Researching Access to Development Opportunities in British Basketball: The Value of Adopting a Figurational Approach

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The compatibility of coaches and athletes expectations of their joint relationship is a critical determinant of high performance in sport. This relationship is underpinned by a psychological contract, but our conventional understanding of this contract appears unable to explain some of its critical features. A qualitative methodology was employed to explore present day understandings of this relationship in British basketball, a sport that is currently subject to commercialising pressures. It is suggested that the figurational theorising of Norbert Elias may help us to explore the psychological contract in such uncertain developmental settings.

Keywords: figurational approach, sport, development opportunities, psychological contact

The quality of the coach-athlete relationship is critical to the development of work skills in high-performance sport (Jowett 2003; Stokvis 2000; Poczwardowski et al. 2002). The coach’s ability to instruct, and the athlete’s ability to receive instruction, are clearly critical factors in mediating skills development, but wider issues of compatibility, including the goodness of fit between the parties’ personalities, working styles, ethical positions and emotional needs, are also critically important in mediating the quality of the relationship (Potrac et al. 2002; Bergmann Drewe 2000). It is common for athletic performance to fall below anticipated levels when such expectations are not met (Jowett 2003; Poczwardowski et al. 2002). This paper will seek to show that it is possible to bring these issues into the sphere of human resource development, by exploring the psychological contract underpinning the working relationship between coach and athlete. In the process it will explore the distinction that is often made between transactional and relational contracts, that is to say, between the work goals and forms of emotional satisfaction sought by either party through their joint working. It will also explore two common assumptions underpinning the theorising of the psychological contract, namely the individualistic perspective that privileges employee expectations and perceptions and the commonly held assumption that the contract is between the employee and an organisation in the collective sense, rather than with individual organisational representatives, such as managers (Rousseau 1990).

These issues will be explored by making reference to basketball, a sport that is currently subject to intense commercialising pressures in the UK. Unlike its American counterpart, British basketball survives in a highly hostile commercial market, competing for sponsorship and spectators in the shadow of the traditional national sports, soccer, rugby and cricket. Until recently, this sport was largely amateur in status, played solely for the pleasure and prestige attached to achievement. Maguire (1988) employed Elias’ figurational theory to explore the increasing commercialisation of the British game, showing how increasing tensions between club-owners and the sport’s governing body, led to the emergence of a breakaway professional league, the BBL, in 1987 and arguably, from the perspective of the amateur lobby, to the loss of development opportunities for British players. Stokvis (2000) used figurational theory to suggest that commercialising pressures in sport are leading to
individualisation among athletes and a heightened fragility in coach-athlete relations. The work of these two writers would suggest that the commercialisation of British basketball is currently leading to changes in the psychological contract between coaches and players, in particular, to a shift from a developmental to a commercial agenda, and from a comparatively stable to an increasingly volatile form of contract in which perceived violation is more likely to occur. This paper will explore this possibility. In doing so it will follow their lead in using Norbert Elias’ figurational theory as an analytical framework.

British Basketball as a Setting for Career Development

The Commercialisation of the British Game

The growth of basketball as a game sport within the UK formally commenced in 1936 with the formation of its first governing body, the Amateur Basketball Association. Maguire (1988) describes how commercialising trends have led to the current Americanisation of the professional game, and to a change in its racial make-up. In the contemporary professional game, teams have many Afro-American and indigenous British Afro-Caribbean players. Despite the presence of a professional league, British basketball clubs are small, commercially vulnerable organisations. It is not unusual for club directors to take on coaching roles, and player-coaches are common. While a few better-funded clubs may offer youth academies, most clubs cannot afford to do so. Development opportunities for young players are therefore geographically fragmented, and talented junior players often compete for scholarships to North American colleges, as a means of obtaining access to the competition opportunities offered by the college league, the NCAA. The employment offered to professional players is casualised, dominated by single-season contracts and salaries that are low by European standards.

The increasing commercialisation of the game is changing the professional obligations of both players and coaches. At the professional level of the game, both parties must be adept at dealing with public, sponsors and media. Coaches of professional clubs take on a particularly prominent role, acting as the ‘face’ of the club in dealing with external interest groups as well as with players. However, this prominence comes at a significant cost in terms of job security. As in other professional game sports, while coaches are likely to be primarily responsible for the hiring and firing of players, they are also vulnerable to being fired themselves if their teams fail to win matches on a regular basis.

The Coach-Player Relationship

As in all game sports, basketball coaches work to develop technical skills and competition strategy among their athletes, to build athletes’ motivation, their capacity for emotion management and their capacity for team-work. For their part, players commit themselves to building effective performance skills through: developing and maintaining peak levels of physical fitness; engaging regularly in practice to build strength, stamina, agility and precision; and working to correct their technique in the light of feedback on performance. Those who commit to high performance sport must be willing to conform to the vision of their coach and submit to a rigorous regime of training. However, to build their skills, players also need to gain experience of competition against testing opponents. Here, the coach’s role as a team selector potentially locates them in opposition to the interests of individual players, who must compete with one another for selection to teams, to their teams ‘starting five’ (its elite player group), and to the allocation of court-time during competition matches. Even so,
The player-coach relationship remains a symbiotic one since the success of either party in competition is dependent on the performance of the other.

Theorising the Psychological Contract from a Figurational Perspective

The psychological contract is conventionally understood from the perspective of equity theory (Adams 1965) or social exchange theory (Homans 1974). Effectively, it assumes a ‘norm of reciprocity’ (Gouldner 1966) in which individuals feel obligated to respond positively to favourable treatment by others, but will assess the sum of the benefits accruing from the arrangement, setting benefits received against contributions made. It is assumed that the relationship of an employee with his/her organisation will remain mutually satisfying as long as either side continues to see a fair return on contributions made. Where this condition is violated, forms of overt withdrawal behaviour, including firing and resignation, become more probable, and subversive forms of ‘getting even’ can also take place (e.g. Coyle-Shapiro 2002; Morrison and Robinson 1997).

Writers have attempted to clarify our understanding of the psychological contract by discriminating between transactional and relational contracts, the former focusing on tangible benefits and contributions, such as pay and fringe benefits, set against hours worked and effort put in, and the latter on longer-term, aspirational dimensions of the contract, such as the opportunities for future career development offered in return for organisational commitment and long service (e.g. Anderson and Schalk). The psychological contract is conventionally assumed to refer to the relationship between the individual and his/her employing organisation, but what exactly constitutes the ‘organisation’ has been the subject of some debate. Rousseau (1990) has sought to resolve this by adopting an individualistic perspective in which the employee’s perspective is privileged and therefore becomes the primary focus of research. However, writers have cautioned against adopting a static model of the contract. For example, Conway and Briner (2002) argue that it must be seen as dynamic and resting on continual changes of mood. Writers have also highlighted the ways in which HRD interventions can impact both positively and negatively on the contract (D’Annunzio-Green and Francis 2005).

This paper will seek to show that the power dynamics of the psychological contract can be usefully explored by adopting a figurational sociological perspective (Elias 1978, 1991, 2000; Mennell 1992). From a figurational perspective, the everyday social engagement of individuals and groups is deemed to give rise to dynamic networks of social tension or ‘figurations’, representing their relative abilities to withhold social functions from one another. Effectively, it is assumed that social change is driven by the working out of individuals’ manoeuvring for power opportunities. Such manoeuvring is understood to take place both in the collective sense, as struggles between vested interest groups at both local and global levels, and in the individual sense, as individuals vie with one another for power opportunities. At the level of individual human relationships, a figurational analysis would recognise the presence of complex dependency bonds, reflecting not only expectations and obligations linked with the meeting of physical need, but also the capacity of the parties to meet one another’s emotional needs. From a figurational perspective, therefore, we can see the psychological contract as potentially coloured, not only by expectations of monetary return for work carried out, but also by forms of emotional perception that individuals may be unaware of or wish to conceal, such as their readiness to feel threatened by the actions of others and their readiness to make prejudicial assumptions about others. As Stokvis (2000) has demonstrated, figurational theory also offers a means of exploring the ways in which
global pressures, such as the commercialising tendencies in sport, might impact on local forms of social engagement, such as the working contracts between coaches and athletes.

**Methodology**

The present study adopts a qualitative methodology, in which semi-structured face-to-face interviews were employed to explore perceptions of the athlete-coach relationship from the perspectives of athletes and coaches working at the professional and semi-professional levels of the UK’s basketball development framework. This form of methodology was adopted as a means of getting the clearest possible picture of the lived experience of these informants, and of the ways in which their working relationships may be changing under the pressures of commercialisation. Several teams in the UK’s professional league, the BBL, and the highest division of its developmental national league, the EBL, were invited to participate. Structured sampling was employed in order to ensure as even a spread as possible across teams in terms of country of origin, skin colour, length of career and estimated level of expertise (defined in terms of whether players tended to start matches or played from the bench). All participants in the present study were male; this was unavoidable since at present in the UK, few women’s teams are able to paid playing opportunities. Several key informants, including ex-coaches and ex-players, also took part in the study.

In all, the players and coaches interviewed represented 3 BBL and 2 EBL teams, and had experience of many other British and overseas teams. Interviews were carried out with eight players, three coaches, three player/coaches and two club directors with extensive experience of coaching and playing at elite level.

Figurational theory was drawn on to devise interview questions probing informants’ perceptions of the player-coach relationship, including questions exploring the perceived working obligations of either party, the conditions under which contract violation might occur, and the impact of commercialisation. The interview transcripts were subject to a thematic analysis.

**The Findings of the Study**

The findings of the study will be summarised by contrasting players’ and coaches’ perceptions of the working obligations, exploring contract violation, and considering the possible impact of commercialisation.

*The player’s perception*

When asked what their obligations to their coaches were, players were unanimous in recognising the need to give their best at all times and to show respect and loyalty to their coaches. When asked what they expected coaches to give to them in return, players looked for both development opportunities and respect, but also, insofar as clubs could afford it, for money. However, the American players appeared to adopt a more individualised stance. This was the view of one experienced American player:

This is my fourteenth year of playing … and I like to think of myself as a very self motivated person - there are some players that need coaches to push them all the way to do everything. There are some players that are just self motivating, so I think it’s important for a coach to push them but I think for a player or an athlete … at the end of
the day it’s up to that athlete, that player to push themselves. The coach is there to encourage and help.

In contrast, British players, particularly those who were younger and less experienced, complained about the lack of technical instruction in the professional league. For example:

I’ve been playing for a while and I’d say that when I first started playing, when the team first won the Championship, I didn’t really get much feedback then…. most of the extra coaching and all the feedback I got was from the older players and that was about it. The coaches would just like make demands on you, sort of “do this” and that would be it …. a lot of technical information is really lacking over here. I think a lot of coaches just want to get players in, draw players up and then send everybody out there, they don’t really develop players as such. (young British bench player, BBL)

**The coach’s perception**

On their part, coaches expected players to display a positive attitude and commitment to skills development. In return, they felt obligated to develop and motivate their players in ways that went beyond the development of competition skills alone to the provision of general emotional support. But they recognised that some fellow-coaches were not prepared to shoulder such wide-ranging obligations, and that this attitude might be linked with commercialisation. For example:

There are very, very powerful coaches who will… plenty on record in the States … who will basically use the players for their own preferment if you like, for their own careers, and they won’t have a great deal of sympathy at an individual level, or empathy at an individual level. The players are just almost objects in a game of chess and they use them to their advantage, sadly. (elite coach)

**Contract violation**

Among the interview questions probing for contract violation were a number exploring the ways in which the expectations of coach and player might be influence by perceptions of colour or nationality. Informants’ answers confirmed that on both counts, stereotypical assumptions appeared to skew the psychological contract in favour of certain social groups. For example, they appeared to be exacerbating tensions between North American and British players:

Sometimes I’ve been on teams where the coach will talk to the American players totally different to the way he talks to an English player. Basically, he’ll ask an American player to do something and he’ll tell an English player to do something … there’s a total change in his respect … as though you’re not really as important. (young British bench player)

Both black and white players could recall instances of racial prejudice by coaches. In some respects this could work to disadvantage both black and white players. There was general recognition that black players risked being seen as ‘stupid’ but also as ’athletic’ and more capable of providing the spectacular ‘dunking’ that spectators loved to see. On the other hand, white players were likely to be seen as more intelligent but primarily suited to floor shooting.
However, the black players interviewed appeared to believe that the commercialization of the game was working to suppress discrimination on the grounds of race. For example:

I think in the last say fifteen twenty years the game has become so - how do you say - specialised that people are put into categories, not by colour anymore, probably doesn’t have anything to do with your colour, it is your size your athletic ability, your weight, your speed, your strength, they categorise you in that class now rather than you know, than just more colour than anything. (elite black American player)

Contract violations could also occur in other ways, and when they did so it was clear that coaches often did not have it all their own way. The player who offered this view saw it as a commercial risk:

I think there are constantly power struggles with coaches and players. Coaches could always threaten to not play you or they could practice you extra hard or make a meal out of certain things. If a coach likes another player better than another player, he’ll do his best to make sure that the one player he really likes excels …. It happens every day … you know this is like business, like any other business. (experienced American player)

If a player is, say, on a guaranteed contract … he can become lazy, or he could be selfish which is to the detriment to the coach. He could not listen to the coach …. He can also get out a mutiny. He could team up with the other players and tell the other players that this coach is not doing a good job. “Lets go to Management” and all of them will go together. (experienced American player)

When psychological contracts were violated, wider social constraints often made it impossible for the working partnership to be dissolved. In such cases, problems could escalate and in extreme cases, abuses of power could result. Informants told many stories in which both players and coaches were on the receiving end of such abuses. For example, players might be forced to play through injuries. For example:

Sometimes coaches will ask players to play through injuries and that to me is horrendous …. we’ve often played against teams where the coach puts a lot of pressure on the player to go out and do it even though the player is injured, he’s turned an ankle or whatever. I think the coach is in a very poor position where he’s putting the player under pressure to play if he’s injured, but that does happen. I’ve seen situations where players have worsened the injury to the extent that they’ve lost their job in the end because it’s become so acute …. But, you know, the coach is under pressure and he’s put the player under pressure, it’s not a good situation. (experienced elite coach)

However, coaches could also suffer abuse at the hands of players and in such cases, power balances sometimes appeared to skew the advantage in favour of the abuser. This story was offered by an experienced coach:

I remember a situation with a player who I’ve worked with… and he’s a difficult player but a very, very effective player, … he had a row with a coach, … and pinned him against the wall by his throat. [The coach] went to the club management because he wanted him sacking and the management refused to sack him and so the coach left.
Management wouldn’t support the coach because he was an outstanding player. They wouldn’t do it, but you know I think that was the management’s loss. (elite coach)

**The Effects of Commercialisation on the Psychological Contract**

It is evident from many of the stories offered above that the pressures of high performance sport can lead to contract violation and abuses of power. In some cases, such as the example of the injured player told to go back on court, it can probably be safely assumed that the abuse would not have taken place if the player had not been a waged employee. Stories of interference in hiring and firing decisions by commercial sponsors also reveals the influence that commercialisation may be having on the relationship between player and coach. Informants seemed to be aware of the influence of commercialisation. For example, a British player referred to the threat to livelihoods posed by American players:

… the Americans … get a lot of money you have five Americans starting and then you have five English guys on the bench … they’re great players, they deserve to play … but … there’s no English players in this league that are actually starting … all the English players go away to Europe … that’s why there’s none in this league because the money’s not great and they can play overseas …. people in this country would like to see less Americans … more home grown talent. (JS)

However, among the black informants, there was recognition that commercialisation offered a way of making a good living. This is how on black American player explained the popularity of basketball among young players today:

Sports has been a viable vehicle for inner city youth all over the world, so I definitely think that in some sports there’s a possibility of money to come with that, for them to have a better life style, to better themselves and their families so I would say that [players’] main motivator would probably be financial. (elite American player)

**Discussion and Conclusions**

Some broad conclusions can therefore be drawn about the nature of the psychological contract. Firstly, the informants’ perceptions of the contract appeared to encompass a wide range of benefits and obligations. One the one hand, while it appeared to be under threat from commercialising pressures, there appeared to be an implicit agreement that the contract should obligate coaches to attend to the development of playing skill and athletic prowess. Both parties recognised the other as a potential route to career advancement and understood the importance of developing an effective working relationship. However, transactional issues were not their only concern. The contract also appeared to be maintained by strong emotional bonds, with either party looking for such gains as respect, loyalty, and fair treatment. Within this work setting, at least, it appears to be impossible to distinguish between transactional and relational contracts or to view one form of contract as more significant than the other.

For the participants studied, the contract also appeared to be subject to continual renegotiation. For example, it appears that the value of the relationship as a medium for developing technical skills might depend on the prior level of development attained by individual players. Here there was potential for contract violation, with those British players looking for technical development but working at the professional end of the game finding
themselves at a disadvantage in the presence of skilled North Americans. The commercialising of the British game appeared to be leading to a situation in which contract violation was more likely to occur. However, it seems that commercialisation is also working to the advantage of many players and coaches, in offering them a form of livelihood and, for black players, an opportunity to redress racial stereotyping to some degree.

This discussion has sought to show that it can be beneficial to view the psychological contract in figurational terms, that is to say, as the more or less stable outcome of mutual dependency between individuals. From a figurational perspective, such dependency can arise between any two individuals in engagement, regardless of the status differences that might characterise their formal working relationship. Figurational theory recognises that wider social processes might convey greater power on one party than the other, irrespective of differences in social status. This point emerges very clearly in the present study, where participants’ stories show how commercialising pressures might prevent coaches from breaking their contracts with problematic but highly skilled players. Indeed, as one informant explained, such contract violations can result in coaches, rather than players, finding themselves out of work, a reminder that while coaches, as middle managers, may work to represent their employers’ interests, they are still employees at the end of the day. As a middle manager, the coach must work to foster psychological contracts not only with players but also with his club’s higher management structure, an ambiguous position that potentially obliges him/her to reconcile conflicting obligations above and below. There may be implications here for the role of the HRD professional in more conventional work settings.

References


