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## PLAYER WELFARE IN ENGLISH PROFESSIONAL FOOTBALL ACADEMIES: SOME POLICY ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

Abstract ID: EASM-2015-165 - (631)

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Date submitted: 2015-03-19

Date accepted: 2015-04-20

Type: Scientific

Keywords: Policy, Welfare, Professional Football, Young People

Category: 12: Sport Policy

Synopsis:

This paper explores the possible issues and problems of implementing the Elite Players Performance Plan in English Professional Football Academies.

Abstract:

### AIM OF THE PAPER

In 2012, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) was launched in English professional football academies with the aim of improving the way young players are prepared for the professional game. According to the Director of Youth at the Premier League, Ged Roddy (2013), the EPPP is to 'address how a modernised youth system can be sustained which will provide the best platform to support the aspirations of our Home Grown Players to succeed in the biggest of big leagues'. With this target in mind, one of the major claims of the EPPP is how a more 'multidisciplinary approach' should be adopted by clubs 'to create a fully integrated environment which will service all aspects of a player's technical, athletic, educational and social development at the Academy' (Premier League, 2011, p. 72). In the light of this alleged commitment to enhancing the all-round development of young talented players, this paper considers some of the key policy issues and difficulties of implementing programmes such as the EPPP within the professional game. In particular, the paper draws upon a wider study which examined the relationships between coaches, managers and players in 21 Academies and Centres of Excellence in England and Wales, and especially how these relationships and the workplace environment came to impact upon players' education and welfare.

### LITERATURE AND THEORY

The wider study, from which this paper has been developed, draws on the main sensitizing concepts of Figurational Sociology. However, given the parameters of the study, concepts from Symbolic Interactionism, such as 'stigma', 'focused encounters' and 'front or back stage' are also integrated to help make sense of young players' experiences. While literature in this area is relatively scarce, the

seminal work in this field remains Parkers' (1996) ethnographic study of one professional football Academy, which also utilises similar concepts. The paper also places emphasis on the research of Roderick (2006), who's various studies into the professional level of the game help to expose the wider cultures within which Academies operate.

#### METHODS

Self-completion questionnaires were completed by 303 players across the 21 clubs generating general descriptive data regarding the lives of the players. Building on this, focus groups (n = 41) were then conducted with the same 303 players who were all aged between 16 and 18-years. Adding an extra dimension to the work, 20 interviews were conducted with Education and Welfare Officers at the same clubs and 13 interviews with the coaches.

#### KEY FINDINGS

The findings of the paper shed light on some key aspects of the workplace relations that characterize the professional football working environment and which often compromised the welfare of young players. Many of the young players drew particular attention to the ways in which they were routinely subject to an aggressive, tough, hyper-masculine, and at times violent, subculture that not only compromised their physical health and development, but also their socio-emotional well-being. On an almost daily basis, players experienced persistent uncertainty about, and scrutiny over, their performances and attitudes which they frequently internalized in often highly individualized and negative ways. In addition, what was often passed off as harmless 'banter' (Parker, 1996; Platts, 2012; Roderick, 2006), were comments and put-downs by fellow players, coaches and managers which had a variety of deeper-seated and hidden meanings that were frequently experienced as guilt, shame, self-questioning and anxiety (among other emotions) that were concealed from others. Players' constant attempts to engage in a range of self-presentation strategies and self-concealment behaviors enabled them to hide these emotions and personal doubts behind a mask of apparent invulnerability. Players' self-presentational concerns were in turn closely related to the hierarchical and highly unequal organizational structure that continues to characterize the management of professional football clubs, and in which traditional methods of managerial control and authoritarianism often compromised player welfare.

#### IMPLICATIONS

The paper raises a number of policy-relevant questions not only in relation to football, but other professional sports in which player welfare is a concern of governing bodies and associated bodies. The paper also questions whether the claimed commitment to safeguarding player welfare while pursuing performance-related objectives can realistically be expected to challenge, let alone breakdown, the prevailing subcultures that surround professional football when many of the workplace relations which support those subcultures remain highly unequal and frequently characterized by distrust, authoritarianism and an unquestioning expectation that players will work in desired ways.

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