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The Influence of a Form of Sport Life on Athletic Experiences: An Ethnographic Study

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Introduction

- A *form of sport life* describes the everyday practices of a sporting culture, and is embedded in a complex dynamical system that is multi-layered and has a reciprocal nature in regards to factors that influences practices, structures, traditions, customs, and behaviours
- Talent development environments should aim to provide high quality athletic experiences, which over time, enriches athletes selective capacities to immediately detect and discriminate affordances offered by a competitive situation (Dreyfus, 1992) (Figure 1)
- Crucially talent development environments can be shaped by a form of sport life, influenced by the reciprocal actions of its inhabitants, the practices of coaches and athletes, cultural expectations of parents, and National Governing Body models of learning (e.g., Rothwell, Davids, & Stone, 2019)
- While there is some recognition of the broader social, cultural, economic and political factors that influence talent development, little research has explored the relational nature of a form of sport life and an athlete's detection of affordances. Therefore, this study aimed to 1) experience first-hand the form of sport life in a talent development environment and to 2) theorise how these practices could influence athlete's detection of affordances.

Methods

- A season long (September 2017 to June 2018) ethnographic study was conducted at a professional British Rugby League Football clubs England Talent Pathway programme
- The ten month period provided weekly data collection opportunities including observation of practice sessions, coach meetings, and coach development sessions and informal and formal interviews with key agents
- To remove the subjectivity linked to a priori assumptions of the first author, an "analytically detached outsider-perspective" allowed theory and reflection to provide a more objective view of the social environment under study (Baur & Ernst, 2011)
- A three stage thematic analysis was used to generate the final dimensions.

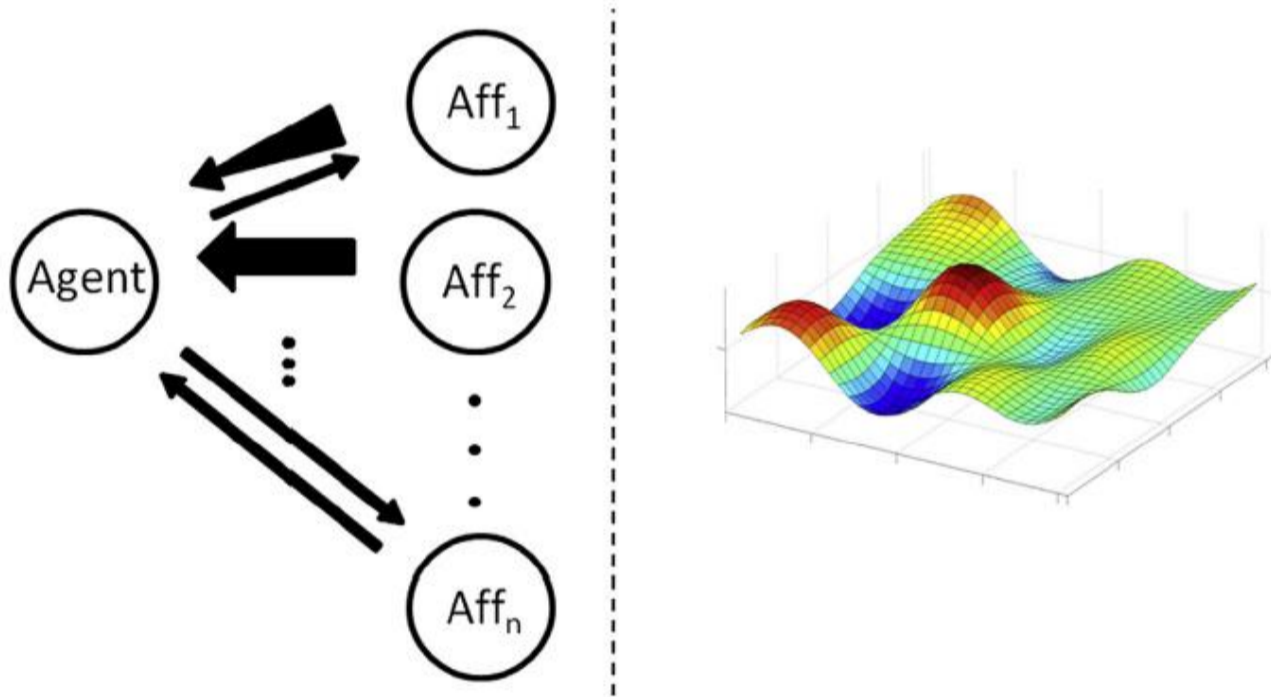


Fig. 1. Illustrates an athletes coupling with multiple affordances (Aff1-n) at the same time. The widths of the arrows reflect the degree of invitation and the landscape indicates the strongest level of attraction (deepest blue) (Adapted from Withagen, Araújo & de Poel, 2017).

Results

- The final dimensions generated from the analysis were sociocultural influences, coaching paradox, and practice tasks and robotic players.

Sociocultural influences
Masculinity and disciplined behaviour were socially and culturally constructed and reproduced by the actions, attitudes, and practices of key agents.

"Your city clubs, i.e., your xxxxx clubs, you know you're gonna get some rougher lads who are open to a good fight and all that and even at an early (age), I mean, I know for a fact". (coach)

Coaching Paradox
Deeper probing and observation revealed there was a clear disparity between the recommended method of practice and the coaches' customs and habits.

"They've obviously got a vision of how it was done back then and if it doesn't look like what they were doing back then they don't understand the way that things have changed". (coach)

Practice Tasks and Robotic Players
Practice aimed to enhance predictability and reduce uncertainty through rigid role specification and the reduction of personal autonomy.

"Not great at making decisions, very robotic at times, unable to work things out for themselves so the game's structured now and as a result people can't make great decisions. " (Head of Youth)

Discussion

- Coaches' perceptions of expert performance behaviours (i.e., accurate reproduction of technical movements) does not support skilful engagement with the environment (Fig 2)
- Sociocultural influences limit players' engagement with affordances, who displayed safe practice behaviours rather than explore the affordance landscape and risk making mistakes
- The over reliance on external agency (i.e., the coach) to guide actions and game behaviours suppress exploratory action
- In conclusion, socio-cultural-historical constraints are an undervalued area of skill acquisition but have a profound influence on the development of athletes.

Selected References

Dreyfus, H. (1992). What Computers Still Can't Do, New York: MIT Press
Withagen, R., Araújo, D., & de Poel, H. J. (2017). Inviting affordances and agency. New Ideas in Psychology, 45, 11-18.

Skilful Engagement with the Environment			
	Elements responded to:	Action governed by:	Success determined by:
Novice	Decontextualised features of the environment	Application of rules or instructions	Precision in applying rules
Developing expert	Solicitations that lead to conventional outcomes	Deliberation and experimentation	Moving towards a grip on the relevant solicitations
Expertise	Solicitations that lead to exceptional engagement	Exploration of the affordance landscape	Detect relevant affordances and new possibilities for action

Fig. 2. Adapted from Dreyfus' phenomenology of skill acquisition