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AN ECOLOGICAL APPROACH
TO YOUTH SPORT PARTICIPATION:
HOW TO DO IT

Artur Santos¹, Márcio Domingues¹, Carlos Eduardo Gonçalves¹

KEYWORDS: youth, sport, context

INTRODUCTION

Sport influences the youth athlete development in several dimensions beyond technical and tactical skills, being source of satisfaction but at the same time acting as a promoter of attitudes and values regarded as socially positive (Kavussanu & Spray, 2006). In the last years it has been verified an increase in the number of people involved in youth sport, as athletes and their families, coaches, managers or supporters.

The youngsters involvement in sports it's related to several positive outcomes (e.g., skills development, positive relationship with peers, satisfaction, pro-social values) (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2005). However, sport can pervert some values, as the case of behaviors that doesn't explicit violate the rules, but aren't socially correct. The behaviors called "useful or tactic fouls" are accepted and expected by sport managers, coaches and supporters (Cruz, Torregrosa, & Boixadós, 2007).

The established relationships between the athletes and other persons in sport context (e.g., coaches and peers), as well with the institution in which they practice sport, have an important role in sportive experiences, influencing the athletes development. According to Bronfenbrenner (1999), who proposed the Bio-ecological Model approach in human development, despite the various sources of influences that the young athlete is subjected, he still has an important role in his own development process.

The use of the ecological theory in youth sport studies is more and more accepted among scholars in recent years (Bengoechea & Jonhson, 2001; Strachan, 2008; Holt, 2008; Araujo, 2009). Bengoechea and Jonhson (2001) specifically refer that this is an appropriated model to examine the youngsters' involvement in sport as a developmental process.

Bronfenbrenner (1999) improved his initial theory of the Ecological Model, developing the PPCT model: "person, process, context and time". This model states that there exist particular ways of interaction between person and context, which operate through life and relate to the primary mechanisms that produce human development. (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The personal characteristics influence the way the subject lives, experiences and perceives the contexts in which he/her is involved. It is throughout complex and dynamic processes that

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the subject establishes active (progressively more complex and reciprocal) relationships with other individuals, objects and symbols on the immediate environment.

Two specific propositions were defined on the original Ecological model conception. To be effective this interaction has to occur on a fairly basis and through a long period. These ways of interaction with the environment are referred as *proximal processes* (e.g., parent(s)-child, child-child, teacher-child, coach-athlete activities).

“The form, power, content, and direction of the proximal processes effecting development vary systematically as a joint function of the characteristics of the developing person; of the environment – both immediate and more remote – in which the processes are taking place; and the nature of development outcomes under consideration.” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

The global context, where the individual is living and where the interactive processes occur is denominated as *developmental context*, which is a complex unity, embracing both the immediate environment, where the person in development lives, and the more remote one, where the person had never been, but being strong related and having power to influence the human development. Those context sub-components are denominated:

MICROSYSTEM: here are inserted a number of activities, roles and interpersonal relationships that the individual experiences in his locals of residence and activity. In school context, for example, this level concerns the relationships between peers and adults in school, child capacity to confront problems in this context. But if we refer to home context this level is referent to parents and child relationships, or between siblings. In sport case, this is related to relationships between peers, coaches, families, sport managers, through the practice and competition processes.

MESOSSYSTEM: in this level fit the interactions between two or more contexts, in which the individual has an active role. For example, interaction between home and a sport or social program, home and community services, relationships parents/educators, parents/coaches, family/community, etc. The subsystems interactions have an immediate reflex on youth development outcomes.

EXOSSYSTEM: it refers to contexts in which the subject isn't directly involved but the events in this system affect it or are affected by what happens in others contexts. The parental workplace is a place where the children don't participate directly but, it can influence and be influenced by that. For example, the mother abdication of a successful career to spend more time with her children can have consequences on the mother well-being and consequently, on the child's as well; the same is true to the fact that the relegation, discharge or workload augmentation can reflect on financial- and/or time- expenditure with the child.

MACROSYSTEM: this level concerns the sociocultural values and beliefs where all systems are set in. This is a set of social factors that inflow in a less visible manner on systems and

subsystems. As an example, the perspective through which society sees the services provided to children and families, how society deals with poverty and provide support to it can influence the childrens' education. The same is true regarding the way families solve their problems, the quality of sport programs and of the sport organizations (e.g., clubs, federations), and their sport philosophy.

CRONOSYSTEM: it appears as a final system that extends the context to a third dimension. Traditionally, when studying human development, the time passage was treated in a synonymous way with chronological age. This system embraces the consistence or the changes of the subject characteristics and of the environment where he lives, throughout time (e.g., changes in family or organizational structure, socio-economical status, job, local of residence).

Therefore, the bio-ecological approach of youth sport practice allows the researcher to analyze the context characteristics, beyond the power to assess the individual characteristics - developmental assets, values, attitudes, motivation. The context can be related to other constructs that are able to clarify the complexity of interactions that foster a positive sport experience. The practice climate has been studied mostly inside the team, reducing the analysis to the dynamics of a small group of teammates that represent the sport microsystem. The multiple and sometimes contradictory influences arising from other relevant sources in the life of the young athletes must be considered and researched, comparing contexts and assessing the potential benefits of each one of the ecological settings.

METHODS

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The study of the context rises important methodological problems, making impossible the use of a single method. The procedures emphasized in this type of research are mixed, blending quantitative and qualitative methods. In this part of the text we suggest a methodological path to study two different contexts of sport practice, strongly marked by social status diversity, and the type of sport organization.

The qualitative analysis consists of a semi-structured inquiry interview as well as a descriptive exploratory analysis. The first represents a type of interview that provides more information. It consists on developing ideas using a guide orientation approach and having the interviewed introducing new reflexions and new directions. The second is justifiable to describe components of a determined social situation (micro-), trough active participation. The observed behaviours are registered and codified according the categories described in the theoretical model.

A documental search technique suitable to case studies is performed. It will enable an exhaustive and in-deep analysis of few sources of information, gathering a vast and detailed knowledge about the object, in order to describe the settings where the research is being held and, to explain the causal variables of youth sport participation in complex situations. The potential lack of methodology accuracy will be sustained by the use of triangulation, a technique described by Denzin (2007).

PARTICIPANTS AND MEASURES

Two diverse ecological settings in youth sport are studied. The sample comprehends 200 athletes from 14 through 16 years of age in two soccer clubs, one professional club and a club from a poor social and economic neighbourhood.

Three studies are performed:

STUDY 1A (PERSONS AND CONTEXT): coaches and parents from the two clubs in question are interviewed. The scope of the interview is to determine youth behaviour susceptible to be influenced by competitive sport practice. The interviews are performed in a semi-structured manner allowing the subjects to determine and dictate their own answers.

STUDY 1B (CONTEXT): the two sport microsystems, the professional club with its academy and the small amateur club are characterized. This analysis is connected to the previous one. Significant others (directors, managers, coaches, families) and their relationships with the club context, the community, the school, are interviewed, in order to reveal potential peer and adult social networks that can frame the environment.

STUDY 2 (PROCESS): the interactions among subjects are studied, in order to define an ecological paradigm. Demographic information is also collected, in order to obtain data about age, years of experience in football, scholar year, ethnic origin of the youngster and the families' socio-economic status. In this phase the instruments are quantitative: three questionnaires adapted to youth sport settings with different background practice are fulfilled. The questionnaires aim to measure the attitudes towards sportspersonship, that can be positive or negative, and the perceived motivational climate, if oriented to mastery or performance.

STUDY 3 (ANALYSIS): an inferential and predictive study, in order to relate the constructs implicit in the quantitative studies with the results of the application of Bronfenbrenner's theory to two diverse ecological settings. The teams' perceived motivational climate and sports-

manship and its effects on personal dispositions of youth athlete, and the possible emergence of a predictive model, are analyzed through structural equation modelling.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The research project presented above aims to deal with the complexity of sport participation, regarded as an interactive and dynamic process where the ecological context shows multiple levels of influences, sometimes contradictory and potential confusing to the young athletes. The study of the contexts, although with strong theoretical support, has been scarcely used in sport contexts. Furthermore the study of sport motivation has been performed mostly inside the team, limiting the influences to coaches or peers. From this point of view, Valle- rand's hierarchical model (2001) has never been full exploited.

The narrative about children and adolescents' participation in sport has been scarcely approached from an ecological perspective, dealing with all the complexity of multilevel social and personal influences that frame sport experiences in a positive or negative way. As Araújo and Davis (2009) state, useful scientific knowledge is needed in order to clarify and guide the tasks of those who work on the field.

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