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Sociological influences on the identification and development of players

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Introduction

Soccer is the world's most popular sport and subsequently an important socio-cultural driver. One of the key factors in the sport's worldwide dominance has been the creation of professional leagues and the emergence of teams as powerful commercial brands and, for some (i.e., investors/owners), a substantive financial opportunity. The current context is a far cry from the local, amateur activity that emerged from the middle of the 19th century (cf. Elliott, 2017). At the highest levels of soccer, the frenzied environment is more akin to the entertainment business; whilst the lowest levels of soccer competition the game is concerned with continued delivery of a quality product that offers hope, aspiration, and expectation. Regardless of whether competing for the highest international honours available (e.g., the World Cup; the Champions League), or to remain competitive within a national league structure, there is the requirement for clubs to field a team that can perform.

Due to the ever-increasing costs associated with purchasing players from another club, it is unsurprising that clubs prefer to look at their own talent identification and talent development (TID) processes and practices (Reeves & Roberts, 2020). Alongside club-driven methodologies for talent identification and talent development, national and international federations have brought about rule changes. For over a decade, efforts have been made with the broad intention of increasing the quality and quantity of players developed by clubs to support their, and in some instances the national federation's, aspirations. Some examples of these changes include, the Deutscher Fußball-Bund (DFB) mandating that all German clubs in the top three tiers must operate an academy; the Fédération Française de Football (FFF) and Ligue de Football Professionnel (LPF) implementing the "Charte du Football Professionnel'; and the Premier Leagues 'Elite Player Performance Plan' (EPPP). There have, however, also been other, somewhat, controversial and wide-ranging rule changes, such as UEFAs 'Level Playing Field' initiative, more often referred to as Financial Fair Play (FFP), which has polarised clubs and fans and, seemingly, done little that it set out to achieve.

Whilst there have been numerous influences upon clubs and their talent identification and development processes and practices, researchers continue to question the productivity of academies in developing players who can transition to the first team (Morris, Todd & Oliver, 2015). The purpose and different structures of academies across Europe has been well documented (see Relvas et al., 2010). The range of specialist practitioners within these structures, that help guide player development, has been expanded, though their individual and combined influence remains to be fully understood. As the breadth of influence (i.e.,

specialist practitioners) upon an individual, from a club or academy environment increases, so too does the need to better understand that influence. It is important to note that the impact of sociological factors upon talent identification and talent development in soccer has received less attention than other disciplines/areas of investigation (Reeves, McRobert et al., 2018). However, seven sociological factors have been proposed as potential predictors of future, adult, high performance in soccer (cf. Williams & Reilly, 2000; Williams, Ford & Drust, 2020). In this chapter, we consider several of those factors and attempt to explain how practitioners and researchers can, with an enhanced understanding of the issues explored, more effectively manage processes and practices that ultimately lead to better outcomes in terms of player identification, development, productivity, and club success.

The role of family

The role of the family unit, but particularly parents, has been of interest to researchers from both participation and performance perspectives (Hoyle & Leff, 1997; for a historical review, see Dorsch et al., 2021). Understandably, parents make a significant contribution to their child's (non)involvement in any sport or activity and there is a body of work that has sought to understand this issue across various sports. Scientists have examined several broad issues including parents' experiences in youth soccer (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke, Harwood & Cushion, 2016; Newport, Knight & Love, 2020), children's preferences for parental involvement and children's enjoyment (Furusa et al., 2020), and the role of siblings during talent development (Taylor, Carson & Collins, 2018), though the importance and role of family does not just concern young players. For example, findings from other studies have highlighted the role of family support in dealing with issues of mental ill-health amongst professional players (Wood, Harrison & Kucharska, 2017), and the impact of job relocation upon soccer families (Molnar & Maguire, 2008; Roderick, 2012; Roderick, 2013).

Scientists that have investigated parents' experiences in youth soccer have reported several common features, including increased sense of parental responsibility and an embodied sense of closeness. An increased sense of parental responsibility has been shown to occur due to enhanced parental identity, linked to their child's role as an academy player (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke, Harwood & Cushion, 2016). Parents feel that their child being identified and labelled as a junior-elite soccer player reflects their parenting ability and, thus, their identity as a parent. The proximity to parental identity and their child's transition through different stages of development programmes and environments has also been noted to

affect parents' identity (Clarke & Harwood, 2014; Clarke, Harwood & Cushion, 2016). In addition to changes in identity, it has been suggested that parents must carefully navigate their position within the academy environment (Reeves, McRobert et al., 2018), seeking to understand the landscape and manage their exchanges with a range of other actors within the environment. Furthermore, interactions between parents have been suggested to require mediation of expectations regarding their child's transition to becoming an elite athlete. The high attrition rate of junior-elite soccer players means that parents, like their child(ren), require careful management of self within the development environment.

Managing identity, expectations, and self within a talent development environment has been closely linked to notions of socialisation and conforming to norms, practices, and expectations within the established culture. These norms, it is suggested, are heightened through parents' interactions with coaches and other parents; meaning that the quality of a parent's relationship with their child's coach, or other parents, might affect the comments they make, the questions they pose, and the role they take in coaching their own child (Clarke & Harwood, 2014). Specifically, Clarke and Harwood's (2014) study found that parents had to adjust to the shift in power to, and increased involvement from, their child's coach(es) whilst negotiating the expectations placed on them, and how this all personally affected their identity. Parents suggested that they experienced difficulties controlling their behaviours whilst watching competitive games from the side-line and ensuring that they adhered to the socio-cultural norms of 'not interfering' despite competition being an emotionally loaded aspect of a parent's role (Dorsch, Smith & McDonough, 2015) and one that can influence both the parent's and child's experience (Knight et al., 2016).

In their study of parents' experiences of the youth soccer journey, Newport, Knight and Love (2020) sought to understand parental experiences at different transitions of youngsters through an academy environment. Parents detailed an ever-changing journey through the academy environment that included a dual relationship that ranged from enjoyment and opportunity to sacrifice and consequences. Those dualistic experiences coincided with an evolving experience of the implications of the environment, that ranged from initial excitement and amazement through to focussing on the future (see Figure 1).

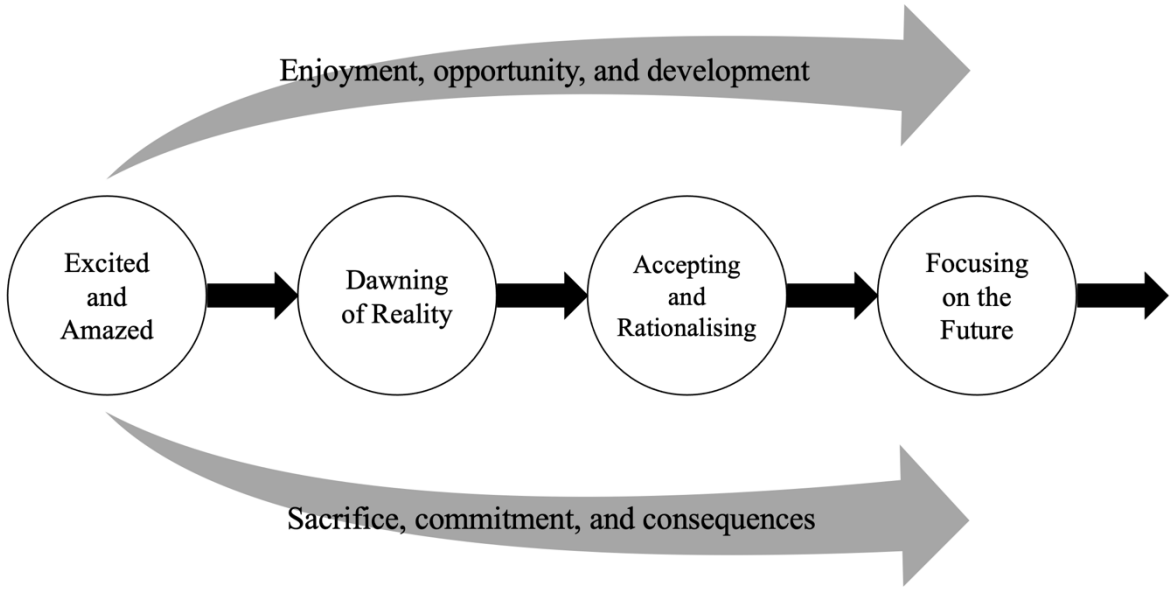

Figure 1. Parents' experiences of the youth soccer academy parenting journey

Source: Adapted from Newport et al. (2020)

In addition, Newport and colleagues proposed several recommendations for academies that included creating a parent-supportive culture, facilitating an environment that is welcoming for parents, respecting, and appreciating parents' commitment, valuing input and feedback from parents, and delivering a programme of support for parents. All these suggestions have resonance with the broader talent development literature (Furusa, Knight & Hill, 2020), such as the need to support and educate parents on multiple factors relating to their child's involvement and development in the academy environment. Parents blindly trust the academy to do what is best as "they're the experts," but acknowledge that they would like to know more to be able to engage with their child an understanding manner (Reeves, Enright et al., 2018).

Whilst efforts to be more inclusive for parents are certainly warranted, we should not assume that the role of family is only impacted by and through the academy systems and environments. Families themselves have been shown to exercise influence in the decision of whether a young player engages within a talent development programme or not. In their study of young Ghanaian soccer players, van der Meij and Darby (2017) found that players believed

that being recruited to an academy[1] was necessary to help them to migrate as a professional soccer player to one of the more lucrative leagues, often in Europe. Their ability to take-up the offer of a place at an academy, however, was fraught with delicate negotiations with their families. These negotiations often revolved around the perceived value of soccer and its role in facilitating international mobility as it related to a broader, longer-term livelihood strategy for the whole family. Such studies offer a sort of balance to the standard thinking around engagement in academies and professional soccer, particularly within developing nations.

The role of the family, as a focus of investigation in talent identification and talent development in soccer is of great importance. As key stakeholders in the lives of young and established players, their potential influence upon myriad factors that have direct or knock-on effects to other domains (i.e., psychological) and ultimately performance cannot be underestimated.

Coach-athlete relationship

There is a large body of work that underpins our knowledge of the coach-athlete relationship, though its importance was, for a long time, acknowledged but ignored (Yang & Jowett, 2016). Coaches spend a significant amount of time with their players, involved in on and off-field learning and development activities; this is coupled with the input of other specialist coaches and support staff (e.g., strength and conditioning coaches, performance analysts, nutritionists,). There are also other instances where coaches and players spend long periods of time together, such as travelling to games, where relationships can be affected. It has been suggested that the coach-athlete relationship includes all situations where a coach's and athlete's feelings, thoughts, and/or behaviours are inter-related (Jowett, 2007). The relationship between a player and their coach is of great importance and can affect multiple facets of a player's life, including their happiness (Lafrenière et al., 2011), their ability to cope (Nicholls et al., 2016), and performance (Jowett & Cockerill, 2003; Murray et al., 2020). However, much of the research in this area has been conducted with elite players or athletes,

[1] It is important to distinguish between the European-style academies, typically owned and operated by professional clubs with no associated costs to players and their families, from the African- (and other-) style academies, that are fee-paying private academies. This highlights a clear distinction in the sport development models operated around the world but is not for further discussion here.

and so our understanding of the coach-athlete relationship within talent development programmes is less-developed.

In recent years, there have been efforts to better understand the coach-athlete relationship within junior-elite soccer. For example, Nicholls and colleagues (2017) sought to explore whether the coach-athlete relationships were able to longitudinally predict the attainment of mastery achievement goals. The study surveyed 104 male academy players aged between 9-20 years old and using two measures, the Coach-Athlete Relationship Questionnaire (CART-Q; Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004) and the Attainment of Sport Achievement Goal Scale (A-SAGS; Amiot, Gaudreau & Blanchard, 2004). The coach-athlete relationship did not change over a six-month period and the quality of the relationship remained relatively stable. Players who perceived a stronger relationship with their coach were more likely to note higher perceived levels of mastery goal achievement – goals that are aimed at attaining a level of competence defined by skill development or self-improvement – six months later. Nicholls et al (2017) concluded that the coach-athlete relationship might be an important predictor of mastery goal achievement and that academies might maximise its benefit by incorporating coach-athlete relationship training within coach development programmes.

A similar study examined the link between the transformational behaviours of parents and coaches, and the impact of age (Murray et al., 2020). Transformational behaviours of parents and coaches were assessed using the Transformational Parenting Questionnaire (TPQ; Morton et al., 2011) and the Differentiated Transformational Leadership Inventory (DTLI; Hardy at al., 2010) respectively; and players' mental toughness was measured using the Mental Toughness Index (MTI; Gucciardi et al., 2015), and their physical performance through seven field-based fitness tests commonly used to assess physical performance in adolescent soccer players (Paul & Nassis, 2015). A total of 334 male players, aged 10-17 years, and playing in amateur to performance domains participated. Multi-level modelling examined the interaction between age and transformational leadership behaviours of parents and coaches on players' mental toughness and physical performance. The father's transformational leadership was positively associated with the mental toughness of younger players, whilst the coach's transformational leadership behaviours were positively associated with the physical performance of older players. The influence shifts from parent to coach at an older age, and so implications for the coach-athlete relationship and how those dynamics change and, thus, requires different behaviours. There remains a need to understand the causal

pathways for these shifts in influence and to understand its potential impact upon engagement and performance particularly as young players transition between different phases of player development (i.e., training to train/deliberate play through to training to compete/deliberate practice; Côté, 1999). The results of this study also intersect with the role of family, touching on the influence of family and how it might further influence relationships and decision-making between the three groups.

Such influence might also affect how relationships evolve and manifest. As such, there has been an increased interest in the notion of 'care', as a lens by which we can understand relationships between players and coaches. Nel Noddings (1988) seminal work in education drew on feminist theory to suggest that care should be the central tenet of the teacher-student relationship; an idea that has now been extended to coach-athlete relationships (see Annerstedt & Lindgren, 2014; Jones, 2009). Indeed, care has been shown to be an essential component of pedagogy (Cronin, Knowles & Enright, 2019) and thus, the development and maintenance of relationships. However, soccer environments are typically characterised as harsh and uncaring, with myriad micropolitical factors for individuals to contend with (Potrac et al., 2012).

In their case study of a premier league soccer player's relationship with a strength and conditioning coach during a period of long-term injury, Cronin and colleagues (2019) propose three important findings. First, that the coach "*cared for*" the player through a rules-based approach that adopted elements of Noddings's (1988) *pedagogical caring relation* but was largely driven by utilisation of scientific measures and logical rules in a "care full" manner. Second, it is important to recognise the social and environmental context in relation to care. Findings revealed that both coach and player appeared to be engaged in a caring relationship that was positioned in a broader milieu shaped by external and internal pressures that included others' employment status, financial pressures associated with league position, and an aggressive blame culture. Thus, how the player was cared for and how that care was received by the player was a complex interplay of factors that reinforce the notion of care as an integrated, not isolated, activity. Finally, whilst care is suggested as being central to pedagogical endeavours, the care given can be defined, limited, or enabled by other actors within their social context (e.g., other coaches, players, agents, etc.). Consequently, this study highlights that for coaches to care in soccer, there needs to be a shared understanding with players.

Communication is suggested as a critical component of care (Noddings, 2005) with all involved needing to embrace authentic dialogue that involves a genuine effort to listen to individuals. In complex environments, like professional soccer clubs it is suggested that there is a need to genuinely listen and involve players in order that they receive and accept an appropriate form of care (Cronin, Knowles & Enright, 2019). Moreover, the involvement of medical staff, soccer-specific coaches, strength and conditioning coaches, sport psychologists, nutritionists, data scientists, and others – all of whom have a role in assessing, monitoring, supporting, and caring for players – it might be better to care through an integrated approach, creating a climate, or web, of care that surrounds players with staff and teammates (Gano-Overway, 2014; Cronin, Knowles & Enright, 2019).

Cultural Background

The process of globalisation in professional soccer has been driven by increased television and media rights, sponsorship, and merchandise sales which has, in turn, manifested in the global migration of players (Magee & Sudgen, 2002; Poli, 2010; Richardson et al., 2012). In recent years there have been initiatives by some federations to increase the numbers of indigenous players in club squads. For example, UEFA introduced the *home-grown* rule in 2006, with quota rules to be met by clubs for the start of the 2008-2009 season. Evidence from the six major European leagues (England, France, Germany, Holland, Italy, and Spain) showed that opportunities for *home-grown players* (i.e., minutes played and appearances) between 1999 and 2015 was mixed. Only Germany saw significant increases in playing opportunities for indigenous players when comparing before and after the introduction of the rule; England and Italy saw significant decreases, and all other countries saw decreased, though not statistically significant, opportunities (Bullough et al., 2016). It was suggested that during the 2015-2016 season, approximately 50% of players from the top five European leagues (as above but excluding Holland) were foreign (Gerhards & Mutz, 2017) compared to 20% in 1995-1996, and 39% in 2005-2006.

Cultural diversity in soccer teams around the world has increased over the last few decades (Poli, 2010), though research efforts to understand the impact have only relatively recently begun to appear and their implications are broad. What we can be recognised already is that players from different countries, with different cultural backgrounds, languages, social and behavioural norms, are frequently integrated into, and expected to perform effectively, as a team. It has been suggested that the differences noted above increases the likelihood of

misunderstandings and conflicts (Lazear, 1999), which might stem from an individual's own or, indeed, their cultures prejudices that inhibits their willingness to cooperate with others.

When examining the 'big five' leagues, Maderer, Holtbrügge and Schuster (2014), found that culturally homogenous teams achieved higher average performances. They concluded that managers of more culturally and ethnically diverse teams should consider the potential costs associated with achieving integration and instead should strive to embed young players from the club's own academy. The effect of cultural heterogeneity, as observed in the Bundesliga, has been shown to negatively (Haas & Nüesch, 2012) and positively (Andresen & Altmann, 2006) affect team performance. Looking beyond the macro-level make up of a team's cultural diversity, Brandes and colleagues (2009) have suggested a more complex interaction of cultural influence upon team performance. When accounting for playing positions, more homogenous defensive formations performed better, whereas the opposite was true for striker formations. However, when the performance of teams from the big five leagues in Champions League games was examined, diverse and valuable teams tended to outperform less diverse and less valuable ones (Ingersoll et al., 2017), suggesting that the cost of players also acted as a mediator to performance outcome alongside cultural diversity.

As the results and findings surrounding cultural and ethnic diversity are inconclusive and evidence is, at best, mixed, it is safe to say that we need to know more about this issue. Whilst it appears that a non-linear relationship exists between cultural and ethnic diversity and team performance, with some teams benefitting from diversity in their teams' makeup, it is not clear where the tipping point between benefits and disadvantages lie or what or how much other factors might be of influence (e.g., team value). Whilst the impact of diversity upon team performance has been examined across the top 12 European leagues (Gerhards & Mutz, 2017), it has been suggested that a team's market value might be a stronger predictor of success, particularly in leagues with greater financial inequalities amongst clubs. Whilst market value and relative team salary have been shown to have a positive effect on performance and squad size a negative effect, cultural diversity has no significant correlation. These studies have been largely confined elite teams rather than development environments. Whilst the latter has been examined in relation to the impact of geographic location upon talent identification and talent development practices, there has been no attempt to understand the influence of cultural background at this critical timepoint in young soccer players' development. There are no studies that have sought to understand the implications of cultural background upon teams or individuals within academy environments. Such studies would be

welcomed and would undoubtedly have value as soccer's globalised state continues to grow and interest, participation, and investment increases from countries that have, previously, had little influence in soccer, such as China and the Arab States of the Persian Gulf.

Socioeconomic background

The influence of socio-economic background has been largely overlooked within soccer talent identification and development research. Whilst there is strong evidence relating to engagement in, and drop out from, grassroots sport based on social class (Pabayo et al., 2014; Pabayo, Molnar et al., 2014; Lammle, Worth, & Bos, 2012; Vandendriessche et al., 2012), there is little examination of this issue from a talent development or elite performance perspective. In other sports, scientists have reported that athletes' sociodemographic markers, such as race and relative access to wealth, favour white, privately educated athletes (Lawrence, 2017; Winn et al., 2017). However, this change within soccer has been slow to occur; since inception, soccer has been the quintessential working-class sport. Less than two decades ago, it was suggested that in Ireland, young soccer players tended to be targeted from working class families (Bourke, 2003), perhaps, due to soccer's historical roots as one of the few sporting opportunities available to those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), though current evidence challenges that notion.

In the United States, there have been material, geographic, and cultural changes in soccer since the 1970s that has included the expansion of private leagues, pushing competitive leagues into the suburbs and away from larger cities with obvious implications for the demographic of players participating (Andrews, 1999; Andrews et al., 1997; Reck & Dick, 2015). A recent study of the socioeconomic, racial, and geographic composition of professional female soccer players in the US (Allison & Barranco, 2021) found support for these claims. The study examined longitudinal data including National Women's Super League (NWSL) rosters and combined these with US Census data and concluded that those at the highest levels of women's soccer in the US come from "places ('hometowns') that are whiter, less black or Latino, more suburban, and less socioeconomically disadvantaged than the national average, with higher per capita, median household, and median family incomes" (p464-5). Also, studies of academies within the UK indicate that youngsters entering soccer talent development programmes are perceived by scouts and recruitment staff as being increasingly from middle-class backgrounds (Reeves, Roberts et al., 2018).

There is only one study, of which we are aware, that has specifically focussed on issues of socioeconomic status of academy soccer players from Europe (Kelly et al., in review). This study explored socioeconomic status and psychological characteristics in academy players in in England. Players' home postcodes were used to determine socioeconomic status and the Psychological Characteristics for Developing Excellence Questionnaire (PCDEQ) to explore psychological constructs of coach-rated 'high' and 'low' potential players. Players rated as having a higher potential were from families with a significantly lower socioeconomic status ($P<0.05$) and scored higher on factor three of the PCDEQ (i.e., coping with performance and developmental pressures ($P<0.05$), compared to players considered to have lower potential. These results suggest a possible causal link between socioeconomic status, psychological characteristics, and perceived potential to become a professional player. Similar findings have recently been reported in Brazil, where it was suggested that the poverty of young Brazilian soccer players might help shape their level of skill and expertise (Uehara et al., 2021). The authors suggested that poverty created an exosystem which young players increased the likelihood of participation in soccer-specific activities and, thus, their engagement in deliberate practice and play (e.g., Ford Ward, Hodges, & Williams 2009; Hornig, Aust, & Güllich, 2016), which have both been shown to facilitate the development of expertise. It has also been suggested such situational factors might facilitate some psychological characteristics, such as overcoming adversity, motivation, mental toughness, and resilience. It is difficult to assess such claims though as we lack sufficient relevant high-quality studies and data.

There are obvious differences between the socioeconomic statuses of players and their families around the world, but it is imperative that those involved in academies and development programmes to recognise the influence that socioeconomic status might have when designing, implementing, and evaluating talent development pathways (Rees et al., 2016).

Conclusions and future directions

In this chapter, we explored how sociological influences upon talent identification and talent development in soccer can have widespread implications. The range, breadth, and interconnectedness of these factors can be a confounding factor and researchers have only recently begun to explore some of these issues. Social factors do not occur in isolation, and so neither can our efforts to examine these issues. We suggest that the impact upon the

development and performance of individuals and teams can be greatly influenced by sociological factors.

One of the largest contributory factors is the role of family in the talent identification and talent development. Family have been shown to be crucial in providing a range of resources and support to youngsters. But they have also been identified as key in determining (non)engagement in academy/development programme environments and, as such, should be viewed as one of the most crucial stakeholders in their child's talent development pathway. Where players and their families do engage in academies, evidence has indicated that there needs to be better appreciation of how families are welcomed, appreciated, and valued. Another critical relationship exists between player and coach. This relationship has been shown to be significant in terms of the time spent together, both on and off the pitch –and in soccer, involving multiple coaches and support staff, too. The coach-athlete relationship has been linked to players' happiness, their ability to cope, and their performance. Recently, the ability for coaches to show care to players has been highlighted as an important factor in how the relationship can manifest but for care to manifest, there must first be a shared understanding of what care is and what it means between the coach and player. The effect of cultural factors in coach-athlete relationships are yet to be explored; and due to the inconclusive and mixed nature of findings from studies examining cultural diversity in soccer, we have a long way to go before we can fully understand and appreciate the complexity of cultural heritage and its impact upon talent identification and talent development. Similarly, we have a limited understanding of the role socio-economic status plays in identification and development. The limited, yet growing data, paints a picture of an increased number of middle-class participants, from less diverse backgrounds entering academies and development programmes in developed countries. However, it is noted that poverty in developing nations, like Brazil, is suggested to be at least in part responsible for the development of more skilful players, through promotion of an exosystem that promotes deliberate play and practice. That said, the causal relationship between poverty and skill development in soccer has not been established, despite calls for such examinations in the literature.

We must recognise that not all academies and development programmes are created equal, and that the social determinants have a significant role to play in the identification and development of soccer players. In order that we, as researchers and practitioners, do not miss or prevent any individual from succeeding in soccer, we must continue to enhance our understanding of the complexity and interconnectedness of social factors with psychological,

technical, tactical, and physical determinants of talent in soccer. Here, we suggest that there needs to be more comprehensive, inclusive, inter- and transdisciplinary thought given to the sociological factors that affect the identification and development of players, and that that thought extends into the elite professional game, too. The notion of a sociologist working within an academy or development environment might seem alien, particularly as sports science disciplines and sub-disciplines continue to fight for recognition and to be embraced. Yet such a role would be truly transdisciplinary – cutting across all departments with the potential to positively impact and influence possibilities for players to achieve.

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