Est. 1841 | YORK ST JOHN UNIVERSITY

Law, Graeme and Bloyce, Daniel (2018) Game models as a framework for understanding power in the male football figuration. In: Malcolm, Dominic and Velija, Philippa, (eds.) Figurational research in sport, leisure and health. Routledge, pp. 34-44

Downloaded from: https://ray.yorksj.ac.uk/id/eprint/3814/

The version presented here may differ from the published version or version of record. If you intend to cite from the work you are advised to consult the publisher's version: https://www.routledge.com/Figurational-Research-in-Sport-Leisure-and-Health-1st-Edition/Malcolm-Velija/p/book/9781138708259

Research at York St John (RaY) is an institutional repository. It supports the principles of open access by making the research outputs of the University available in digital form. Copyright of the items stored in RaY reside with the authors and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full text items free of charge, and may download a copy for private study or non-commercial research. For further reuse terms, see licence terms governing individual outputs. Institutional Repositories Policy Statement

RaY

Research at the University of York St John

For more information please contact RaY at ray@yorksj.ac.uk

Game Models as a framework for understanding power in the Male Football Figuration

Graeme Law, York St John University

Daniel Bloyce, University of Chester

Introduction

This chapter will apply the figurational concept of game models to understanding issues of power in professional men's football, specifically in relation to contract negotiations. Contract negotiations are discussed widely in the media, with various sources claiming to have knowledge of the negotiations among top players, their agents, managers and owners of football clubs. One such headline during the 2016-2017 football season stated, 'Arsenal face uphill struggle to keep Alexis Sanchez as Chilean wants Champions League football and new deal worth £300,000 per week' (Daily Mail, 18th May,2017). Despite regular headlines and intense public interest there is little academic research examining these negotiations. It is also questionable given the secrecy with which these negotiations are treated and individual salaries are never made public whether media reflections are accurate (Roderick, 2006). In this chapter we examine interview data from rare access to a group of current and former professional footballers who between them have been contracted with clubs in all of the top five English divisions from the 1960s to the present day. In doing so, we argue that by applying game models as framework for analysing the data, we can provide a more nuanced, and object-adequate account of the contract negotiations that are a key feature of the professional game. Before we examine this further, it is important to provide a brief overview of the concept of game models.

Understanding power: Game models as a representation of figurational interdependencies

Elias (1978) used the concept 'game models' to provide a clearer understanding of power as an everyday occurrence that is part of all human relationships. This is because, he argued, the analogy of a game enables one, 'to bring out more graphically the processual character of relationships between interdependent people. At the same time, they [games] show how the web of human relations changes when the distribution of power changes' (Elias, 1978: 80). This perspective emphasises Elias view that power balances, like relationships between people, are bi-polar at least, and usually multi-polar. Elias (1978) argued that the more complex the game, with greater numbers of players, the weaker the possibilities for stronger players to directly influence the game. In other words, as the chains of interdependency lengthen, the ability for any individual, or group of individuals, to control the figuration diminishes, and unintended outcomes emerge. Such unintended outcomes area regular aspect of human relations, however powerful any one individual or group might appear to be.

In What is Sociology? Elias (1978) provides a series of game situations, from simpler games involving just two people, to more complex games that involve multiple players. He does this to provide an illustration of the power relations involved in such games, and also to highlight that even in the simplest of games, no one player can exert complete control over that situation, and the opportunities to do so within increasingly complex, multi-player games diminish further. In the simplest example, Elias (1978) considers a game involving just two people, one being a much stronger player than the other. The stronger player can, to a degree, restrict the actions and limit the options of the weaker player, allowing them to make certain moves (Dopson & Waddington, 1996). The weaker player, however, does have some degree of control over the stronger player, as the stronger player must take into account the moves of the weaker player when planning their own. Notwithstanding this, in a 'two player game' the

player with greater strength does, clearly, have a higher degree of control over the outcome of the game.

Elias (1978) also considers two player games where the players are roughly equal in ability. As the power differentials between players in a two-person game reduce, the ability of any one player to be able control the game lessens (Elias, 1978). As such, the ability to exert influence on the outcome of the game 'increasingly passes beyond the control of either' (Hanstad, Smith & Waddington, 2008: 233). As Elias emphasises,

> Both players will have correspondingly less chance to control the changing figuration of the game; and the less dependent will be the changing figuration of the game on the aims and plans for the course of the game which each player has formed by himself. The stronger, conversely, becomes the dependence of each of the two players' overall plans and of each of their moves on the changing figuration of the game – on the game process. The more the game comes to resemble a social process, the less it comes to resemble the implementation of an individual plan. In other words, to the extent that the inequality in the strengths of the two players diminishes, there will result from the interweaving of moves of two individual people a game process *which neither of them has planned* (1978: 82; original emphasis).

In other words, the analogy of a game, even a relatively simple, two-player game, provides an excellent illustration of the unintended outcomes that are a feature of all social relationships. For Elias (1978), this becomes even more apparent as we consider games of greater complexity, from multi-person games at one level, through to multi-person games on multiple levels. Examples of multi-player games on one level are one player playing simultaneously against several others, or two teams made up of several players competing against each other. In multi-player, multi-layer games the structure of the game is much more complex (Elias,

1978). As the number of players within the game increase, along with the complexity of that game, the power differentials between players diminish the direction of the game becomes less predictable and less likely to be controlled by a single individual (Elias, 1978).

In summary, game models was used by Elias to illustrate that even in a very simple 'figuration', a two-player game, the most powerful cannot 'control' everything, and unintended outcomes will emerge. These outcomes are only likely to increase the more even the ability of the players. As the game becomes more complex, and the players more numerous, the power chances of any one individual diminishes further. The key point being that when we examine the complexity of the wider social world, and the network of interdependencies in which people are involve, in this case, the people involved in the negotiations of contracts for professional footballers, even the most powerful in that relationship will not achieve all of their intended goals. In other words, game models help us to:

> Indicate the conditions under which players may slowly begin to encounter a problem: that a game process, which comes about entirely as a result of the interweaving of the individual moves of many players, takes a course *which none of the individual players has planned, determined or anticipated* (Elias, 1978: 95; original emphasis).

Despite its potential utility, game models as a concept has only been explored in a limited number of cases. Dopson and Waddington (1996), for example, used games models to examine processes of change in the management of mental health services within one case study in the National Health Service (NHS). In relation to sport, Hanstad, Smith and Waddington (2008) examined the circumstances surrounding the establishment of the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) using game models to help throw light on the way in which members of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) attempted to manage change with

the emergence of WADA, and their subsequent inability to effectively control this process. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the utility of the game models concept further. Having provided a brief overview of the concept of game models, and its previous application, we will now examine the utility of the concept in helping to understand the power relations that exist during contract negotiations within professional football.

Negotiating power balances - Two player games

Traditionally, contract negotiations took place in a one to one situation, involving the player and the manager (Taylor, 2013). Our data suggests that prior to the introduction of the Premier League in 1992, contract negotiations were almost always two player games. In such a 'game', where one person (the manager) is comparatively strong, and the other person (player) comparatively weak, the stronger player has much greater control of the game, and, thus, the contract negotiations tended to be very one-sided. A former top division player who played during the 1960s and 1970s explained that contract negotiations were, 'a scary thing to do ... you have to go and speak with your manager and it was intimidating. These guys were tough'. Another former top division player who played in the same era also explained how the negotiations took place just with the manager:

> So you go into the manager's office and he says he wants to keep you, which is always a good start. It's nerve racking as he is in charge. He made an offer. I asked if he could give me more. I didn't demand a figure I just said I was top scorer and I felt I warranted a bit more. He gave a smile and said "leave it with me". I got taken back in two days later and he had an extra 20 pounds [a week] for me. I accepted straight away, I wasn't going to ask for more as I knew this was the best I was going to get. It was his way of saying you deserve it, but you need to do it [perform to the same level] again next year.

This player continued to explain that the manager was surprised that more money had been requested as it was not the norm as, ‘players didn’t normally ask him [the manager] for more money, I think that’s why it took him two days, he had to work out if he wanted to do it’. This would suggest that there is a balance of power in this two player game, even if the balance heavily favours the more powerful player, there is still a balance, which can result in outcomes that no one, especially the more powerful player, planned for. Nevertheless, clearly the game was largely dominated by the ‘superior player. Although such one-sided negotiations were more prominent with those who played prior to the introduction of the Premier League, it was still evident in interviews with players who had played after this time that such contract negotiations tended to be early in a player’s career. Contract negotiations where a player represents himself (Shropshire and Davis, 2008) are typically heavily in favour of the managers and/or the club directors, as players are regarded as novices in this situation with very little knowledge about the contract process. Indeed, within our study, one player discussed signing his first professional contract with a Premiership club:

> I don’t really think I said much in my first contract negotiation. I didn’t really know what was going on. I think in that sense you can get taken advantage of. The manager kind of sold it to me telling me how good an opportunity this was. Who was I to argue? I think if I had asked for something extra I might have got it, but I didn’t have a clue and he certainly didn’t tell me.

Two player games were common for first contract negations across the leagues, as a current player explained when describing his first contract negotiations at a League Two club: ‘It was me and the gaffer [manager]. After training one day I was taken into a room and told I was getting offered a pro-contract and these were the terms. He said “have a few days and let me know”, all quite simple and straight forward. I didn’t know any different’.

This would suggest that players were perhaps unaware that they did hold some power within the negotiation process and therefore believed the manager had total control. However, using Elias's game models, we would argue all 'players' are involved of interdependencies and therefore always have some form of power – to a greater or lesser extent – within the game. A former Championship player gave an example of having some 'power' in his first contract negotiation:

> It was me and the gaffer, he offered me my contract and the terms. I asked for a bit more which really took him by surprise. He had a bit of a pop at me and told me I should be grateful for this opportunity, but I explained I was going to be worse off than I would have been as YT [youth team player]. He offered me an extra 25 pounds a week, not a great deal more, but it covered a few bits.

A former League Two player also gave an example of being able to negotiate a small increase in his wages, demonstrating the control of the manager was not total:

> It was always just the two of us [player and manager], I would ask for a little more and sometimes you would get it, but I never felt I left having won, I got what he was really prepared to give me. It might sound daft even though I got more than the first offer, but it really was on his terms ... I always came out thinking, though, "well I did get more than if I hadn't have asked".

So far, we have discussed 'game model' situations where the manager was in greater control within contract negotiations, but on occasions players might be considered the 'expert player' in such a two-player game. A former Premiership player explained:

> I was the club captain at [Premiership club] and a new gaffer came in. He had never managed that high so it was a strange appointment … In the negotiations with him I was in charge, he was clueless, I got my best ever deal because I basically bullied him. He didn't have a clue. It was so obvious he wasn't used to dealing with money on that scale ... He did manage to get in my contract, though, that if we were relegated then my wage dropped a couple of grand a week.

In this case, it demonstrates that even the weaker player in a two-player game still has some influence on the stronger player, if not the overall direction of the game (Elias, 1978).

However, when the relative expertise of the two players is more evenly matched, then neither one is able to exert sufficient control over the game/contract negotiations to such a degree that they can dictate terms. This was highlighted by many Premiership players. A former international and Premiership player gave an example of a two-player game where there was a clear difference from being a young inexperienced player to one with lots of first team experience and this changed the negotiation process:

> I had a manager who always advised us that he would give us the best deal and agents were just out to take our money … I realised he just wanted to bully us a bit and make us sign for less. I can't really blame him. It probably gave him two extra players a season. Once I had played a bit, other clubs were interested in me and I stood up to him and said, "to stay I needed more money". I ended up with a closer figure to what I wanted; previously I had no chance getting that.

By the player receiving a wage that he had desired, which previously in his career he would have been unable to achieve, this demonstrates how with a more even power balance, through the player having more worth to the club and manager, greater negotiation is possible. A

current League One player also gave an example of having greater levels of power once he was considered a valuable player who had the option to move to another club:

> I was offered a new deal, but I wasn't happy with the terms. He [the manager] didn't want me to leave. So we went back and forth for ages. It kind of got to the stage where it was less of a negotiation but more of a conversation about what we were both thinking. That was different to what I was used to … The deal really dragged on, but I would say in the end we were both happy with the terms agreed.

In this situation, such an even balance of power lead to protracted negations that were not necessarily intended by either 'player'. It is clear from these illustrations of the negotiations that took place that the power differentials that exist between the individuals can diminish overtime. Power differentials are processual and there is an 'ebb and flow' to a game, particularly with relatively evenly matched players, that will see power fluctuate. Power is a fluid concept more generally, and sometimes a previously 'weaker' player might, in time, become the stronger player. This is another important dimension of Elias's understanding of power, though this is not necessarily encapsulated as well as it might be with the 'game models' concept. This is because 'the models demonstrate the relational character of power in a simplified form' (Elias, 1978: 75). As the models are an analogy of a game, it does not fully take into account the complexities in relation to the fluidity of power ratios that exist in figurational interdependencies. The concept of a game can potentially be more static than the type of dynamic power relationships in which individuals are immersed in their day-to-day lives.

Complex negotiations - Multi–player games

We will now discuss contract negotiations in the form of multi-player games to further our understanding of the process. Multi-player games can involve one player playing simultaneously against several weaker opponents at the same time. Elias (1978: 83) argues that 'if groups formed by weaker players do have stronger inner tensions, that is a power factor to the advantage of their opponent', therefore, the greater chances of the manager to control the moves within the game and the direction of the game. One such example of this was where some players mentioned taking their parents in to the negotiations with them. As such, on the surface at least 'the game', in terms of numbers on each side, was balanced in favour of the player. However, this did not necessarily translate to their 'team' having greater control over the direction of the game and, thus, the contract negotiations. As a former Premiership player explained: 'I moved to [Prem club] and my first contract there was a joke. I took my mum and dad in, [and they were] clueless, and I signed on 400 pounds a week. So I won the Champions League on 400 pounds a week [laughs]'. The player's parents were two weaker players along with the player himself as they were all inexperienced 'players' of the 'game', whereas the manager could be considered to have been something of an expert given he had vast experience of contract negotiations over several years of managing at the top level. So, despite having three players playing 'against' him, the manager was still able to exert considerable influence over the 'game', resulting in a relatively low wage, under the circumstances, being agreed. A consequence of this negotiation was that the player always used an agent for every subsequent negotiation. A lower league player also gave an example of a parent being present within the negotiation process:

> My dad came in with me and he was like a chocolate fire guard. He was just buzzing about being in with the manager, so he gave no guidance. The gaffer just played the game with him; you know telling him stories as he could see how excited he was. So

> when it came to the contract my dad was just telling me to sign. I had no experience in negotiating so I just signed, [it] was an easy deal for the gaffer.

Inner tensions were demonstrated by players when taking their parents into contract negotiations as the parents offered little guidance and were in awe of the situation, therefore undermining the potential power of having 'more players' in the team. These examples highlight how adding more individuals to the 'game' does not always mean the power ratios will be in favour of the greater number of players, as, in these cases, the manager still had more control over the game, and thus, the contract negotiations.

Game Models and Negotiations Post Bosman Rule

In 1995 the Bosman rule was introduced which meant that transfer fees for players out of contract were illegal under European law. Thus, from 1995, players out of contract could move without a transfer fee. Since this ruling, transfers and negotiations typically involved more people and became more complex (Roderick, 2006). As the number of people in the process grows, any one individual may find the negotiations increasingly difficult to understand and control (Hanstad et al., 2008). As agents and players join together elements of a more organized challenge to the clubs began to appear. Agents tend to have less personal involvement in the relationship with the manger and the club compared to the player (or, indeed, the player's parents), as an agent will 'relieve them of the burden of negotiating with the very person – the manager – who will be selecting them to play in the first team and with whom they have already formed or will have to develop a working relationship' (Roderick, 2006: 127). As agents tend to have a greater understanding and less personal involvement in the relationships with club officials, this can potentially add power to the player and his 'team' of negotiators within the game.

Several players discussed using an agent as they had become established players, because there was a strong feeling that they could add power to the negotiations on their behalf. A current Championship player explained how the process was different when he was moving from a lower level club to a higher level club:

> I use an agent because he knows what he is doing. That's what their job is. Mine is to play football, not negotiate contracts, so it makes sense really. When I moved to [Championship club] it was done by dealing with the directors, now they are businessmen. They know how to negotiate. It's moved on now, it's not player and manager talking over bits, it's a business deal now you know, and so business guys should be on my side as well as theirs.

This situation approximates more closely with what Elias (1978) refers to as a two- tier game model. Elias (1978: 86) explains 'from a group in which every individual plays together on the same level it may turn into a "two-level" or "two-tier" group of players. All players remain interdependent, but they no longer all play directly with each other'. The people who make up the second tier (agents and club directors/lawyers) play directly against each other, but are still tied to the players who make up the first tier (players and managers). As there can be no second tier without a first tier, those in the second 'have no function except with regard to those on the first' (Elias, 1978: 86). As the game is increasingly complex it is increasingly difficult for any one player or group of players to develop an accurate picture of the game or understanding of the directions it may take, which can lead to unintended outcomes (Dopson & Waddington, 1996). A former international provides an example that highlights the involvement of the first tier players in this two tier, multi-player game, and the unplanned outcomes that can occur:

> Contracts can take a long time now. There are that many people involved. Basically at [Premiership club] the manager came to me and said there is a letter, I am offering you a new contract. Go speak to your people and then let them speak to the chief executive. I will be in touch with him, you be in touch with your agent. That was the last time I spoke to him about the contract, but it got signed by him and me. Basically, me and my agent had a chat, he went to the executives about what we wanted, he came back to me and this process went on for a while. I suppose they were speaking to the gaffer about how much he wanted me. Anyway, in the end I think both parties were happy... I ended up with things that I wasn't expecting, you know because when my agent was asking for things they would offer something else instead, which at times turned out to be better, like different bonuses and stuff.

This example demonstrates the unanticipated outcomes that result from the complex interweaving actions of multiple players pursuing their goals. Despite this type of negotiation being more prominent in the top divisions, there were also examples of this at the lower levels of professional football, but on a smaller scale. A former League Two player explained:

> Basically at [League Two club] I wasn't directly involved [with the negotiation]. It only took a day, but it was done between the chairman and my agent. The agent kept coming out of the room to call me, and I know the chairman was speaking to the gaffer because he told me later on my agent had been demanding, but yeah, the gaffer left all that [negotiations] to others and it seemed to work well.

Elias (1978) argues that games of this complexity draw attention to the fact that all players are interdependent, therefore constraining each other's actions. The complexity of contract negotiations in professional football, in terms of the number of people involved and the

shifting balances of power between the groups, means that 'any process of change is likely to involve a challenge to the self-perceived interests of one group or another' (Dopson & Waddington, 1996: 542-543). Dopson and Waddington (1996) also note that the capacity of some groups to shape or to resist change is greater than that of others. It is important to stress that balances of power are not fixed and static but that they are continually in flux (Dopson & Waddington, 1996). This highlights that first-tier players (players and managers) should not be seen as players who have little involvement in the game or that it is played out by those above them. A case in point was provided above by players and managers being consulted by agents and club officials.

Conclusion

One of the main objectives of this chapter has been to demonstrate how Elias's game models provides a means of 'temporarily isolating and focusing upon complex processes of interdependent relationships, and making them easier to understand' (Dopson & Waddington, 1996: 546). When the contract negotiations in football are subject to appropriate academic scrutiny, the concept of game models illustrates they are far more complex, in comparison to media portrayal.

Traditionally contract negations were two player games. In such a 'game', where one person (the manager) is very strong, and the other person (player) is very weak, the stronger player has much greater control of the game, and, thus, the contract negotiations tended to be very one-sided. This was also the case for many players who played after the introduction of the Premier League who were at the beginning of their career as they were seen as 'novices' in the negotiation process, or for some players who were playing at a lower level, as they were less likely to be exposed to agent representation early in their careers. However, power

differentials are processual there will be an ‘ebb and flow’ to a game, power is dynamic and over time, it will fluctuate. In some two player negotiations, the relative expertise of the two players was more evenly matched (the power of manager and player more even), meaning neither one was able to exert sufficient control over the game/contract negotiations to such a degree that they could dictate terms. This even balance of power lead to protracted negations that were not necessarily intended by either ‘player’.

Multi-player games were also examined where one player was playing several weaker opponents. These examples highlighted how adding more individuals to the ‘game’ does not always mean the power ratios will be in favour of the greater number of players. In this case, the manager still had more control over the game, and, thus, the contract negotiations. More complex multi-player games were also highlighted, which took place over two tiers. These two-tier games demonstrated greater complexities, frequently with a more even distribution of power, which led to various unintended outcomes. Although the games were over two-tiers, all players were interdependent and had power chances within the game. Whilst the second-tier players, the agent and the club directors, do not play directly against the first-tier players, the player and the manager, they do have involvement with the second-tier players. This is demonstrated through the agents and club representatives regularly contacting the players and manager to discuss the process. In such negotiations, the balances of power are not fixed and unchanging, on the contrary, they are continually in flux (Dopson & Waddington, 1996).

All games are contests of strength and are a way of displaying power. In a two player games an expert player playing against a novice will have far greater power chances which can influence the outcome of the game through the direction it takes, along with the time to conclude the game. However, using Elias’s game models has illustrated that as the

complexity of the game increases, it becomes much more difficult for any single player or group to control the game and its outcome, commonly leading to unintended outcomes.

References

Daily Mail. (2017) *Arsenal face uphill struggle to keep Alexis Sanchez as Chilean wants Champions League football and new deal worth £300,000 per week.* Retrieved from the Daily Mail Website.

http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/football/article-4515984/Arsenal-news-Alexis-Sanchez-wants-Champions-League.html#ixzz4hXksTF8v

Dopson, S. & Waddington, I. (1996) Managing social change: a process-sociological approach to understanding organisational change within the National Health Service. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 18(4): 525-550.

Elias, N. (1978) *What is Sociology?* London: Hutchinson.

Hanstad, D.V., Smith, A., & Waddington, I. (2008) The establishment of the world anti-doping agency: A study of the management of organizational change and unplanned outcomes. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 43(3): 227-249.

Roderick, M. (2006) *The work of professional football*: *A labour of love?* Oxen: Routledge.

Shropshire, K.L., & Davis, T. (2008) *The business of sports agents*. (2nd ed.). USA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Taylor, M. (2013) *The association game: a history of British football.* Oxen: Routledge.