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'We're sweeping the floors': life as an EFL Championship youth academy Player

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ABSTRACT

This study sought to explore life "off the pitch" at one English Championship Youth Academy. Using concepts from Elias' figurational sociology to explore data from 12 semi-structured interviews, traditional notions of hyper-masculinity that are well-known on the pitch tracked into off-field behaviours. Friendships, banter, mandatory education were all themes of prevalence identified through thematic analysis. Key findings highlight that players did not associate with occupational inevitability; the notion that success at academy level translates to a successful career, however, a highly stringent athletic identity resulted in education being viewed with disdain and friendships of convenience being prevalent to protect themselves from the ruthlessness of the industry.

Introduction

In recent years, the world of football has arguably been a focal point of global academic study, sparking psychological and sociological intrigue and analysis to explore what makes the world's biggest sport such a phenomenon.[1] It is not purely academics with an avid interest; fans, critics, the media, businesses and almost everyone in between has some interest in the "beautiful game", with football often described as a "surrogate religion for millions".[2] Since the introduction of the English Premier League in 1992, football in the United Kingdom has attracted and continues to attract thousands of youths and children due to the appeal of "making it big"; football is far more than a mere game where twenty-two individuals run around a pitch after a ball.[3] The professionalization of the game has produced an environment where multi-million-pound TV deals, global owners, merchandise sales, transfer markets and players as celebrity icons are viewed as the norm.[4] However, the success rate for making it to the topflight of football is a topic receiving a great deal of media publicity[5] with only 0.012% of youth academy players being successful in playing in the Premier League.[6] Despite this statistic, millions dream of footballing success and academies up and down the country remain full with potential future stars. Youth academy research, therefore, is on the rise, with studies exploring transitions into academies from full-time school,[7] friendships within the sport,[8] and engagement in education,[9] although little has explored the life of an academy player away from the pitch. It is the aim of this study therefore, to present a sociological case study of one English Football League (EFL) Championship, Category 2 Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) Youth Academy where the day-to-day life of being a professional player is explored and how this

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influences behaviours in different social settings, views on participating in education, and future career preparation.

According to research, hegemonic masculinity- "the culturally idealized form of masculine character",[10] dominates club environments and perpetuates expected norms in relation to behaviours and practices where individuals conform to and reproduce subcultures that stem from the working-class history of the sport.[11] Changing room banter, strong, aggressive playing styles, obedience and silence, adhering to managerial authoritarianism, earning a rite of passage through displays of masculinity from youth to first team are some examples of the typical subcultures in professional football.[12]Recent research[13] that has explored the mental health and wellbeing of young academy players aged 9–15, has suggested the explicit nature, rigid schedules, adherence to a clubs ethos and an overwhelming need to embody the identity of a footballer to those within the club and to close family members could have negative connotations for their long term mental health. As a result, football clubs are now more than ever seeking to employ sports psychologists and/or sports chaplains to support the professional players.[14] In their study Roe and Parker[15] explored the provision of chaplaincy in collaboration with the EPPP to provide holistic support for players. The support offered was viewed in a positive manner based on consistent contact with the chaplain and a balanced understanding of each key personnel's role within the club to facilitate the importance of the support provided by the chaplain. This was highlighted as significant based on an acknowledged overlapping of roles between psychologist, welfare officer and chaplain, however, if trust was reciprocated between the three roles, the level of achievable and worth holistic support provided to players was considered heightened and beneficial.[16] Here then, it is apparent, that both research and implementation of support packages is being undertaken by some clubs and thus a bid to tackle the wider pressures of being a professional footballer is in operation.

Dreams vs reality

Studies over the past two decades have begun to create a portfolio of knowledge on professional football despite the sport being a notoriously closed social world, where access to participants is difficult to secure and all those involved remain weary regarding "outsiders" gaining knowledge of the inner world of football.[17] In his book, "What is Sociology?" Elias[18] identified the word "fantasy" as a characteristic of human life. He stated that when exposed to pressure, anxiety and the unknown regarding a specific social event, people will fill the gaps of uncertainty, where their knowledge or an answer to a problem is lacking, with fantasy. This becomes problematic when the wrong fantasy is played or matched with the wrong setting or scenario or in a situation of crisis; this can result in negative consequences for the individual.[19]Elias[20] further elaborated that "the element of fantasy . . . plays an important part in directing a group's common actions and ideas towards it's goal". However, despite potential groups of people all conforming to the same fantasy, when reality or realism are also considered, Elias states that is it possible to see how different people align to different realistic or dream-based ideologies. Dreams are, according to Elias,[21] the backbone of the history of the world. He said:

> Dreams often find short-term fulfilment; but in the long run, they virtually always seem to end up drained of substance and meaning and so destroyed. The reason is that aims and hopes are so heavily saturated with fantasy that the actual course of events in society deals them blow after blow, and the shock of reality reveals them as unreal, in fact as dreams.[22]

Based on this consideration by Elias for how we view events that shape our world, this idea will be used within this study to consider how players navigate the well-known fragility of the path to success. Moreover, the notion of occupational inevitability has been identified as prevalent in other studies[23] and is a term used to describe how players assume that because they have succeeded in gaining an academy place that they will be completely successful for a whole football career. This can be likened to Elias' discussion on fantasy and how individuals will collectively dream about

achieving the same thing, in this case, to be a successful footballer.[24] Other research that utilizes this concept includes findings from a questionnaire completed by Irish born players which suggested that in contrast to views from the media that suggest players enter the football world for economic reasons, respondents identified their love of football and their dream of playing for their country as more influential reasons for adopting a professional career.[25] Such dreams could be perpetuated as young players who successfully enrol in a youth academy have experienced success as a schoolboy player and therefore enjoyed rewards and attention.[26] However, several studies have concluded that the embodied dreams of the young players combined with the knowledge that they are talented and irreplaceable does not transpire into career longevity.[27] In reality, the success rate is incredibly low making failure more difficult to accept in the long-term; the transition out of what is often a successful youth team into a lower ranking, less successful first team is a high possibility and the detachment of their athletic identity is a nearly impossible feat.[28]Despite this, the appeal to be an academy player remains a significant draw, emphasizing Elias' point on how it is apparent and relatively easy to see how people collectively engage in fantasy and reality-laden ideologies.

Upon integration into the academy, trainee players face a stark, frank, and differing situation from what was expected.[29] Restrictions enforced by figures of authority such as managers and coaches become the norm.[30] The acceptance and internalization of abusive behaviour without question, the necessary sacrifices of personal time, socialization with the outside world and negating education are all enforced upon arrival at the academy.[31] However, many athletes are very much aware of their exploitation,[32] but due to their dedication and immersion in the environment, players accept this reality and, in some cases, insist that it is necessary and appropriate to succeed, particularly as managers and coaches are deemed figures of power who can control who is offered a professional contract.[33]Thus, this study will aim to explore how this level of dedication within the football environment filters into every-day life at academy level.

The negation of education during secondary school and upon arrival at the academy has been found to be prevalent amongst young players who suggest improved grades were not possible due to their immersion in football.[34] Furthermore, many schools do not advocate a career as a professional footballer and even when careers advise sessions were attended, no advise was ever offered.[35] Comparatively, in a study by Adams and Carr, the placement of football at the top of the players priorities in interviews with 12, 14–15-year-old academy players from a lower English league club suggested that most players prioritized their football over maintaining friendships.[36] This could be a paradox due to the assertion that during times of increased pressure and vulnerability, for example during poor performances or rejection, emotional support and a feeling of safety is often sought through friendships.[37] Participants suggested they do not have real friends in football as the threat of competition for their place in the team is too extreme. After experiencing playing school and local league football with friends and being successful, the dream of being a footballer is cemented but the reality on entering an academy is that for many players, friendships were based on survival.[38] However, due to trainees all experiencing the same environment, there is evidence of some emotional support between trainees. Perhaps perpetuated by alienation from their friends outside of the academy due to a lack of understanding on both parts of what the trainee footballer was experiencing and what the others outside of the academy were doing in their "normal life", trainees felt isolated and lonely.[39]

'Chasing the Big-time'

Although conducted in 1996, Parker's study on youth academy players at an English league club where life as a full-time trainee professional footballer was documented provides a backdrop against which reflections and comparisons of current academy life can be made. Over the course of the 1993/1994 season, 20 first and second year scholars, aged between 16 and 17 as well as several members of staff including the Education Officer and Youth Team Coach were interviewed to establish the behaviours and practices of young players.[40] The study found that footballs' popularity

as a working-class leisure pursuit of the early twentieth century was still evident, with the hegemonic masculine culture providing a distinct link to identity formation particularly during the academy trainee years where youths were in an impressionable period of their lives.[41] Even by the second year of their scholarship, around the age of 18, a "higher profile was attributed to second year status" which was "intimately linked to becoming more of a man".[42] Embodying the ideologies of athlete behaviours were instrumental in influencing the identity of the young players suggesting players become somewhat institutionalized. This included accepting club values and wearing the correct kit at the appropriate times, eating meals according to rank, withstanding regular criticism and following orders by persons of authority.

Attending an offsite education facility was one such order academy players needed to abide by and the study observed interesting levels of behaviours whilst at the college.[43] Players who enrolled in classes deemed more difficult, such as A Levels or degree courses behaved appropriately and well. Those enrolled in lower-level courses, such as GCSEs, City and Guild and foundation level subjects behaved in ways that is possibly expected in that type of environment.[44] Disruption, misbehaviour, skipping lessons to venture to the computer rooms or library with no real agenda, were all ways of avoiding authoritarian restraints. This may be due to their level of athletic identity; the stronger the athletic identity, the less likely the individual is to engage in education as it does not portray their level of dedication and commitment to their sport.[45]

Through further observations, trainees used day-release at college to demonstrate their masculine prowess by behaving in ways that boosted their self-esteem and identity. For example, the inappropriate discussion of female anatomy and the embarrassing of the female teacher were behaviours that certain players adopted regularly:

> In the BTEC class ... weekly debates accommodated speculation about what Finance teacher Hilary Chamberlain looked like naked and whether or not the colour of her pubic hair corresponded to that on her head.[46]

This could be considered a paradox; the education environment is not viewed as a manly place to be seen in, yet participants used the time to enhance their masculinity by behaving in domineering ways. Despite the discipline required on the field that players were able to commit to, within the classroom, discipline and dedication quickly disappeared and targets and achievements were unmet. Furthermore, a low view of education from the professionals within football, such as coaches, managers and other personnel could go some way to explaining the lack of motivation towards education by players.[47] Some stated that players were paid by the club to play football, not study. Likewise, in Platts' study,[48] participants discussed how education was not to be discussed with managers and coaches as they prioritized getting a contract and the players were afraid that asking questions about their education would show a lack of commitment to their football. Based on the research discussed, the study will seek to answer the following research question:

What are the experiences of Youth Academy players lives "off the pitch" in relation to prevalent subcultures within the world of football?

To answer this question, the following aims and objectives are intended:

(1) This study will adopt Elias' figurational sociology to consider the power (in)balances that fluctuate within figurations (groups or networks of people) and how being part of different environments can influence an individual's identity.
(2) Examine if and how the athletic identity and hegemonic masculinity found on the pitch, transfer into life off the pitch.
(3) To examine players views of "normal life" and preparation for life without football.

Figurational Sociology

Figurational sociology "starts with an individual or group, or form or behaviour, then maps into the surrounding, constantly changing, figuration of which it is a part".[49] The term figuration,

penned by Elias,[50] is used to describe a group or network of people where interdependent relations are produced and reproduced based on fluctuations of power. Power itself, is an ever-present, multi-sided, characteristic "of all human relationships" and is neither "a thing to be owned or possessed" and is in constant flux within a figuration.[51] In this context, power is a useful concept for understanding the agendas of individuals in relation to the actions of others within social structures. As more interdependent chains form as more relations with others are built, the actions of each individual become less planned or known. Thus, Elias believed it is not possible to predict with certainty, the processes and behaviours individuals within a figuration will undertake.[52] These concepts are useful tools therefore, for understanding how an individual's identity and habitus can be developed and/or changed over time and will be pertinent in exploring how young academy players form interdependencies of meaning in different figurations in this study.

Habitus is a term used to describe "embodied social learning"[53] that individuals undertake through interactions and dependence on others. Elias believed that habitus was a set of acquired dispositions where actions and behaviours were a result of internal familiarities or second nature beliefs that often operate subconsciously thus arguing that a habitus is a social construction.[54] Elias used habitus as a tool for understanding how individuals' function for one another based on these internalized norms and to understand the reason why people respond to the social world in certain ways, which transcends into how these individuals treat their bodies and may be useful in understanding how academy players life their lives outside of a club figuration.[55] Additionally, Elias was, perhaps unusually for a sociologist, strongly interested in the development of individuals, throughout the life course[56] and in particular, the period of youth where the habitus of an individual is likely to experience growth and expansion. This study will therefore consider habitus development when exploring the perceptions of young players experiencing academy life.

Established outsider relations

Between 1958 and 1961, Elias and Scotson completed a research project on a small suburban community on the outskirts of Leicester called "The Established and the Outsiders". The aim of this study was to examine power imbalances within the community. In this area, there were three different populations of people observed; the first was a middle-class group, the second was the oldest or resident working-class group and the third was a newly arrived working-class group from London.[57] The first two groups were regarded as the established groups, having settled there for a substantial time and living in the most highly regarded streets of the area. However, although group 3 did not live in a particularly different way demographically to the other two groups, their lifestyles and choices were what differed. Opting to keep to themselves, socializing amongst only themselves and in loud, overbearing ways in public houses, over time, those in group 3 became ostracized and excluded from any potential positions of influence within local organizations.[58] As part of this segregation from the other groups, group 3 became a topic of gossip as to how they were perceived by the other two groups. Gossip itself is arguably a tool for perpetuating the balances of power and ultimately the treatment of one group against the other. Labelled as "rough", "noisy", "dirty" and so forth, the Outsider group were perceived as a "they-group" where power relations were weighted against them by the Established groups.[59] The labelling of the terms "group disgrace" or a "minority of the worst" for the Outsider Group was due to continuous gossiping between Established group members. Through the power imbalances within this figuration, the internalization and acceptance of these terms was adopted by the Outsiders as they were afforded little opportunity to retaliate, therefore internalizing themselves as the "we-group". In comparison, the Established group, with power weighted in their favour, perceived themselves as superior to the Outsiders, liaising with one another successfully and thereby creating greater power chances within their existing networks.[60] This study can be useful to explore different groups within sporting figurations, explaining power balances within interdependencies and has been used in various

sporting contexts previously.[61]Thus, this concept will be used to explore and analyse the various daily, non-football experiences felt by the youth academy players in this study.

Methodology

To answer the research question, a singular case study was deemed the research design that would firstly be permitted by the club and secondly, be a design whereby interpretations of the inter-dependencies at work amongst the group could be analysed.[62]A case study design can provide opportunities to seek and identify gaps in existing knowledge and then allow for decisions to be made on appropriate implementations or strategies deemed suitable to tackle a problem.[63] It would be inappropriate to assume that the findings generated through analysis of this club could be generalized and assumed to be the same in another Championship club.[64]As access to a football club is notoriously difficult due to their desires to keep their affairs private, the second author's link to this football club was paramount. Ethical approval was granted by York St John University's Ethics Committee.

To explore the young players experiences off the pitch, criterion and convenience sampling were employed.[65]These were determined firstly by the connections the second author had with the club, therefore the participants were convenient to the researcher. Secondly, the specific criteria for participation was decided upon through how best to answer the research question and therefore, in agreement with the gatekeeper who was necessary due to the age of the individuals, male academy players, aged 16 to 19 on a two-year contract with the Championship club were interviewed. 26 players (number in the squad) were invited to participate for transparency and non-bias reasons. However, due to personal choice, being unavailable due to injury or being on loan, 12 semi-structured interviews were conducted with these participants (see Table 1) allowing the researcher to gain rich data through responding inquisitively to the reflections and thoughts of the interviewees.[66]

Prior to the commencement of the research, an introductory meeting with the club was arranged, where the researcher provided an overview of the project and the requirements of the participants. The aim of this introductory meeting was to alleviate any potential misgivings or wariness that the players may have held for the researcher as an outsider. During the address, the researcher described and explained her own professional dance background as a method of building rapport and relational anecdotes to the field of football were given during this and the interviews.[67] This rapport and trust building was essential particularly given the researcher was both female and a non-footballer.[68] Prior to each interview, informed consent forms were completed and all participants advised of their rights regarding confidentiality, anonymity and their right to withdraw

Table 1. Participant data regarding time spent in youth academy environments.

Player	Length of service at current club as a scholar (16+ age)	Length of service at current club (pre 16)	Time spent at other youth academies outside of current club
1	9 months	Age 11 to present	N/A
2	9 months	Age 8 to present	N/A
3	2 years	None	None
4	9 months	None	2 clubs (league 2) ages 12–15
5	9 months	None	None
6	9 months	Age 9 to present	None
7	9 months	Age 14 to present	Championship club ages 6–13
8	9 months	Age 14 to present	Premier League club ages 10–14
9	9 months	Age 9 to present	None
10	9 months	None	None
11	1 year, 9 months	Age 13 to present	Academy Development Centre; age 10–12
12	9 months	Age 7 to present	None

without penalty. Interviews were conducted face-to-face and followed a very relaxed, conversational process that followed no strict pattern which put both the researcher and participant at ease.[69] Discussion topics included "Early football experiences", "Education and Career" and "Life outside football". Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Thematic Analysis using NVivo12 was used in this study. As a programme, NVivo12 allows for the concise management of data and the creation of codes that can be reworked through the analysis process.[70] Thematic analysis provides trustworthiness in the form of transferability, as the data provides the reader with the opportunity to draw their own conclusions.[71] Each interview as listened to several times, whilst notes were made simultaneously to identify any reoccurring patterns in the data.[72] Initial codes were then allocated to groups of data with relevance to each other. This was done in accordance with Elias' theoretical perspective where concepts of habitus, interdependences, power and figurations were utilized. In total, 83 codes were created which included codes such as "a footballer's identity"; "future career plans"; "early specialization"; "adapting to academy life"; "daily academy life"; "club preparation and football education"; "academy education" and "school education". These codes were then organized into overarching hierarchies where the researcher was able to clarify and finalize the appropriateness of each code and its name.

Results and discussion

Whilst not directly football related, several components were indicated as prevalent to daily academy life for the youth players. Perhaps surprisingly, the expectations to complete "jobs", such as boot cleaning, first team equipment preparation, dressing room cleaning, ball inflating, is still a distinctive part of being a youth academy player that appears to have altered little from Parker's study.[73] This discussion will focus on the daily expectations of youth players and will include their views on living in digs or at home, their perceptions on their future careers in both football and non-football roles whilst analysing their thoughts on the low statistical success rate of youth academy players in England. Using ideas and concepts from Elias, it will be argued that despite the low success rates, most of the interviewees were still determined to strive for football success, whilst a surprising percentage have considered alternative careers. Although aware that the chance of making it as a professional footballer is a slim reality, these young players do appear to realise their current success just to make it to the academy. Through this and early specialization, and in agreement with other study findings[74] these players are too heavily invested in their footballer identity to renounce their dream.

Living the youth academy life: off the pitch

Each of the 12 players were asked to describe a typical day as a youth player and all gave similar answers. They were very specific on timings and what happens on certain days of the week, which could be argued is an extension of a type of school environment where the individuals know what is expected of them at specific times and days of the week. This rigid structure, which was suggested by Player 8 to be "a bit repetitive but enjoyable", arguably perpetuates the habitus of these individuals and suggests a possible reason for why some of these players were so unsettled or found the transition into the academy full-time difficult during the untimetabled pre-season. The structure of the day was highly routinized and gave the youth players very little control as they were instructed to complete training and jobs in a format that prioritized the first team's use of the club and facilities. Player 11 said:

> [we're] training half 10, quarter to 11, back in . . . Shower, wait for lunch, cos we have to wait for the first team and 23s . . . that varies depending on what they've done.

A noticeable form of hierarchy is evident at this club, with first team players prioritized over youth players for something as simple as eating lunch and this was a practice instilled regardless as to the change of managers or personnel. None of the players expressed negative opinions of this hierarchical behaviour; their portrayal of their day's schedule was discussed as a norm that has been internalized by players from the start. These young players dream of becoming first team players and can clearly see what they will receive and where they will be if they are to make it into the first team. This can be explained by Elias'[75] ideas surrounding interdependencies through which power ebbs and flows influencing the behaviours of all individuals within the figuration. In line with existing research, it is well known that football clubs foster a long-standing ideology of what it means to go through a rite of passage to become a first team player and because of this, the power at play within these figurations, continually enables and constrains these players into upholding these traditional norms and abiding by them. Thus, what happens is these players actively seek to earn their right to be a first team player through a form of transitional passage and acceptance. This passage is arguably determined by their behaviours both within the club environment and externally, as those with arguably more power, i.e. club managers who determine the offerings of professional contracts, are also watchful of the activities players engage in outside of the club environment, which means life off the pitch is arguably just as controlled as it is on the pitch.[76]

In agreement with findings from other studies,[77] the completion of jobs is a rite of passage on the way to the next stage of achievement: a place in the Under 23s squad. Both Players 4 and 12 indicated a subconscious understanding to display the correct attitude and abide by the rules without confrontation. This could be part of their embodied habitus as these are dispositions are deeply rooted within them which are produced and reproduced by the presence of power by those over and above them within the figuration.[78] Player 9 echoed the same feelings:

> it's quite strict but I feel like, we've all gone along with it, we're all playing a part and we've all kept to the standard, we've not really dropped below. I think it's a really good thing cos as the Gaff's come in, the new Gaffer, I feel like he's come in and brought a mentality where standards are everything. So, cleaning up around the club at the end of the day, making sure everything's presentable for any of the younger boys coming in can see that.

It was clear that a recent change of first team manager at the club brought new expectations of ways of behaving off the pitch. For example, player 3 suggests that the new manager prioritizes jobs higher than the previous manager who viewed the Under 23s as borderline first team players:

> I think sometimes they, not forget about us . . . they don't care like, if we came to them saying "look the changing rooms done", it could be another hour or so till they come down and look at it . . . cos they have other things to do. . . cos we're not priority . . . I don't think we should be a priority, but I think there should be that trust.

Likewise, when asked about his thoughts on the necessity of completing jobs, Player 8 said:

> P8: we have to sweep the hallways, especially now with the new manager. He's really cracked down on it. Like. . . hoovering the floors. Everything. We've got a lot of jobs to do.
>
> NH: What do you all think about that?
>
> P8: (raises his eyebrows) Wouldn't like to say.

This answer arguably demonstrates the level of conformity these players will adhere to, no matter how much they may internally disagree with the rules which suggests Elias' ideas on Dreams vs Reality is prevalent. Here, to achieve the ultimate dream, the reality is often maintaining silence despite the level of anxiety and the constant pressures this may entail. This echoes the findings in Manley, Roderick and Parker's study[79] on the discourse of identity and maintaining silence in a sporting environment. Remaining silent is arguably a coping strategy to deal with the fluxing power balances between themselves and the personnel who control their daily routines, yet it should be noted that these players are not completely powerless, they choose to normalize these expectations to show that they have a good attitude and are disciplined enough to be a success.[80]

Leaving home

As part of the youth academy life, players are often required to leave their childhood home and move into accommodation provided by the club. This can take the form of "digs"; a house with a family who offer a room for a lodging academy player, or a home designed for academy players owned by the club itself. The cohort interviewed lived in various environments. Seven of the players lived in digs at the time of interview, although one had recently moved back home after feeling he could not manage the demands of the academy and living away from home. Three found moving into digs particularly difficult, whilst out of the 7 who lived in digs, 6 said once the initial transition was complete and they became accustomed, they found the whole scenario completely fine. For example, Player 11 suggested that being paired with other academy players into one house was beneficial as they could discuss how they were feeling and therefore settle in together, which is perhaps interesting given that the cutthroat nature of the industry and an "every man for himself" type subculture means historically, players tend to keep their thoughts private.[81] Player 3 said:

> if I'd been moved into another place instead of where I was, I think my experience would have been completely different, but because I was stuck in with 5 lads, I made those friends from living with them.

This statement suggests the need for friendships is regarded a priority by some of the players to manage moving away from home and to bolster their self-confidence when entering the new workplace. This can be identified as a similarity to the findings from Fry and Bloyce's study[82] on golfers who made friendships for convenient purposes whilst away from home on tour. Likewise, Elias[83] states an "interdependence of the players, which is a prerequisite of their forming a figuration, may be an interdependence of allies or of opponents". These players are arguably aware of the upcoming challenges that they face to be success, as all players knew that only 0.012% of academy players are successful at Premier League level.[84] Thus, facing such challenging times but with allies as opposed to opponents could be determined as a coping strategy adopted to lessen the isolated threats to their identity that these players may experience.[85]

This finding highlights the difficult task the football club must undertake to liaise with appropriate accommodation providers for these young individuals to live in. Player 6 suggested that he would struggle if he had to move away from home and felt that dealing with such changes "could have an effect on how they play as well". Player 9 echoed this stating that he "felt like I'd enjoy football a lot more if I was in my home environment". A home environment often symbolizes safety, material meanings, emotional connections and support networks through social interactions with significant members of an individual's close circle, these players are struggling to manage the transitional change into adulthood that leaving home creates, plus, managing new and perhaps strange employment requirements that differ from the norms experienced during school.[86]From an analytical perspective, leaving home sees these players transition from an "Established" member of a safe and secure environment that is comfortable and reassuring, to an initial "Outsider" member where they are alone and need to establish new interdependences with others in their new accommodation to feel more secure.[87] This also cements findings from other studies that suggests the notions of friendships and allies are highly important in this high-pressured environment.[88]

Dressing room relationships and non-football friends

In the interviews, all players were asked about their perceptions of dressing room relationships. Of the 12 participants, 5 stated that everyone in the academy "got along" and were friends. This is perhaps interesting, given the remaining 7 said that it was not possible to be true friends and teammates due to rivalry and the competitive nature of the environment. For example, Player 6 said:

> I'm the person in the changing room where we get along, best of mates . . . but when we step out onto the pitch, I'm fighting for your place and you're fighting for my place.

Combined with a sense of "drifting apart" from friends outside of the academy as described by Player 9, academies can be lonely and isolating. Despite this, players described a sense of unity amongst the academy players with Player 9 saying "there's no problem with anybody, we're all good friends", whereas Player 3 alluded to groupings of players, particularly by those who live in digs together:

> I was stuck in digs with 5 other lads . . . so we tend to hang out together. We don't really go out as a team.

Player 12, a second-year scholar, suggested the atmosphere in the dressing room was better this year compared to last year:

> last year it was probably more difficult to be fair because we were bottom of the league and didn't really win many games so there was probably more conflict between people.

The league position for the team was cited as a reason for a divide between the first-and second-year scholars by 7 of the 12 players. Some stated that the divide was present particularly at the start of the season such as Player 1 who said "it was to be expected, because they [second years] had to do it [jobs] last year". The physical configuration of the academy building means that the scholars are split into two changing rooms, which some said, contributed towards the "divide" and how each group socialized separately outside of the academy. Player 5 said, "I'd say truthfully there's a bit of a divide between the first years and second years". However, Player 12 stated that he felt that it was a good thing to have a mixture of first and second years in the dressing room as he felt it helps new players coming in to integrate as some will not know anyone, thereby attempting to challenge the Established and Outsider boundaries. This finding aligns with Parker[89] who suggested that traditions of the domineering masculine environment are still present, where these young players enter the academy aware of long-standing traditions in terms of academy operation, which were to be adhered to without question. Player 7 explained the divide between the first and second years both in and outside of the academy:

> there's a big split between 18s and 17s. At college, the 17s sit one side of the school . . . 18s sit at the other side. So, you get on well with the people in your age group. But this year, quite a lot of people have noticed quite a bit of friction between-like the two age groups, but it's been really weird. That we're actually second in the league. And when you look at it in detail, thinking well, "he doesn't really get on with him because he's a second year, the second year doesn't get on with him cos he's a first year" and all that back and forward and yet on a football pitch, we bitch to each other a bit, but we're still second in the league going for the first . . . you would have thought . . . they should be near the bottom.

Player 7 then, contradicts Player 12 who states that low league position was a cause for friction, as he suggests the friction is there permanently, yet they can succeed on the pitch as a team when it matters. This "bitching" and divide as per Player 7, concurs with of Established Outsider Relations[90] where acts of gossiping perpetuate levels of "we" and "they" group divisions. Through this segregation, power fluctuates between the two groups as both need each other to succeed in a match, however, the Established, or the second years, view themselves as superior to their Outsider counterparts off the pitch.[91]Ultimately, this reinforces the feelings of belonging in each segregated group and further constrains the footballers into accepting these occurrences as football subcultures that are so deeply embedded in the sport and controlled by fluctuating power balances, that change is unlikely to occur.[92]

Plans for the future: education and ambition

Given the low success rates for young footballers to achieve high-level playing careers, this study sought to understand players views of normal life and how they may consider life without football. This was achieved through establishing the players perceptions of their current mandatory educational studies and whether they had a second career option. Perhaps unsurprisingly, all the player's aspired to become a professional footballer. However, in contrast to Parker's study[93] where the term

"occupational inevitability" was used to describe the academy player's thoughts on making it as a professional and therefore a disregard for potential failure, 8 of these 12 players in this study had a "Plan B" career option. For some, this was to remain in a sporting role such as that of a physio, or sport scientist, whereas others wanted to go into Business, Law or Engineering, with enrolling at university was mentioned by several participants. However, 9 players said that many academy players did not take their mandatory education seriously, despite knowing the low success rates.

> P1: there's some boys who just think you know, I'm gonna be a footballer, blah, I'm here in the academy, I'm here full-time, I've pretty much made it, I don't need to do this.

The main reasons for disregarding education were boredom, purely wanting to play football, or the course being too like one completed previously at school which echo other study findings.[94] No player indicated that education would be frowned upon by the club, should they wish to pursue more qualifications. Thus, it cannot be said for certain whether the assumptions made in other studies[95] where a stronger athletic identity results in lower educational commitment are evident in this study, as over half of these players specialized early in football. Furthermore, those who did specialize early do not exactly correlate in a linear fashion to those who do not engage fully in education. For example, Players 2 and 11 played from a very young age but were the only two players who said they take their education seriously. Players 3 and 10 did not start professional football till later, with the former completing what was necessary and the latter engaging in extra business study A Levels, proving that it is not a simple matter of those who have specialized early as the ones that disregard education, it is more complex.

When asked about their views on education now they had left compulsory schooling and were enrolled on a mandatory BTEC in Sport Studies at a new college close to the academy, all 12 players suggested that they view education as an important part of their lives. However, it was very clear that attending college on a Wednesday was a necessary evil for most, yet an opportunity to express their masculinity and footballer identity to outsiders.[96]

> P3: we went and did it at a local college and then everyone just went nuts. Cos you get people trying to stunt, looking like "oh look at me I'm a footballer in a college".

Player 1 continued by saying that this view is "expected" in this kind of environment with Player 2 interestingly adopting an "us" analogy:

> Some of us are [interested], some of us just get on and work . . . some of us, hate it, some of us can't, some of us won't do it, some just get bored too easy.

This kind of description suggests a unity of identity, where the perception is that they all feel and act the same way due to their embodied footballer habitus. Likewise, these players suggest that banter is a present behavioural subculture that follows them from the academy to the college. Player 10 said that at the new college, which is Rugby-orientated, himself and the other academy players feel segregated from the full-time pupils, despite assurances from academics that they will be welcomed and integrated. The youth players are outweighed in the power balance struggle and in the minority outsider group, as they are made to feel like Outsiders by their Established, rugby-playing fellow students.[97] This is perhaps interesting, as within the club itself, there is a division of Established second years and Outsider first years, yet at college, all youth academy players feel the need for reassurance amongst one another:

> P10: we're not really classed as students in the school . . . they don't speak to us . . . we tried speaking to each other but that didn't last very long . . . I don't really mind, because I've got the lads to have the banter with.

Despite some players wanting to study additional A Levels and other subjects, the outside world's perception of these players as elite athletes precedes them in other environments, therefore, no matter how hard they try to integrate, they are isolated, and constrained to maintain the footballer stereotype that has dominated the football world for many years.[98]

Notwithstanding the disregard for education, the players did allude to a punishment system orchestrated by the club should they not complete their education on time or to an accepted standard. The punishments were given on a strike system, where one strike was to coach one of the younger academy groups one evening during the week. A second strike was to miss training and a third was to miss a match completely. Given the percentage chances of being in the starting XI anyway, this strike system was described by most players as effective because it meant the work was completed and football could be played. To miss a match because of not completing their education was regarded as foolish as it could allow someone else to take their place:

> P10: if the education isn't up to date then you could miss training, you could miss matches and that, that puts your place up in jeopardy, so if you're playing well every week and you're not doing your education, you could be on the side lines. You might not even be in the squad.

This could be argued as evidence of power fluctuations within this figuration. Those in positions of authority such as the Education Officer arguably have the balance of power in their favour, as not only is attending education mandatory, but putting in effort and fulfilling the course requirements is also something the club values highly. Despite some players not wanting to be at college, all players attended because of the power balance in favour of the club: no education, no football. As stated by Elias,[99] no individual is completely powerless, with the players holding some power, as the club needed the players to attend college as part of their obligations to the English Football League. This finding differs from other studies that found clubs were not over enthusiastic regarding education as to do well or be interested in gaining an education was to admit failure as a footballer.-[100] This study shows that this club regarded education as important to complete regardless as to individual opinions, as players suggested that the club's views on education were positive and encouraging. The appointment of an Education Officer reinforces the club's apparent value of education. In a comparative study,[101] Irish trainee players felt English players had substantial time to complete their studies, which all players in this study confirmed. Some players, however, did allude to difficulties in managing their education and football, with Player 7 stating that he could have done more education, yet he feels at an advantage that he did not as he states that "some of the boys are doing business, some of the boys are doing History. They're behind in our work because they're trying to do that as well". Player 8 said that he found it difficult to self-teach and complete the work in one day and a morning compared with the amount of time they would be given to do the same course if at school. Similarly, in Bourke's study[102] an improvement in relations between academies and educational institutes is necessary if players are to be individually motivated to complete their studies. With their educational officer a keen drive for these players to gain good qualifications as well as the club moving their players to a new college, this club arguably takes their player's education seriously, yet there is still room for improvement.

Regarding career ambitions, these players were unanimously clear about their dream of becoming a professional footballer and that they would complete anything that was asked of them, such as navigating pressures to play well consistently that were blanketed by imaginings or fantasies about being successful. This demonstrates Elias'[103] notion of power and its continuous fluctuation that both enables and constrains these players into accepting the subcultural norms of the club that impact their life both on and off the pitch. This was even evident when the players were asked if they would play in lower leagues to still identify as a footballer. Most of the players answered yes, which is in stark contrast to other findings[104] that said English players will not consider lower league opportunities. These players identify as a footballer, their habitus is continually evolving through continued high-level exposure to the environment and the ratio of power that fluctuates through the interdependencies they form with others, but they are extremely aware of their success in gaining an academy place. They are driven by their childhood dreams to make it on the main stage, despite the harsh realities that they may not succeed.

Conclusion

The aim of this case study was to explore how youth academy players navigate fluctuating power balances and prevalent subcultures in football and how this influences their identity "off the pitch". Using concepts from Elias' figurational sociology to explore life "off the pitch", players stated their abidance towards "jobs" as a rite of passage, despite this controlling the players day and down-time. Upon joining the academy, players describe friendships with people from school as drifting apart whilst they prioritized embodying the subcultural norms of the club environment. When discussing daily academy life and the norms it entailed, many of the players suggested the prevalence of a divide between the players, particularly first and second years. Some players suggested that banter is accepted by all, whereas others alluded to normalizing it for the sake of fitting in. As tradition is a vehicle for legitimizing positions of power, this study's data suggests that youth academy players are constructing and reconstructing their masculine identities by maintaining elements of tradition, such as banter and hierarchical behaviour to protect themselves in the ruthlessness of the industry.[105] Some participants suggested that everyone was friends, whereas others described a kind of usage of one another. In other words, off the pitch these players used one another to rid themselves of feeling isolated and lonely with no friends, but during game time they purely focused on themselves and working to succeed as an individual.[106] These participants demonstrate that football is indeed a group of individuals in a team sport as their identities are continuously evolving through the interdependencies and power balances to which they are subject.[107]

Regarding employment, players in this academy did not associate with the term "occupational inevitability". All players were knowledgeable on the low statistical success rate of making it as a professional and many had a "Plan B" for when their career finishes. Despite this, many did not speak particularly positively about their mandatory educational requirements, although they did understand the value of education, which could be said is an indication that headway is being made in terms of understanding the unlikelihood of being successful. This club upholds a positive mentality towards education and through the appointment of an Education Officer, encourages youth players to undertake additional qualifications, which again contrasts to findings from other studies.[108]

In conclusion, the findings from this study offer some contrasting contributions to the knowledge of professional football, whilst further cementing evidence presented in other research studies. For example,evidence of tradition present in this study shows that the hyper-masculine culture, long associated with football, features predominantly. The norms of the environment are continuously working to enable and constrain these young player's identities through the formation of new chains of interdependence within the figuration. These players are well aware of their limited chance of success but show resilient characteristics as they manage and negotiate the waves of adaptations necessary both on and off the pitch.

Notes

1. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", McGillivray et al., "Caught up in and By the Beautiful Game", Roderick, "A very precarious profession", and Hague and Law. "I was really, really shocked".
2. McGillivray, Fearn and McIntosh, "Caught up in and By the Beautiful Game".
3. Hickey and Kelly, "Preparing to not be a footballer".
4. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time" and McGillivray et al., "Caught up In and By the Beautiful Game".
5. Gheerbrant, "Premier League: What happens to footballers", and Matthews, "Fans slam arrogant".
6. BT Sport, "No Hunger in Paradise".
7. Hague and Law, "I was really, really shocked".
8. Adams and Carr, "Football friends".
9. Parker, "Training for Glory", and Platts, "Education and welfare".
10. Burgess et al., "Football Culture", 200.
11. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time" and Roderick, "A very precarious profession".

12. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time" and Roderick, "A very precarious profession", Platts, "Education and welfare", Roe and Parker, "Sport, Chaplaincy and Holistic Support".
13. Sothern and O'Gorman, "Exploring the mental health and wellbeing".
14. Roe and Parker, "Sport, Chaplaincy and Holistic Support".
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Roderick, "A very precarious profession" and Hickey and Kelly, "Preparing to not be a footballer".
18. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
19. Ibid.
20. Elias, *What is Sociology?* 28
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Hague and Law, "I was really, really shocked".
24. Ibid.
25. Bourke, "The dream of being a professional soccer player".
26. Clarke et al., "Players understanding of talent identification".
27. Bourke, "The dream of being a professional soccer player" and Roderick, "A very precarious profession".
28. Bourke, "The dream of being a professional soccer player" and Roderick, "A very precarious profession" and Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son" and Morris et al. "From youth team to first team".
29. Parker, 'Chasing the Big-Time, and Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son".
30. Kelly and Waddington, "Abuse, Intimidation and violence".
31. Kelly and Waddington, "Abuse, intimidation and violence" and Mitchell et al. "Exploring athletic identity".
32. Roderick, "From identification to dis-identification".
33. Kelly and Waddington, "Abuse, intimidation and violence" and Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son" and Clarke et al. "Players understanding of talent identification".
34. McGillivray et al., "Caught up in and By the Beautiful Game".
35. Bourke, "The dream of being a professional soccer player".
36. Adams and Carr, "Football friends".
37. Roderick, "A very precarious profession" and Adams and Carr, "Football friends".
38. Ibid.
39. Ibid.
40. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid, 66.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid and Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son".
45. Ibid.
46. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", 146.
47. Ibid.
48. Platts, "Education and welfare".
49. Roberts, *Key Concepts in Sociology*, 75
50. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
51. Ibid and van Krieken, *Norbert Elias*
52. Ibid.
53. Dunning, *Figurational contributions*, 214
54. van Krieken, *Norbert Elias* and Roberts, *Key Concepts in Sociology*
55. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
56. Ibid.
57. Elias and Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*
58. Ibid and Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*
59. Ibid.
60. Ibid.
61. Liston, "Established-outsider relations", Velija and Flynn, "Their bottoms are the wrong shape", Velija, "Nice girls don't play cricket" and Lake, "They treat me like I'm scum".
62. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Roderick, "A very precarious profession", Atkinson, *Key Concepts* and Bryman, *Social Research Methods*
63. Crowe et al. "The Case Study Approach".
64. Bryman, *Social Research Methods*
65. Sparkes and Smith, *Qualitative Research Methods*
66. Roderick, "A very precarious profession", and Kvale and Brinkman, *Interviews*

67. Law, "Researching professional footballers".
68. Ibid.
69. Ennis and Chen, "Interviews and focus groups" and Law, "Researching professional footballers".
70. Jackson and Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*
71. Lincoln and Guba, *Naturalistic Inquiry*
72. Braun and Clarke, "Using thematic analysis".
73. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".
74. Ibid and Platts, "Education and welfare".
75. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
76. Ibid and Roderick, "A very precarious profession".
77. Ibid and Roderick, "A very precarious profession".
78. Dunning, *Figurational contributions* and Paulle and van Heenkhuizen, *Elias and Bourdieu*
79. Manley, Roderick and Parker, "Disciplinary mechanisms".
80. Ibid, and Elias, *What is Sociology?*and Brown and Coupland, "Identity Threats"
81. Roderick, "A very precarious profession".
82. Fry and Bloyce, "Friends as enemies".
83. Elias, *What is Sociology?* 130
84. BT Sport, "No Hunger in Paradise".
85. Nicholls and Polman, "Coping in sport".
86. Elias, *What is Sociology?* and Lahelma and Gordon, "Home as a Physical, Social and Mental Space"
87. Elias and Scotson, "The Established and The Outsiders".
88. Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son" and Fry and Bloyce, "Friends as enemies".
89. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".
90. Elias and Scotson, "The Established and The Outsiders".
91. Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An introduction*
92. Elias and Scotson, "The Established and The Outsiders", Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An introduction*, Roderick, "A very precarious profession", Hague and Law, "I was really, really shocked"
93. Ibid.
94. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Platts, "Education and welfare", Hague and Law, "I was really, really shocked".
95. McGillivray et al. "Caught up in and By the Beautiful Game" and Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son".
96. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".
97. Elias and Scotson, "The Established and The Outsiders".
98. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".
99. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
100. Ibid, Monk, "Modern Apprenticeships", Brown and Potrac, "You've not made the grade son" and Platts, "Education and welfare".
101. Bourke, "The Dream of being a professional soccer player".
102. Ibid.
103. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
104. Ibid.
105. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time", Roderick, "A very precarious profession" and Platts, "Education and welfare".
106. Fry and Bloyce, "Friends as enemies".
107. Elias, *What is Sociology?*
108. Parker, "Chasing the Big-Time".

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Data

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