Sending Foucault on Loan to the Lower Leagues: A Disciplinary Analysis of the Loan System in Professional Football

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Abstract

While transitions in sports have been thoroughly researched, specifically that of retirement (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013), little focus has been given to the temporary transition such as the loan system in professional football. Moreover, transition research has been mostly understood from a psychological standpoint. This research focused on the socio-political aspects of the loan system in professional British football utilising a Foucauldian lens. Specifically employing Foucault's (1991) theories on discipline and power to better understand the discipline ridden football environment. Six professional football players between 18-21 were interviewed with a focus on their loan experiences. The rich data obtained from said interviews, analysed through a Foucauldian lens, highlighted three key themes in the participants' loan experiences, the lack of communication between player and those in positions of hierarchical power such as managers and coaches, the politics involved in loans, and the adaptation to a new environment. Through Foucault's concepts of docility resulting from discipline, and surveillance as a disciplinary tool, we are able to understand that players feel reservations of going on loan as they fear being away from the surveillance of their coaches will impact their careers negatively. This was evident by the number of participants who mentioned a fear of being forgotten. Additionally, the players demonstrate moments of stress and anxiety from the stakes of the professional game alongside years of unchallenged problematic football cultures which convince players to conform to a career in which they have little say over. This study contributes to our understanding of how young professional players have to tiptoe through a new power-laden environment in which they must handle the pressures that come with expectation and performing in a new social and disciplinary space, resulting in a mixed feelings towards their loan experiences.

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To my sister, you make me immensely proud and hopeful for the next generation. The world needs more people like you.

A thank you to the participants who shared their time with me allowing for this to be possible.

Lastly, to my father, I love you. I miss you. Un fuerte abrazo papá.

List of Contents

Introduction

> "I'm at Tottenham right, and I'm thinking I'm trying to break into the first team. I got so many players ahead of me at the time but that's where I sort of saw myself and then all of a sudden bang! I'm getting non-league football… I'll be honest, I didn't want to go. I was 'kicking and screaming'. I wasn't happy about it… You're seen as a pawn in a transfer signing. You are a commodity. You are traded like a piece of meat really… It's the way you look at it. So I could have gone there and gone 'I'm better than this' and sort of sulked a bit and made it apparent that I thought I was better than that and then I would have got nailed, number one, by the players in the dressing room because they're playing for a different thing. They're playing for their livelihoods. I'm playing in reserve games and youth team games and people are saying 'Oh it's the north London derby' It's not. It's kid football. There you've got to win. Three points matters. Instead of playing to develop as a player, I was playing to win matches and that was something that really helped early on in my career." (Peter Crouch, 2022)

This brief excerpt from the Peter Crouch podcast highlights the phenomenon of the loan experience in a way which is seldom discussed. Being an integral facet of professional football, the loan system appears to be poorly understood and rarely researched. Thus, this insight into the loan experience by ex-professional football player Peter Crouch perfectly introduces the intricate social layers and power structures in a dimly recognised component of professional football. I believe this to be a rich vein of untapped research which can be used to learn and inform the field of sports sociology and I hope this study provides an invaluable insight into the football phenomenon.

The Loan System in Professional Sports

The loan or ‘farming’ (as known in the United States) system in sport refers to the temporary move of a professional athlete from their parent club to their loan club. Loans operate towards providing the athlete with experience unattainable at the parent club. With both clubs benefitting from said deal (Bond, Widdop. & Parnell, 2020). Usually in the farming system, the parent club will either own or have a contract with one specific lower league club, while in the loan system each team is an independent entity. Informal agreements do exist between certain clubs which allow for better and easier negotiations of loans between clubs. In other words, lower-level clubs can be ‘affiliated’ with top level clubs where most players from the top club will be sent to on loan e.g., Chelsea and Vitesse.

While perhaps being mainly attributed to association Football, the loaning and farming system operates in other sports, such as Rugby League, Baseball, Ice Hockey, Cycling, Wrestling, Formula 1, amongst others. Rugby League tends to use the same ‘loan’ system as in football. Top league teams will ‘loan’ out their players to different lower league clubs in hopes of providing the player with further experience. In American baseball, the teams in the highest league - Major League Baseball (MLB) - will have contracts with specific teams in the Minor League Baseball league. Usually, the MLB teams will have contracts with young players, but rather than having their own academy to develop their talents such as in football, teams in the MLB will use their contracted team in the minor leagues to develop these players, before they make the step up to the major leagues. These minor league teams are referred to as ‘Farm Teams’. Despite the primary use of these farm teams to develop young players, MLB teams may send players from their own team down to the farm team. This is known has ‘farming out’ players and usually happens to players who are under performing and are struggling to compete in the Majors.

The ‘farming system’ is similarly utilised in professional Ice Hockey in North America where the top league teams (National Hockey League) are tied contractually to lower league teams (American Hockey League). In individual sports such as cycling and wrestling, professional clubs will have ‘feeder’ clubs in lower competitions, specifically for the development of young cyclists and wrestlers. In Formula 1, the top teams such as Mercedes, Red Bull, and Ferrari, will partner with middle-tier to lower-tier teams in the same division, for example Mercedes and Williams, Red Bull and Alpha Tauri, Ferrari and Alfa Romeo, in hopes of providing Formula 1 experience to younger, inexperienced drivers or rookies. While the drivers for the middle to low tier teams have their own contracts with their respective team, the top teams can use these drivers in case one of their own is unavailable. If successful in their middle to lower tier teams, the drivers will usually be offered a contract or ‘seat’ to race for the top-tier team but are also free to move to other teams if provided with an offer. This transition goes the other way too. Top-tier drivers can be sent down to lower-tier teams if they are underperforming or aging. While drivers racing in F2 can be offered seats in F1, F1 drivers are not allowed to move down to F2.

Whatever term is used, it is evident that a temporary transitional period is offered to some youngsters or under-performing athletes in the top levels of their respective sports to develop these athletes or in some cases ‘offload’ underperforming athletes. Despite playing a significant role in each of these sports, academic research has yet to explore in depth these commonly utilised systems of development and transition.

The Loan System in Professional Football

A ‘loan’ typically occurs when the club wishes to retain the player’s contract (registered to the club) but have no immediate use for the player’s services and do not wish for the player to be transferred. Thus, the player is made ‘available for loan’ as opposed to ‘available for transfer’, in which case the club hopes to sell the player to other clubs (PL Handbook, p. 697, 2020). Loans are mostly common with professional football clubs attempting to develop young players - usually players considered to have potential to break into the first team or players developed through the academy which can be sold for profit (Stratton, Reilly, Williams, & Richardson, 2004) – by sending them to lower-league clubs (e.g., a Premier League club - the top division in the pyramid of British football - loaning a player to a League One club). The aim here is for young players to gain experience playing at a higher level than academy football or to play ‘men’s’ football, preparing them to make the step up to the senior team.

For an older player, a loan could also signify the club wishing for the player to gain experience elsewhere as they do not believe the player would get much game time at the ‘parent’ club, however, the more likely scenario is that the player has fallen out of favour at the club and has been unable to find a permanent move. When this occurs, clubs will use the loan system to give the player game time elsewhere and drum up interest for a future transfer or to see out the remainder of their contract. Additionally, the loan club will likely pay the players salary in full or in part. Depending on the deal, additional bonuses can be paid to the ‘parent’ club such as for every game the player features in or for every game the player is left on the bench. These negotiations tend to be carried out by a director of football or a loan manager in top clubs. For younger player, loans tend to be set in motion by a member of the

academy setup i.e., the academy manager, goalkeeping coach, or even their agents (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021).

The system of contracting players through loans is particularly popular amongst lower-league clubs as these teams have extremely limited budgets. Thus, the loan system benefits both parent club, wanting to provide game-time for the young, talented players, and loan club, in need of high-quality players without having to break the bank in transfer fees (Bond, Widdop, & Parnell, 2020).

A Brief History of the Loan System in British Football

Regarding British football, loans were not officially introduced until 1966, in which players were allowed to be temporarily transferred to teams in different divisions for a minimum of three months. Prior to this, there had been unofficial loans between teams of players for important matches as early as the late 1800's. While banned throughout the early 1900's, one-match loans were reintroduced during World War II as many teams struggled to make numbers due to the number of men shipped to war. Shortly after the war concluded, this rule was reverted (Brown, Edwards, & Davies, 2016).

Post 1966, the rules on loans would significantly change, especially with the introduction of the Bosman ruling in 1995 in which players could move clubs for 'free' once their contracts were up (i.e., the player didn't command a transfer fee), resulting in a significant rise in bidding competitions for star players. This in turn, promoted the development of young talent as many clubs could no longer outbid stiff competition, and thus became increasingly reliant on the loan system as a means of developing their young players (Norbäck, Olsson, & Persson, 2021). In 2003 players were officially allowed to go on loan to

other clubs within the same division and this has given rise to the loan system now utilised in professional football.

Despite the media attention around football player's transfers and transitions, little academic research exists for the loan system in football as well as other sports. In a study by Brink, Kuyvenhoven, Toering, Jordet, and Frencken (2018), professional football coaches were asked what they would like to see from sports science development in football, one of the top 5 answers was talent development. With loans playing an important role in youth development, perhaps it is time to provide further research on the loan system.

The Football Academy

The role of the football academy lies primarily within preparing young football players for the professional game. A secondary purpose for elite academies is the income they can generate from the sale of young players (Stratton, Reilly, Williams, & Richardson, 2004). These footballing institutions offer a unique workspace in which boys as young as eight years old can sign a contract and compete on a yearly basis to remain within professional football's grasp. In the UK, all 92 professional clubs currently run academies in attempts to develop the next big thing (Adams & Carr, 2019), and while every year more attention is being placed on how to create a safer space for young players, back as early as the 90's, academies were a much tougher space in which young players were placed in the ultimate sink or swim boys club. Borrowing a further extract from That Peter Crouch Podcast (2020) on youth academies:

> "It's a baptism of fire. Football is a harsh environment. It's sink or swim and youth team managers were very, very strong with us. Ripping the piss out of each other was part and parcel of everyday life really. It was a tough environment. I think when you come from school it can be quite harsh, and then put all the bullies together if you like, and you form a

> youth team. I saw players go under in that environment, and I saw players thrive in that environment. When I was growing up in the youth team you had to have broad shoulders."

In the episode Peter recalls the tough environment typical of academies of the past, in which players would ruthlessly compete with each other, in an environment governed by strict disciplinarian coaches, with a strong emphasis on 'grounding' the players by making them compete tasks for the senior team such as helping out in the kitchen or being responsible for cleaning the first team player's boots.

Since those days, academies have placed a larger emphasis on more holistic methods of development which see coaches instil development-based and arm-round-the-shoulder methods as opposed to their strict and hard counterparts from the past. Furthermore, youth players are made to attend education and obtain qualifications instead of scrubbing muddy boots. Whilst there has been a conscious effort to create a safer space for young athletes by tackling obvious problems, numerous subtle techniques and methods of discipline still permeate throughout the young professionals institution resulting in negative outcomes for young people who fail to make it to the professional level.

The Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to utilise a socio-cultural approach and gain an insight into young professional football player's experiences while on loan. This specific, temporary transitional period was investigated due to its lack of presence in the academic field. A review of relevant literature was carried out to highlight the lack of existing research into the loan system, provide a background, and highlight the benefits of carrying out this research.

The study was explored through a post-structuralist lens and provided socio-cultural analysis of the data to provide a new understanding of how the loan system is experienced, specifically, how the social politics, new environments, and expectations mould the experience of each participant. With this data we have come to understand the inner workings

of the loan system, and some of the factors that bring to light potential damaging or negative consequences resulting from the loan system. The analysis was heavily influenced by the works of French historian Michel Foucault, more specifically his theories from Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison (see methodology chapter). An example of topics touched upon were; the player's support received during their time on loan and their perception of their standings within the parent club as this highlighted some issues regarding the institution of discipline (the football club). As opposed to the domination of psychological research in transitions of the individual which "… perhaps falsely suggests that the athlete is the predominant location where change needs to occur." (Jones, 2013, p. 23), this research focused on the broader social impact of the loan system on the individual.

Literature Review

Introduction

Thus far, the most researched transition in a high-performance athlete/elite player's career is that of retirement and, specifically the challenges experienced therein (for example, see Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Roderick, 2012; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Jones & Denison 2017; Stamp, Potrac, & Nelson, 2021). While mainly researched through a positivist and post-positivist lens, these transitions are now being explored through a sociocultural lens, providing a wider, relational social picture facing the intricacies of retirement and professional football (Hickey & Roderick, 2019; Jones & Denison, 2017; Stamp et al, 2021). By contrast, the transition or experience of being loaned from one club to another has received limited attention across global sporting contexts.

To further understand the loan period in a football player's career, this review shall provide context to the research question by considering existing research pertinent to the overall field of study (the British working football context), and review pertinent existing Foucauldian research that has drawn upon the thoughts of Foucault to inform the socio-cultural investigation of sporting arrangements.

The Culture of Professional Football in Britain

As football is intertwined with British culture, it is important for this review to consider the "wider influence" football plays in British society (Jones, 2013). While many versions of football otherwise known as 'rough' football have existed for centuries, through a combination of; days of leisure given to industrial workers; the churches push for athleticism; the reformation of working-class school systems to involve physical education; and even the utilisation of pubs for the working class to gather in the mid to late 19th century, the official

formation of the FA (Football Association) alongside a British football league arose (Walvin, 2014). A game created for and by the working-class people, which over a hundred years on, despite its global fandom, is still considered a masculine, working-class sport (Hargreaves, 1986). This is not to say modern British football is not a sport for every class, instead, it is perhaps still a sport which resonates most strongly with the working-class due to the 'celebrity' status and financial potential available to the 'every-man'. An opportunity which, due to their social status, may not be available to them elsewhere (Baker, 1988; Woolridge, 2002).

The idea that football is an opportunity for everyone does come at a risk, especially for the youth that become enamoured with the dream of one day having thousands chanting their names (Green, 2009). Brown and Potrac (2009) examined said risks revealing that an average of 85% of elite youth level football players fail to gain a professional contract and are cast out of the elite football world. Mirroring findings from the retirement literature, the young, 'dropped' athletes were found to struggle with feelings of fear, anger, depression, anxiety, and a loss of identity. An identity forged through football culture in which a 'good attitude' is deemed more important than actual skill - an example of the language and discourse used as a disciplinary tool by coaches which fuels the mistaken belief that they have a good chance of 'making it' (Cushion & Jones, 2006). Additionally, these players are asked to sacrifice a large portion of their social lives outside of the academy in order to display their dedication and loyalty to their clubs (Magrath, 2017). A loyalty met with an environment of extreme competitiveness in which the young players are constantly tested and if not deemed good enough, will have their dreams ended (Magrath, Roberts, & Anderson, 2015).

Many young footballers, once dropped from their respective clubs, criticise the lack of skills and education provided to serve them in a life outside of football (Brown & Potrac, 2009). A criticism that ties to the 'anti-intellectual' attitudes displayed in football culture (Carter, 2006), the view of education as a 'hindrance' to becoming a professional football player (McGillivray, 2006), and a dominant discourse in sports in which the coach is always right and the athlete must be docile (Johns & Johns, 2000). Furthermore, the closed environment created in a football academy to 'protect' players from distractions has arguably hampered the development of sociological research within this social setting (Magrath, 2016).

Loans in Football

One aspect of the British working football culture that has escaped significant attention is that of the loan system. In one of the few studies to address this process, Abbott and Clifford (2021) investigate the perceptions of academy soccer player's experience while on loan. In their qualitative research, Abbot and Clifford (2021) focused on the players physical, technical, tactical, psychological, and psychosocial aspects of their loan experiences. From fifteen professional academy football players, they uncovered themes relating to the struggle to adapt to the physical, tactical, and psychosocial aspects of their loan moves. The principle themes showed evidence of; players reporting difficulties with the physicality of their loan experience with an increase in the use of strength and pace with both teammates and opponents, an increase in the tactics presented to them, a struggle to stay motivated after tough performances due to the presence of crowds, and sometimes issues interacting with their new teammates due to age differences. Abbott and Clifford (2021) end their investigation by providing suggestions on how to reduce the struggle that many of these young players face through the use of better feedback and communication both from loan

club and parent club, the providing of coping mechanism and mental strength training to young academy players, an increase in matches played by academy teams to ensure physical demands are easily adapted to, and a more specialised method for matching players to loan teams.

Swainston, Wilson, and Jones (2020) explored three 'junior' players experience while out on loan in their psychology-based case studies of six young football players attempting to transition towards senior football. The nature of the study lies in the perception of motivation and confidence during their transitions to senior football. In their study, the three participants who moved out on loan recalled their need to develop and adapt physically and tactically to men's football. Once in the first team, all three would be loaned out again, whereby their new goal was to impress rather than adapt, in the hope that the manager at the parent club would reward them with a spot in the first team upon their return. While the study focuses on the psychological transition from junior to senior football, it does provide an insight into young player's experiences while out on loan, the pressures they are under to develop, and the lack of support when away out of sight from their parent club.

Having played an important part in professional football since 1966, it is curious to see a lack of research into the loan system itself. Nevertheless, a plethora of transition in sports research does exist (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004; Roderick, 2012; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Jones & Denison 2017; Stamp, Potrac, & Nelson, 2021) and while it may primarily focus on transitions into and out of sport, more specifically moving from academy/ amateur football to senior/ professional football and retirement, it can potentially be adapted to better understand short-term temporary transitions.

Transitions in a Professional Athlete's Career

A professional athlete's career can be comprised of several different transitional periods (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) which can involve a significant degree of challenge and turmoil for the football player (Stamp, Potrac, & Nelson, 2021). Researchers have explored a number of aspects of transition including an athlete's entry into their respective sport (Bruner, Munroe-Chandler, & Spink, 2008); the step from the youth to senior level (Swainston, Wilson, & Jones, 2018); transfer from one club to another (Roderick, 2012; Roderick, 2013); and most commonly, the transition out of sports, mainly in the form of retirement (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013; Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Jones & Denison, 2017). Additionally, Wylleman & Lavallee (2004) break down transitions into two types – normative transitions and nonnormative transitions. Normative transitions can be classified as a "predictable and anticipated" (p. 509) transition, for example, an athlete stepping up to professional level from amateur. Nonnormative transitions exist when unplanned events occur such as an injury. Due to the dominance of retirement research, this section will mostly focus on this latter transition.

Traditional Positivist Approaches to Transition Research

Transitional research tends to be dominated by the positivist and post-positivist psychological lens (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014) and has done so since its emergence in the seventies (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Since then, numerous models and paradigms have been developed to better understand the psychology underpinning transitions. Early versions of positivist and post-positivist transitional research focused on athlete's retirement from their respective sports (see Stamp, 2017, for a review). This research tended to be carried out using questionnaires and surveys and highlighted the struggle athletes faced during this transition,

with many reports of athletes turning to excessive drinking as a coping mechanism (Mihovilovic, 1986). As research in transitions developed, gerontology and thanatology theories were adopted to make sense of athlete's exit from sports (Stamp, 2017), however, they were met with criticism for lack of relevance to sports transition application (Coakley, 1983). Through this and other similar criticisms came the development of the process-orientated transition models (Schlossberg, 1981), in which the characteristics of the individual facing retirement, their perception of transitions, and the characteristics of their pre- and post-transition environments were analysed. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) argued all these models lacked sport-specific context, giving way to the rise of conceptual models of transitions. Their widely adapted model suggested that transitional research should investigate the cause, the adaptation process, and coping strategies used by athletes as they seek to navigate transitions. This approach encouraged the psychological exploration of context-within transitions. Through the advancement in context-within research a better understanding was obtained of how athletes are more likely to experience negative consequences when their retirement comes from decisions out of their control (McKenna & Thomas, 2007), and how athletes can be left with feelings of anger, rejection, fear, loss of identity (Park, Lavallee, & Todd, 2013), subsequently leading to potential mental health problems and suicidal thoughts (Frith, 1990). More recently however, a sociological lens has been adopted for transitional research to provide a bigger picture of the challenges faced when transitioning.

Sociological Interpretivist Application of Transitional Research

Perhaps one of the key issues with the over-reliance on psychological research on transitions is the focus placed on how the individual might be 'fixed' as opposed to considering the broader socio-cultural context (Jones, 2013). As a progression from the

arguably limited view of positivist and post-positivist research, poststructuralist and interpretivist sociological researchers have attempted to provide a broader understanding of the relational and social challenges afflicting transitions in professional athletes' careers (Roderick, 2006; Jones & Denison, 2016; Stamp et al., 2021). Interpretivists, for example, seek to uncover how individuals make meaning through the analysis of multiple social experiences (Markula & Silk, 2011). Despite sociological transition research mainly focusing on retirement (Jones, 2013; Stamp, 2017), Roderick's (2006a, 2006b) research provides arguably the most extensive analysis of professional footballers' experiences which he addresses when considering within-career transitions.

Roderick's (2006a, 2006b, 2012) work casts a light on the uncertainty plaguing professional football players careers. One of the consequences of this uncertainty is that players are forced to relocate in search of job stability. Through his interpretivist, semi-structured interviews of 47 professional football players, Roderick (2006a, 2006b) revealed that the players had a constant sense of uncertainty. For example, the uncertainty older players face when younger players come through the team fighting for the same position; the uncertainty of injuries, falling out of favour, change in managerial staff are all doubts constantly faced by footballers. Due to this, they attempt to build a large cast of informal social networks as a 'safety net' (Roderick, 2006a). When faced with said uncertainty a player may decide to transfer to a different club in search of job stability. However, the decision as to whether one is transferred can be influenced by a complex range of factors.

Roderick (2006a) attempts to address some of the sociological factors affecting players' transfers. Firstly, Roderick discusses the power of control within transfers and who plays a part in these decisions. While transfers were mostly down to the managers in the past, control has shifted towards the players as football has evolved. This is not to say it is solely

down to the player. For a transfer to occur the managers, directors, and players must be in some level of agreement and work together within the regulations. Due to these regulations, the negotiation power could swing in favour of the club or the player. Alongside these key players in the transfer process, Roderick also examined how agents, club doctors, and players partners played a role in the transfers as well (Roderick, 2012). For example, a club doctor holds control over the transfer when examining the players previous medical history and assessing whether the player is a viable investment or a spouse who is reluctant to move geographically for several sociological reasons, such as the anxiousness of leaving friends and family behind, the logistics of planning such a move, and the fear of settling in (Roderick, 2012).

Secondly, Roderick briefly examines what factors influence a players' decision to seek a transfer. Collinson (2000) lists various reasons as to why workers may present resistance when faced with uncertainty, short-term contracts, and being placed at the bottom of the hierarchy and many professional footballers face these events during their playing careers (Roderick, 2006a). Due to the authoritarian styles of football managers (Carter, 2006), resistance can be perceived as a direct threat to their position, thus leading to conflict and both parties looking towards a transfer as a solution (Roderick, 2006a). A further reason for potential conflict and uncertainty occurs when a player falls out of favour and struggles for game time which strongly affects a player's athletic identity as playing regular first-team football ties to their sense of self-worth (Roderick, 2006b; Roderick, 2012). Additionally, a player will look towards their informal social connections in search of better social 'harmony' within their working environment (Roderick, 2006a). While providing an insightful, sociological analysis of football players careers, Stamp et al., (2021) argues the need to explore an athlete's multiple identities when exploring their transitions.

Like Roderick - Stamp, Potrac, and Nelson (2021) employ a sociological interpretivist approach to shift focus away from the cognitive capacities of the transiting athlete and towards their embodied feelings and their relationships with other. While Stamp et al., (2021) provided further evidence that uncertainty and vulnerability characterise many athletic careers, they determine that the uncertainty athletes face outside of sports and how either uncertainty in their sporting career or non-sporting lives/ identities can also affect the trajectory of the other. For example, these authors explored how the imbalance caused during a non-sporting transition can inversely affect the balance of a sporting career and vice versa as one athlete recalls having denied a career-beneficial transfer due to having to relocate from his family. Furthermore, Stamp et al., (2021) considered how players' roles and identities as fathers, partners, friends, etc., can influence a sporting transition and how each of these identities are connected to each other. In terms of within-career transitions, Stamp et al., (2021) do highlight voluntariness as a key difference between out-of-sports transitions and within-sports transitions. For example, a football player will most likely have more say in a transfer from one club to another than the transition faced when retiring. This is a key factor which is believed to be crucial in the quality of transition experienced (McKenna & Thomas, 2007), and is mainly due to the supposed control the player feels when making their decision (Roderick, 2006a).

Sociological Post-structuralist Application of Transitional Research

Interpretivist and post-structuralists might share a similar epistemology, in that knowledge-research is a subjective process, however, unlike the knowledge that can be discovered in humanism, post-structuralist believe knowledge to be ever-changing, thus multiple in realities and better understandable when reflected upon historically and socially (Markula & Silk, 2011). While interpretivism has highlighted the complex experiences of

athletes in transitions, such as dealing with multiple identities (Stamp et al, 2021), post-structuralism has illustrated the different power-laden techniques affecting the transition process, such as when Jones and Denison (2017) utilised a Foucauldian post-structuralist paradigm to consider the experiences of retired professional football players, which will be similar to the analysis used here. Similar to Stamp et al, (2021), Jones and Denison (2017) discuss the challenges football players face when retiring through a sociological analysis of players experiences. Employing Foucault's theories on discipline, Jones and Denison (2017) exposed the disciplinary techniques which dominate a professional footballer's life, and how hard it was for them to adapt once taken out of this highly structured environment. In other words, the players had become 'docile footballing bodies' through years of occupying an arrangement typified by discipline and felt lost when provided with the freedom that comes with retirement. Through the constant observation from their coaches, use of punishment, gratification, and the use of examination alongside the perpetual presence of disciplinary mechanisms, footballers tend to accept a professional life of uncertainty, stress, and structure.

Interestingly, a further theme from Jones and Denison's (2017) study was that of a sense of relief experienced by footballers once retiring from the professional game. A number of players recalled the stress of constant surveillance and scrutiny which made their transition out of football a liberating one. This feeling of stress went together with the toxicity of the football 'culture', never being able to 'switch off', and the demands of constant competition both physically and mentally. This study serves as a reminder of the importance of further research into the arguably unhealthy aspects of British football culture and an illustration of the insight provided when analysing sports through Foucauldian research.

Foucault in Sports

Given this study has been framed as a post-structuralist investigation from the outset, in the following section, research from within sports sociology, (including that which has embraced a Foucauldian lens) to explore the social arrangements of sport and sports coaching, will be reviewed.

Foucault believed power to be present in all social interactions and was interested in understanding the disciplinary workings of institutions such as prisons, the army, and hospitals (Markula & Pringle, 2007). With his work, sociologists have been provided tools with which to analyse society and social phenomena, one of them being sports as a modern discipline (Markula & Pringle, 2007). When looking at social Foucauldian theory and its effects on athletes, Denison (2007) illustrated an athlete's poor performance and subsequently his dropping out of sports due to conforming to disciplinary techniques and becoming a docile participant in long distance running. Denison (2007) hypothesised that by controlling the location for the athlete to run in and setting the timetable for the athlete to stick to, he as a coach was becoming a 'uniquely knowledgeable speaker' (Shogan, 1999, p.41) and in turn moulding and shaping the runner into a docile and disciplined athlete (Markula & Pringle, 2006). In other words, by dictating everything about the athlete's training, he was justifying the idea that the athlete should do everything the coach orders without question. This can be seen as a clear example of Foucault's notions of art of distribution, control of activity, and discourse, in this case, the discourse that surrounds modern coaching practices, in which the coach has all the knowledge (Johns & Johns, 2000). A discourse which enables the use of disciplinary power to control and discipline bodies (Foucault, 1991). This is not to say coaches are ill-intentioned, as many modern coaching courses will talk extensively about being 'athlete-centred' and 'athlete-empowering', however, these are arguably unintentional

‘blanket’ statements which can conceal the underpinning power operations in coaching practices (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2017). Simply put, it is difficult to empower an athlete when the taken-for-granted rule is to always follow the coach. While Denison (2007) and Denison et al. (2017) clarify that not all discipline is detrimental to the development of an athlete, they do warn of the consequences of producing docile athletes and suggest for future coaches to include social theory and ‘problematization’ to their practices.

Due to the subtle disciplinary techniques imposed in sporting institutions and the discourses dominating the coach-athlete relationship, athletes tend to commit and sacrifice a great deal as their participation transitions from the amateur to professional level. Johns and Johns (2000) detailed the abuse athletes such as gymnasts and swimmers endure, largely based on their weight or physical appearance, yet many conform to these due to the ‘truths’ in their respective sports which are promoted by coaches and officials in positions of hierarchical power. In multiple accounts of Johns and Johns (2000) study, athletes regurgitate these ‘truths’ in a clear example of self-governance and the cycle of discourse traversing from coach to athlete. Foucault (1991) uses the example of a panopticon (a prison structure designed for prisoners to be unaware of when they are being watched) to demonstrate how disciplinary power operates to promote self-governance and correction of behaviour. In relation to sports, the use of space, time, activity, and taken-for-granted ‘truths’ work as a modern panopticon to ensure athletes self-govern and conform. As a result of these conformities, athletes recall feelings of insecurities, self-doubt, and loss of love for their sport (Johns & Johns 2000). Regarding these disciplinary methods in sports, Denison, Mills, and Konoval (2017) pose the question ‘do the same techniques used on prisoners need to be applied to professional, or even grassroot athletes’?

In terms of football, Jones and Denison's (2017) research similarly highlights reports of loss of interest/ love for sports when interviewing football players, some going as far as battling mental health issues due to the retirement process from their highly disciplined careers. Additionally, some football players mention feelings of stress due to the constant surveillance and examination from coaches, further examples of Foucault's (1991) notions of hierarchical observation and examination as instruments of discipline. More recently the extensive use of technology as a surveillance method in sports has come under criticism for its intrusiveness and its justification of coaches' over-reliance on disciplinary power (Jones, Marshall, Denison, 2016; Jones & Toner, 2016).

Besides allowing researchers to understand the underlying disciplinary power issues in sports, Foucault's framework has also encouraged researchers to rethink how they can develop coaches and athletes. Denison, Jones, and Mills (2019), as suggested by Foucault, attempt to problematize coaching so to begin the discussion into the harmful effects of disciplinary power and promote ethical relationships between coach and athlete. Where it may not have been '…recognised as having a moral, aesthetic, political, or historical value.' (Foucault, 1980, p. 50), problematizing coaching values will shed light on the power relations which impact athletes negatively. An example of this is critiquing the training programmes coaches will enforce upon their athletes which are built upon 'truths', or discourses void of critical thinking and problematization on their social implications (Denison, 2010). Thus, Denison and Mills (2019) suggest problematizing the norm by questioning the historical and traditional forms in which coaching 'truths' have come about. While not an easy task to change traditional coaching practices, once understood as a culmination of past ideas which are not necessarily the 'best' way to coach, a coach may begin to produce more holistic ways for their athletes to develop (Denison & Mills, 2019). Denison and Avner (2011) suggest

problem-setting in a critical manner as opposed to problem-solving to break from coaching routines. In other words, a coach might reflect on how the problem has arisen and modify the solution to fit the individual. Similarly, athletes might be encouraged to reflect on the how, why and who has set the problem (Denison & Avner, 2011). By carrying out these methods of problematization and critical reflection on current 'truths' in coaching, one can finally begin to '…disrupt the movement of power in some way that can disturb the making of athletes into docile bodies' (Mills & Denison, 2018, p. 311).

Through its deep cultural ties in British history and society, the numerous moments of transition an athlete faces, and its complex social structure riddled with disciplinary power, loans within football can then be considered an appropriate topic to analyse through a Foucauldian lens. As this study will go on to justify through its methodology.

Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the philosophical assumptions of the poststructuralist paradigm, to explain why the chosen qualitative approach utilised to conduct this study aligns with a post-structuralist study of this nature, and to outline the specifics of the methodology embraced throughout.

Disciplinary Power, and Docility Related to Football

There is a certain irony in labelling Michel Foucault a post-modernist philosopher, political theorist, or a historian as he always argued against categorisation. He never wanted to be boxed into a specific role or research, however it is fair to say he was a researcher of society, its history, and the way thoughts change over time (Markula & Pringle, 2007). A good example of this is his research into disciplinary power, and how through various techniques it has evolved to the extent we rarely question how we are influenced by it. As opposed to Marxism, Foucault believed power to be omnipresent in the social body thus it is prevalent in every social interaction, rather than traversing downwards directly from a position of economical hierarchy (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2014). Furthermore, he believed power and knowledge to be co-constitutive. In other words, knowledge creates power and power requires knowledge. This knowledge, written or unwritten, can act as a guide to social practices and controls what is understood as ‘truth’. Which Foucault (1975) referred to as ‘discourse’. In a coaching and sporting sense, this discourse regulates what is accepted as ‘good practice’ (Downham & Cushion, 2020). Knowledge which has been procreated through various power operations such as discipline.

Foucault spent a large portion of his research investigating institutions such as prisons, mental asylums, the military, schools, and hospitals which he theorised to be full of disciplinary techniques and instruments to mould human beings into docile and effective bodies (Foucault, 1991).

Foucault would refer to his research as archaeological or genealogical rather than historical in his exploration of prison systems in '*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison'.* His analysis worked as a commentary on the effects of disciplinary power and how it has evolved to be subtler over time. The example he uses is that of how punishment of criminals changed from a spectacle, in front of the public, to locked away behind walls, hidden from the public eye (Foucault, 1991). Punishment gradually changed from targeting the body, to disciplining and controlling the mind (Foucault, 1991).

Giulianotti (1999) has used Foucault's understanding of the imposition of discipline to illustrate how control of the body is controlled in the football setting. He started by explaining how Foucault's techniques of discipline worked to impose power on footballers occupying the hierarchical space of a football club. In detail these are: *the art of distribution* – a location in which to impose disciplinary power e.g., football pitch; *the control of activity* – the use of a timetable to dictate the temporal aspect of discipline e.g., a training timetable; *the organisation of genesis* – the mapping and grouping of the body's activities e.g., a technical training plan; *composition of forces* – the coalition of bodies to form a machine e.g. the starting eleven and the substitutes in a football team. These four disciplines were enacted through three instruments of discipline referred to as: *hierarchical observation* – The surveillance of the individual e.g., the number of coaches or recording equipment; *normalising judgement* – the governing of those around you e.g., players working hard to fit

into the team; *examination* – the use of examinations to categorise individual e.g., heartrate monitors (see Jones, 2019).

As previously mentioned, power exists in all social interactions, thus making a football arrangement a reasonable channel for disciplinary power to move through. From a Foucauldian understanding, sports clubs are institutions of discipline which target the body (the football player) to shape the individual into an effective and docile body. While it can be argued not all discipline is negative (it is, after all, inherently productive – Heikkila (1993), Foucauldian ethics suggests coaches and educators should critically self-reflect on their own relationship within the rules and laws that dictate their methods (Shogan & Ford, 2000). This is not to uncover some inherent evil within sports, but to allow the coach to better understand how they have been shaped and how their knowledge is in turn shaping their athletes (Denison, Pringle, Cassidy, & Hessian, 2015). A strong and deeper focus on the specifics of Foucault's works, including his post-structuralist ontology and epistemology will be explored further in this method section.

Research Philosophy

Poststructuralism derives from French philosophers such as Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, Deleuze, and Foucault due to their opposition of structuralism (Mills & Denison, 2014). Structuralism was originally devised as a "…universal theory of how meanings are created through language structures" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 48) by Ferdinand de Saussure. Poststructuralism counters this tenet by arguing that once set, meanings are fixed. Thus, post-structuralism holds a subjective epistemology and an ontology that holds to the possibility that multiple truths exist. Unlike positivism, which claims to be an objective method of

scientific enquiry in search of a singular reality, poststructuralism understands the social, contextual, and thus subjective influences upon knowledge and research (Avner, Jones, & Denison 2014).

Michel Foucault (1978) argued meaning and knowledge to be ever-changing through relations of power. Foucault further believed discourse (a way of knowing) developed and changed over time and the truth of this knowledge was socially constructed. Therefore, to accurately subscribe to a Foucauldian lens a researcher must avoid trying to find a singular truth or fact but instead attempt to understand the construction of a certain discourse (e.g., the notion a coach is always right) and how it has embedded itself into that facet of society (e.g., sporting institutions), to identify the workings of truth, knowledge and power and how these relations of power inform the experiences of individuals (Avner et al., 2014). In this regard, poststructuralism does not lend itself to quantitative research as poststructuralist epistemology is subjective by nature and thus qualitative.

Qualitative Approach to Research

Sports science research has been heavily dominated by quantitative research; however, qualitative research has become more widely accepted as a contributing and valuable method of research in sports (Bekker et al., 2020). As opposed to the rigid, predetermined research design typical in quantitative research, qualitative research is characterised by flexibility and self-reflection. Qualitative research does not rely on numerical analysis, instead attempts to analyse non-quantifiable data such as thoughts, emotions, and experiences in hope of gaining a rich understanding of social concepts (Gratton & Jones, 2014). In further contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research utilises

smaller sample sizes and a natural data collection location where the researcher is the data collection instrument (Gratton & Jones, 2014, p. 32).

When considering the nature of qualitative research Denzin and Lincoln (2005) described the qualitative researcher as to "…stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape enquiry." (p.8.). In other words, qualitative research seeks to answer how social constructs and meanings arise, whilst the researcher accepts the impossibility of remaining objective in their research. In terms of research design, it is difficult to create a singular map of how to carry out qualitative research due to the multiple methodological processes which exist within and the multiple truths and realities that arise throughout the research process. Qualitative research design can be influenced by the researcher's epistemology, ontology, research purpose, target audience, and bias (Snape & Spencer, 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) proposed that whatever the research project may be, it should be meaningful. With this in mind Markula and Silk (2011) suggested reflecting on whether the research will be used to map, critique, and/ or provide suggestions for social change so to guarantee its meaningfulness.

As mentioned above, given the subjective understanding of knowledge consistent with the assumptions of the poststructuralist paradigm, a qualitative approach is therefore the only possible approach to adopt when attempting to explore the multiple and complex experiences of professional footballers who are sent out on loan from their parent club. While a couple of qualitative paradigms do share subjective epistemologies (see postpositivism and humanism), they all seek a single truth as opposed to poststructuralism's ontology which attempts to understand the multiple realities that exist (Markula & Silk, 2011). This study set out to locate footballers' loan experiences within the various social

contexts they visit while on loan – rather than exclusively attempting to understand their individual meaning making process during these loan periods. The use of a poststructuralist paradigm therefore lends itself to this study more than that of interpretivism as it is a proven heuristic for the mapping of the social contexts of this particular sport in this particular country (Jones, 2019; Jones & Denison, 2017).

Sampling Strategy and Participants

Purposeful sampling was used in order to identify participants who had experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Patton (2014) breaks down purposeful sampling into sub-categories of which criterion sampling was chosen to shortlist the participants for this study. Criterion sampling is utilised when the participants are chosen based on a predetermined set of criteria. For this study the participants were required to be young (18+) players part of a professional academy or professional football team competing in the UK, having recently experienced a loan spell at a club away from their parent club. This set of criteria was chosen to recruit a sample of players who could provide information on their loan experiences in what is a largely undocumented branch of professional football (Abbott & Clifford, 2021).

A total of twelve participants were shortlisted and contacted to take part in the study, of which eight agreed to take part. However, the final number of participants to complete their interviews was six due to the loss of communication with two of the participants. Purdy (2014) indicates the time consuming nature of semi-structured interviews, the quality of the answers and the saturation of information tend to limit the required number of participants for semi-structured interviews in qualitative sports research. In their poststructuralist study, Prendergast and Gibson (2021) interviewed nine professional football coaches and players on

their perceived experiences of loan. The authors go on to justify their low number of participants based on the ‘richness’ of information they acquired. This suggested six participants were deemed an appropriate number of participants for this study due to their recent experiences with loans.

The participants were initially contacted via text messages or email addresses acquired from representatives such as academy coaches, club chairmen, agents, etc, with brief information on the study. Once confirmation of interest from the participants was received, an information sheet and informed consent forms was sent for each participant to read and fill out. Each participant was further explained of their anonymity in the study and a final verbal confirmation of their understanding of the study was taken prior to the interview.

Participants

Table 1.

Participants

Pseudonym	***Age at time of interview***	***Parent club level at time of interview***	***Division of loan Club (Number of games played for loan club)***	***Player's current playing status***
Lewis	*20*	*Championship*	*7th (63)* *6th (17)* *6th (10)*	*Regular starter for 7th Division Club*
Max	*20*	*League Two*	*6th (4)*	*Sporadic player for parent club's senior team*
Daniel	*20*	*Championship*	*4th (34)*	*Regular starter for parent club's senior team*
Charles	*18*	*Championship*	*9th (16)* *8th (9)* *8th (1)* *7th (2)*	*U23's player for parent club*
Seb	*19*	*Championship*	*7th (12)*	*U23's player for parent club*
George	*20*	*Championship*	*7th (9)* *4th (10)*	*Sporadic player for parent club's senior team*

Ethics

When carrying out research with human participants the study must ensure the safety of both participant and researcher (Markula & Silk, 2011). To ensure ethical standards were met, this study was presented and approved by an ethical board. Furthermore, each participant was given an information sheet detailing the nature of the study, their role, the interview process, and their anonymity alongside a consent form. The consent form is essential in explaining the voluntary nature of participation and ensuring that participants understand that they can withdraw from the study up until the submission of this paper (Patton, 2014).

Due to the uncertain nature of interviewing participants in a potentially sensitive subject, care and discretion must be taken throughout. While no morally insensitive questions were asked, recollections of the participants' experiences on loan had the potential to be painful and personal. I sought to address this challenge by posing questions in a sensitive manner while closely attending to the participant's body language and tone for any signs of discomfort as recommended by Smith and Sparkes (2016). Furthermore, each participant was ensured of their anonymity and confidentiality before, during, and after their interviews. Additionally, a professional psychologist's contact information was on hand as a precaution for both participants and researcher. The anonymity and confidentiality of the participant was essential in ensuring the freedom to express their views and experiences without fear of damaging their close-knit web of informal relationships within football (Jones & Denison, 2017). As evidenced in the table included above, pseudonyms were used for each participant and any name they shared during the interview process (e.g., people, football clubs, locations).

Data Generation

The data generated in this study emerged from interviews undertaken with the sample outlined above. These interviews were informed by a Foucauldian inspired interview guide (Avner et al., 2014) designed after extensive engagement with Foucault's (1991) key text *Discipline and Punish* (as discussed above). Qualitative interviews are a cornerstone of sports research because they are said to grant "…insight into people's opinions, feelings, emotions, experience, and the meaning they make of their experiences" (Purdy, 2014 p. 161). They help us achieve such insight because of their interactive and situation specific nature, which is said to allow the generation of unexpected as well as contradictory data that are "produced and not simply collected" (Purdy, 2014, p. 161). Veal (2006) suggests interviews are effective at exploring complex topics from small sampling sizes as they are not reliant on large populations to generate rich data.

According to Gratton and Jones (2014), qualitative interviews may be structured, unstructured, or semi-structured in nature. Like questionnaires, structured interviews follow a predetermined set of questions which are followed sequentially throughout the interview. However, they tend to generate richer data than questionnaires as participant can ask for further context for each question and interviewers can use follow-up questions or probes to elicit more detailed insights (Gratton & Jones, 2014, p. 177). Unstructured interviews, by contrast, involve a limited number of set or pre-determined questions and tend to be led by the participant. Although semi-structured interviews utilise a predetermined set of questions, they possess more flexibility than structured interviews as the questions serve merely as a guide and interviewees are encouraged to direct the course of the conversation. This level of flexibility permits the interviewer to explore unanticipated insights as they might do in an unstructured interview (Purdy, 2014).

Semi-structured interviews were deemed the most appropriate for this study as they allow the interviewer to explore disciplinary based topics guided by Foucauldian theory, while still allowing the conversations and answers to meander around different issues and topics (Adams, 2015). A major benefit in utilising this type of interview is the level of flexibility afforded by the researcher and participant and the promise this holds for the exploration of poorly understood topics.

As mentioned, the knowledge and interview skill of the researcher is key in data generation. The interviews were carried out by me. While not having a great deal of interviewing experience, I have immersed myself in the qualitative practice of autoethnography which utilises many of the same analytical processes. Moreover, I have two years of experience in working football. Having a shared background with my participants encouraged them to 'open up' due to the rapport built from shared experiences (Hannabus, 1996). Additionally, my previous experience within football allowed me to speak the 'language' established in a football environment (Roderick, 2006a), further reassuring my participants into giving me honest and rich accounts of their experiences through our mutual understanding of specific vocabulary. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted over video calls from their own home, ensuring the participants could reflect from a space they considered safe and comfortable.

Regarding the interview guide and schedule, questions were informed by Foucauldian theory, and his theorisation of the techniques of discipline (art of distribution; composition of forces; organisation of genesis; control of activity) and instruments of discipline (examination; hierarchical observation; normalisation) in particular. The questions were based around the player's loan experiences. Specifically, the experiences tied to their environment, teammates, coaches, and their own perceptions of themselves. A total of five

topics were established, each with open-ended questions with potential for further exploration and reflection.

The initial set of questions focused directly on the player's experience at their parent club. Questions here were utilised to cover examples of discipline-based techniques football coaches employ in a professional academy setting, followed up with the player's opinions. Other questions based on their relationships with teammates were explored in hopes of uncovering instances of normalisation (Foucault, 1991) in the disciplinary institution that many young academy players may face.

The second topic covers the player's initial approach to being sent out on loan. This covers questions such as "Did you have a say in the matter?". The focus of this section was to understand player's opinions of being sent out loan, their control over this decision, and whether they saw a temporary transfer as having to conform. This was in part influenced by Roderick's (2006a) analysis of control in permanent transfer to understand if the control over the loan is as situational as those in transfers. Furthermore, do the higher profile players hold more power over their decision to go on loan similar to those looking for a transfer. Additionally, the research by Johns and Johns (2000) which highlighted the different manners in which athletes in a range of different sports conform, prompted the question – are young football players being sent on loan conforming? If so are they aware of this?

The third section touched upon the loan experience itself and whether the experience was positive or negative. Foucault's (1991) disciplinary framework was used to investigate the tools and techniques applied in a football setting and to establish disciplinary differences between loan club and parent club. A further theme in this section was how the player's thought they were treated while at the loan club (i.e., were they expected to perform at a higher level than their new teammates?). These questions were informed, in part, by existing

literature which suggests that many players lose interest with sport due to the constant pressure placed upon them to compete at the highest level (Jones & Denison, 2017). Findings like these raised the intriguing possibility that playing at a lower level might experience less pressure and find football more enjoyable owing to a reduction in disciplinary techniques set upon them (fewer hierarchical eyes on them, lower stakes, less professional environment).

The fourth section focused on the support received by the player while out on loan from their parent club. Due to this being one of the first occasions in their careers in which they have moved away or had to be more independent, an emphasis was placed on how supported they felt during this transition. Questions such as “If you did need support was it easy to access it from your parent club?” were posed to build on Abbott and Clifford’s (2022) finding that first team coaches/practitioners rarely attended matches played on loan.

The final section was based on the player’s perception of their future careers. Due to the uncertain nature of a footballer’s career (Roderick, 2006a), it was deemed necessary to delve into the player’s perception of their own potential and the perceived success or failure of their loan experience, while offering a moment of reflection for the participant. Thus, questions such as “Has this loan spell made you consider your options? E.g., looking for another club.” were put forward to ideally demonstrate the long-term effects the temporary transition had on the young players.

Despite there being a set of pre-determined questions, these were applied in a flexible manner and served as a conversational guide (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). All topics and questions were approved by a supervisory team and were informed by Foucauldian concepts relating to the operation and production of power in elite settings. Moreover, the shortcomings with semi-structured interviews were considered such as the possible

restrictions of the participants accounts due to the structure of questions and the potential withholding of information by the participant (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

To combat said shortcomings ‘ice-breaker ‘questions were posed before engaging with the interview guide to create an informal atmosphere in which the interviewee could feel more relaxed and to build rapport (Sparkes & Smith, 2013, p. 91). Probes were also utilised following some of the questions such as ‘What was that like?’ or ‘How did that affect you?’ in hopes of eliciting clear, rich, and detail-oriented responses. Despite carrying out the interviews over video call, an emphasis was placed on demonstrating active listening by responding empathetically and displaying attentive body language (Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Each interview was concluded by allowing the interviewee to ask any questions, sincerely thanking them for their time, and ensuring a follow-up is possible in case further information is deemed beneficial for the study.

Data Analysis

The process of data analysis, be it in quantitative or qualitative research, is to make sense of the information acquired in a manner which helps to answer the research question (Gratton & Jones, 2014). Analysing qualitative data can be problematic due to the unstructured cluster of rich information presented in results such as transcripts (Taylor, 2014). Furthermore, qualitative research, specifically in sports, has come under criticism for its vagueness (Gratton & Jones, 2014). However, a myriad of techniques and methods exist to guide the analysis process in qualitative research. For example, Patton (2014) suggests steps to ease the analytical process such as organising the raw data, filling in any missing gaps, ensuring data protection (e.g., backing up transcripts), refer to the research question throughout, the application of self-reflection. As a researcher one must be aware that analysis

should occur throughout the research project (Wolcott, 1994) and an appropriate tool to ensure this is the use of self-reflection. Due to the personal nature of qualitative research self-reflection provides an opportunity to better understand yourself within your research and how or why the data is being analysed in a certain way (Patton, 2014). When attempting to make sense of the data, Gratton and Jones (2014) propose coding as a method of data reduction. Coding is the process of categorising raw data by identifying statements related to the research question, searching for patterns within the data be it relational or sequential, and shifting through each category to identify cases that confirm or contradict (so to avoid confirmation bias) the connections to the research question (Gratton & Jones, 2014). While any of the aforementioned methods can be followed to simplify and "tidy" data, Markula and Silk (2011) advise the use of analysis which correlates to the research paradigm and epistemology, in the case of this study - Foucauldian post-structuralism.

As discussed previously, post-structuralist epistemology seeks to uncover multiple truths. To follow a Foucauldian post-structuralist paradigm is to understand power, knowledge, and truth are not found but produced (Avner et al., 2014). Thus, there is no one-method-fits-all for the analysis of such data. This is not to say a detailed data analysis method is not necessary, on the contrary, Markula and Silk (2011) recommend a well conducted analysis process to strengthen the interpretations concluded from the data. However, the subjective nature of post-structuralist analysis might help explain the vagueness of much of the data analysis process presented in post-structuralist research.

Following Markula and Silk's (2011) pattern for post-structuralist interview data analysis, the process used for this study included; identification of themes; the analysis of each theme – its intersections, discrepancies, and/ or new themes; the connection of the themes with the notions of power relations, theory, and previous literature. This alongside the

previously mentioned methods of data analysis were considered as guidelines when connecting the potential links between Foucauldian disciplinary theory and a professional football player's experience while on loan. To give an example, when sifting through a transcript, an answer which highlighted a problematic event or experience was noted down and then cross-referenced with the rest of the transcripts to highlight any common experiences. When attempting to understand the theme presenting itself, I first attempted to note down how common the experience was, how many participants felt the same, similar, or completely different in the scenario. If there was a strong connection between the answers, I would attempt to understand the root of the experience as suggested by Foucault - how was the information founded? If I managed to find a correlation between the use of power through discipline or knowledge, I would try to challenge my bias. Whilst impossible to completely ignore the bias, it was necessary to accept the influence of previous experiences as a football player myself and influences such as those of my supervisors. Lastly, I questioned whether my analysis was producing a single truth or if it was working towards highlighting the multiple truths that exist in this research space.

As football can be described as a 'modern discipline' (Markula & Pringle, 2007, p.100) and similar Foucauldian analysis of footballer's experiences has proved insightful (see Jones & Denison, 2017), the data analysis carried out in this research explored the potential impact of the temporary transition in a player's disciplinary space, the process of the loan itself, and how to ensure a healthier process for both player satisfaction and development. Questions were specifically asked regarding both parent club and loan club so to analyse the differences in disciplinary techniques experienced at both clubs through a Foucauldian disciplinary lens and the impact these methods, or lack of, had on each participant. The coding of the data was influenced by the interview guide and the categorisation of

experiences at parent club, loan club, and the perception of the loan system itself. It could be argued this study could be used to; map the workings of the loan system for young players in football due to the lack of existing research; critique potentially problematic behaviours and practices during social exchanges between coaches and loaned players; and offer further suggestions for social change in the over-disciplinary world of football.

Results and Discussion

While at times the conversations proved challenging to stay on track due to meandering and free flowing nature of the semi-structured interviews, an abundance of rich data was obtained. Inquiring into the loan system proved fruitful with several thought-provoking themes arising throughout. These themes will be broken down in to four sections of analysis with the first theme looking at communication, or lack of, surrounding loans, and 'sugar coating'. The second theme will focus on the politics of the loan move – pressures to go on loan, the players concerns, and role of a contract as a bargaining power. The third theme will detail the loan environment ranging from the players experiences in a new changing room to adapting to playing in front of fans and having to manage expectations. To provide some context, initially, a brief insight into the football academy setting will be presented while providing an example of the 'moulding' that has taken place in the participants footballing careers.

A Word on 'Docile Footballing Bodies'

Compared to 'men's' football or first-team football, academies can be perceived as a 'softer' environment, with more 'arm-round-the-shoulder' approach to coaching. There is a real 'protecting the players' mentality in which they are given few responsibilities and have their day-to-day planned for them. Their food is prepared, their kits are washed, their every need is met by the club staff or their own agents, with their only requirement being to show up on time and demonstrate sacrifice "… put my body on the line… work hard, run until I'm knackered." (George). This can be seen as an example of Foucault's notion of 'control of activity' and 'organisation of genesis' in which every aspect of the players' lives are calculated and measured, with the sole focus for the player being on their footballing

development and thus, increase in their functionality for the club while also moulding the players into docile ‘cogs’ of the machine in which they are ready to put their bodies ‘on the line’. A subtle example of this is the removal of mobile phones in the changing room as explained by one of the participants,

> Not being allowed on your phones in the changing room was massive so we’d just chat about everything in the world really and obviously the coaches would get involved as well. (Daniel)

This is a small example of a list of rules players must follow when at the training ground. These are rules instilled so as to reduce the players’ distractions and are set early on at the academy level.

While the academy setting could be seen as a safer space for athletes than that of first team men’s football, data collected here reiterated that young players are still inundated with various disciplinary techniques that shape them into the docile charactered football players preferred by coaches (Christensen, 2009). Some of the participants said:

> Well, you wouldn’t play on matchday if you turned up late, things like that. If you were meant to start you would be on the bench and that would be your punishment. (Lewis)

> To be fair when I was U14’s I did start to not enjoy as it as much. I literally just lost enjoyment, became a bit too serious (George)

Due to the increase in training sessions and less time available for his life outside of football, George began to question whether a career in football was something he was prepared to pursue but decided to stick with it having been reassured by his father. Despite acknowledging it was the right decision to stick with football, George does also admit that

even now "Enjoyment will never be the same…It's a job and I get paid to do it…it is what it is really." This is an example of how drop-out, loss of enjoyment, and a number of negative side effects are common in a disciplinary sporting environment – a finding in line with previous research (Shogan, 1999; Johns & Johns, 2000; Denison, 2007; Gearity & Mills, 2012).

In contrast, Lewis described the intense training load as 'good' due to the lack of 'distractions.' Foucault (1991) believed discipline was not only enacted via corrective instruction, but also by the transformation of the body to work efficiently and usefully. With the removal of distractions and choices at the academy level the player can focus solely on their football and become a useful asset to the club. This finding is in line with Roderick's (2006) and Jones and Denison's (2017) research which highlighted the need for professional footballers to serve a 'useful function'.

> …you're there 9-5 basically every day and then 23's are there 9-2 or something like that, so you're there all day, so when you get home, you feel like you ain't got time at all. (Charles)

Whilst not necessarily ill-intentioned, this removal of choice and increase in discipline to remove distractions results in docility for the players which as mentioned previously can have negative and even damaging effects. Whilst this paper's primary focus is not on critiquing or analysing an academy setting, this sub-theme does offer useful context which demonstrates and reiterates players' compliance and acceptance of their circumstances, as established in previous research, and hopefully sheds further light on the under-researched structural and cultural environment of academy football (Manley, Palmer, & Roderick, 2012).

Theme One – Communication (or Lack Thereof) Surrounding the Loan Experience

The theme of communication and the lack thereof is one of the most prevalent throughout the data. This can be seen quite clearly in the lack of communication in several aspects of the loan system. Be it on the approach to going out on loan, the decision to keep the player on loan, or the level of communication maintained while the player is away from their parent club. In this first theme, lack of communication provides challenges, relief, and confusion to the already uncertain career the young professionals endure. Here I demonstrate how using a Foucauldian lens is helpful as it explains how a disciplinary background prepares and conditions the players to conform and accept the lack of communication regarding their loans – a lack of communication that a layperson would not encounter or accept in many other professional contexts.

Whilst a transfer would be considered a major decision which would require an employer/ boss/ manager to communicate with their employee in any profession, football would appear to be an outlier. By no means a normal profession, it does beg the question why some football managers might not consider it a conversation worth having. Daniel recalled his own experience of this situation:

> Played ninety minutes and did alright, and then I saw an article in the newspaper, that my grandma sent me actually, about how I was ready to go out on loan. Something about U23's being a step back or something. The gaffer hadn't even spoken to me at all about it.

Despite Daniel being touted as one of the most promising players in the academy and starting to break into the first team, there was no communication from the head coach regarding the possibility of a loan move. Eventually, in an abrupt moment, Daniel recalled the following meeting with his manager:

> The gaffer called me into his office, and I kind of knew what was going on, and he just said 'Club X want to take you out on loan. I don't want you to train today. I want you to travel down straight after training'.

Without consulting Daniel, the head coach had made the decision to send him on loan, across the country, that same day. Despite the 'shock' felt by Daniel, there was an interesting sense of relief in not having been given a choice. Having been at the academy from a young age, Daniel was likely influenced into the docile character that is expected from professional athletes through disciplinary means such as constant emphasis of expected behaviour and tightly timetabled activities, to name a few. Foucault's (1979) disciplinary analysis helps to explain this compliance as he explained how techniques and instruments of discipline enacted by (in this case the football academy context) combine to normalise behaviours and procure docility. Foucault's concept of docility helps us understand how a significant life decision and transition is accepted by the participant without much question. Furthermore, docility explains why the participant even felt a sense of relief in not having to trouble themselves with the process of decision making; they allow this process to be undertaken for them because they are conditioned to focus solely on their football.

In a similar situation, George, another promising player breaking into the first-team of his respective club, recalls the first time he was approached about going out loan:

> Literally, the academy manager just said, cause there was only part-time at Club Y, so it weren't like I was moving house or owt like that. I was just training there a couple times a week and playing on a Saturday, so they didn't really give me an option and I just had to do it. It was only meant to be a month's loan and then at the end of the month I thought 'Thank god, I don't have to go back', and then he called me and said, 'We've extended it until the end of the season.

While there was communication between the player and manager regarding the initial approach to go on loan, once again, the player was not consulted in a key decision. This time with regard to whether he would approve of his loan being extended. George demonstrated the type of obedience normalised in football culture (Roderick, 2006) when he went on to declare that he did have a say in this decision, however he felt he had to accept the manager's proposal. George's response could be framed as a symptom of the troubling dominant discourse built upon years of unchallenged disciplinary practices that coaches are experts who must not be questioned (Markula & Pringle, 2006).

George also confessed that he feared the manager's estimations of him would change had he refused.

> I think, I just would have gone down in his estimations, "He's not looking forward to a challenge."

Foucault describes power as being omnipresent in every relation (1991). This is to say every individual holds power, however, these coach athlete interactions depicted in the collected data do demonstrate an imbalance of power in which players are scared to speak out and lose their position in the highly hierarchical architectural footballing space, even in decisions directly impacting them (see also the findings from Jones, 2019). This fear to speak out was reported by the majority, if not all the players, when asked if they ever disagreed with their coaches, and especially with regard to their loan scenarios. Having all revealed they had moments of disagreement, they professed to having remained silent in fear of the repercussions from the coach or manager who "obviously got the power so he can do what he wants" (Daniel). These confessions of silence resonate with Manley, Roderick, and Parker's (2016) research which highlights the docility young football players must endure in an environment which claims to be more holistic yet fails to give young athletes a voice. In a

further example of the imbalance of power during his loan spell, Max was left out of a match day squad without having been given a reason

> I remember when I found out that I was not playing for Club B that weekend at Club D, I almost felt like I was running around trying to get answers.

Max recalls having had to chase up representatives from his parent club to demand an answer highlighting a complete lack of communication with his loan club and parent club. Due to the disciplinary discourse ingrained in football, akin to institutions such as the military, footballers are seen as assets, cogs required to function effectively as part of a system – what Foucault called the 'composition of forces' (Markula & Pringle, 2007). Foucault's (1979) lens has helped to explain that over time, these institutional conditions have led to and perpetuated the dehumanisation of the individual players and the legitimisation of the continued problematic imposition of disciplinary power. This dehumanisation and objectification of players has allowed those responsible for the choreography of football arrangements (coaches and managers) to not consider clear communication as significant or necessary with those who they see as less than or servile in the space they govern. Importantly for this research into the loan experience, this in-turn results in football players having to navigate through experiences in a career (such as a loan) during which they have to conform in a manner few would accept in professions outside of professional football.

Sugar coating

Aside from the routine lack of communication described above, some players also reported situations in which they were lied to by those in positions of power, none more so than George in a manner he termed 'sugar-coating'.

From as far back as his time in the youth academy George has expressed his issues with the structure of professional football as shown in the pre-theme section. Unfortunately for George, these experiences appeared to carry on throughout his professional career. While not necessarily indicative of a lack of communication, George does give examples of frustrating conversations in which the coach did not always speak candidly with him and regularly broke promises – an occurrence routinely reported in working football contexts (Roderick, 2006).

> I'm saying is sometimes there's a lot of sugar coating. Sometimes people tell you things just to back themselves up and there's no loyalty.

Additionally, in another example, George explains how his second loan spell came about after disagreeing with his head coach over his playing time and promises:

> I was told I wasn't allowed to go on loan and then a week later he wants me on loan. Was told he wasn't going to sign a left-back. Near deadline day, he signs a left-back.

In a profession which demands sacrifice and loyalty from its players it is understandable why George felt frustrated with the attitude not being reciprocated by his manager – but it is clear that this is a normal experience for a working player. Despite a number of the participants having conveyed situations of discontent with certain coaching and disciplinary practices, they all accept the 'truth' that it is all part of making it in football. George in particular demonstrates this as previously having admitted that football is just a job and that 'It is what it is'. Again, Foucault's thoughts can be helpful in understanding the experiences of the players here, as while cognisant of an injustice, they not only feel impotent to destabilize this imbalance, but they also continue to 'trust' the process. Foucauldian thinking helps understand that these participants comply as a result of the prevalence and power of the

discourses of adherence and compliance that circulate within the football and high-performance space that have been routinely espoused (Denison, 2007).

Good communication

In contrast to those moments of deception or lack of appropriate communication, George was positive with the level of communication he received while on loan from members of his parent club. In fact, several of his coaches and managers attended his games while on loan and called him to check up on him numerous times. This was a sentiment echoed by several of the players who indicated that they felt adequately supported throughout their loan experiences.

> If I needed them, I would have rung them but the support they gave me was top quality. They checked up on me quite a lot which was very nice of them just to have a bit of a chitchat. (Daniel)

> After every game my goalkeeper coach, Mark, he would either ring me or text me to see how I'd done or what the result was. He'd come to the games every couple of months or every month. There's still contact there and I was still getting feedback as to how I was doing and also the loan clubs I'd be at would report back and say I how I was doing as well. (Seb)

> To be fair they are quite good at that cause they'll either send the younger coaches to go watch or the head of coaching sometimes goes to watch, depends. They are quite good at that to be fair. To get themselves out to watch the players. (Charles)

This highlights the productive nature of the instrument of discipline Foucault (1979) termed 'hierarchical observation' in which 'experts' (coaches, managers, analysts, etc.,) examine the target of power (players) to ensure optimal performance. While deemed 'support' by coaches

and players this surveillance acts as a gaze in which unwanted traits such as laziness are under constant scrutiny. There is no place for players to hide poor performances in the 'enclosure' (highly visible space designated for power to be enacted), yet with the number of different eyes cast upon them from an early age, players accept the discourse in which they will improve under strict surveillance as that is what it takes to make it professionally. Furthermore, due to the 'reward' system integral to training, players are always keen to demonstrate their performances. Therefore, it is understandable why the participants were happy for the coaches and managers from their parent clubs setting scrutinising their loan performances and fearful of their performances going unnoticed prior to their loan moves. This fear will be explored further in the subsequent theme.

Theme summary

While some examples included above demonstrate how some players had positive communication during their loan spells, this opinion was not shared by all players. The majority of responses indicated that little to no communication had been offered to them while on loan. Max going as far as to suggest a loan manager would have been beneficial to his loan spell due to the lack of communication he received while on loan.

> I think that's something that should just be a go-to for clubs. It's different because in the top leagues they have that a staff member that will look after the boys on loan. When you come down here you don't have it and I think maybe that's lack of resources can't really have that many staff members, but it would've definitely been a lot better because you could have found out what (parent club) thought and how you were doing.

Evidently, the data discussed in this first theme suggests that despite the failure to involve players in key decisions regarding their current and future careers, those in a position of power do still regard the players as important assets to monitor while on loan. An argument could be made here that the data once more reiterates the prevalence of the discourse that coaches are the all-knowing entities of the footballing space, in which the football players are seen as nothing more than machines that must follow orders without question (Mills & Denison, 2013). For example, in several cases coaches and managers did not feel the need to involve the players in key decisions involving their development or would even 'sugar-coat' decisions the player may not find favourable – emphasising the ease with which players' autonomy can be bypassed in this space and supporting the notion that often footballers have little control over their career trajectories. Evidently, this imbalance in the coach-player dynamic places the player in a position in which they must either decide to accept the decisions made for them or risk falling out of favour and have their potential and vulnerable (Manley et al., 2012) careers in professional football jeopardised.

Theme two - The Politics of the Loan Experience

The second theme identified from the data is entitled 'the politics of the loan experience' and shines some light on the various factors at play that influence how a player might experience his loan. Having briefly touched upon the fear of speaking out that players experience during their time at the academy, it was not surprising many repeated this tendency when the time came to make a decision to go out on loan. When the footballers in this study were approached with regards to a loan move the decision was mostly enforced rather than given an opportunity to contest the decision. Almost all participants mentioned the illusion of having a choice (another example of sugar coating) but the fear of reprisal for speaking against the choice/decision made by the coaching staff ensured they remained silent.

In this second theme I use a Foucauldian lens to provide a reading of the data that revealed that players; feel pressure to go on loan, have concerns about going on loan, and how the players' contractual status at the club significantly influences their orientation to a proposed loan spell.

Pressure to go on loan – I'd like to make you an offer you can't refuse…

Due to the importance of communication in the socially structured activity that is football, I felt it necessary to discuss how the participants were approached in regard to going on loan. It was impossible to ignore the fact that a majority of them described the process as one where they **felt** as though they had a choice whether to go on loan or not:

> I think it was always my decision whether I wanted to go… But he sort of, sorted everything out. I didn't know who the manager was or anything like that. It was all set up for me. (Lewis)

> He came up to me and told me he had a loan set sorted out for me. He said it was completely up to me whether I wanted to go or not, but he said he thinks it would be best if I was to go on this loan. (Seb)

> I definitely had a say in it. There was always a say in it. I remember them saying that you know 'it's completely up to you whether you want to do it or not". (Max)

However, despite commenting on having a 'choice' as to whether to go on loan or not, the players also revealed to have felt like they could **not** have rejected the loan proposal, despite some of them having significant reservations.

> If you do this, it will make you better'. Basically, saying everything that will be good if I do it. So it was like I couldn't say no. That's how it was presented. Literally, like, you need to do it. (George)

> …it was sort of one of those questions where you couldn't say no cause you felt like you had to say yeah… (Charles)

While Foucault did not believe the effects of discourse to be 'good' or 'bad', he did believe they could turn problematic once accepted as truth and left unquestioned (Avner, Jones, & Denison, 2014). With this in mind, the participants responses demonstrate the discourse in football in which manager/ coaches should be in total power (Cushion & Jones, 2006), in other words their decisions should not be challenged as they cannot appear to be 'weak'. This study has highlighted another area where the effects of this discourse have problematic outcomes, namely because it forces the players to remain silent while concerns associated with loans build and add to the already inherent instability of a footballing career (Roderick, 2006). This sentiment is shared by Denison (2007) in a self-reflective study in which he analyses his coaching methods through a Foucauldian lens to understand his athletes' poor performances. Denison recalled how his approach contributed to his athlete burning out in part due to what he believes to have been his failure to include the athlete in certain decisions (due to the discourse mentioned previously). This mirrors some of the frustrations expressed by the participants such as George when admitting his loss of love for the sport. When asked what they thought would have happened had they objected, the players responded with:

> I think he would have thought I don't want to go play men's football or something he would have developed a different perspective of me if I didn't say 'yeah'. At the time I didn't get along with him, the goalkeeper coach. So, I think he thought that I was

> gonna go out there and then struggle with it… I think that was sort of the test as well, to be fair." (Charles)
>
> When you're young, I almost felt a little bit vulnerable in that moment because I thought 'if I say no here, they're gonna think I'm big time Charlie (Max)

Again, echoing the previous sentiment of not being able to speak out on a disagreement with their coaches, the players believed speaking out against their loans would jeopardise their standing within the club. Furthermore, this highlights the results of being influenced into being a 'team player' and the discourse of being loyal to the club ingrained from their time at the academy (Magrath, 2017).

Through years of being exposed to both subtle and unsubtle disciplinary practices it is conceivable that fear developed in a way which normalised a lack of questioning decisions that went against the voice of authority. A further example of the obedience, docility, and constant need to 'prove' oneself that is required to either climb or hold ones position in the social and hierarchical pyramids of footballing institution (Guillianoti, 1999; Jones, 2017).

Pre-loan concerns

It is important to note that in the secure context of a research interview, several of the participants mentioned they had significant apprehensions regarding going on loan. Due to the young age of the footballers, going on loan provided a new challenge in which they would find themselves in new, unknown territories - both geographically and socially. As most of the players still lived with their parents at the time of the interviews, it was a first chance at tackling independence. Moreover, most of the players had grown up in the same social bubble throughout their time at the academy. Thus, their pre-loan thoughts were

critical to understanding their loan experiences. With regard to speaking out against a loan move, the players were questioned on their perceptions of what going on loan would mean.

> I think a lot of academy players are very weary of the level of what they're sent on loan to and a lot of academy players turn their nose up at loan moves. (Seb)

> Well with loans, people usually just think it's - you're going out there and the football is gonna be rubbish. Slower than what you're at and people will sometimes think that the club sort of don't care where you go. They are sort of just shipping you out because you haven't got… maybe you haven't got a chance of, at the time of, playing in the first team. (Max)

> Obviously you want to play as high as you can but sometimes when you go to them leagues it's like 'Do I actually need to be here?' or 'Am I learning stuff?' (George)

The players evidently worried the level of their loans would stunt their development. They feared the level of their loan would be too low and not provide enough of a test. Champ, Nesti, Ronkainen, Tod, and Littlewood (2020) theorised that due to the strong cultural identity the players built up during their formative years at a club, such as their strong sense of pride, a move away from their parent club can act as threat to their identity. The players in this investigation demonstrated a good example of this theory as they challenged the level of football they would be playing whilst on loan, with some believing themselves to be too good to go on loan. Furthermore, due to the pressure to perform and impress to make the cut, the players feared being absent of their coaches' gazes. For example, Max noted that, "I had seen teammates going on loan to lower levels and it almost used to look like they were just forgotten.

As touched upon previously, Foucault's lens can help understand these players' concerns. For example, due to the workings of 'hierarchical observation' and panopticism (Foucault, 1979) in their familiar 'home' space, the physical relocation into a new space with specific characteristics (power relations), there was an understandable concern as to no longer being 'visible' to their parent coaches and feeling 'unconnected' from their social bubble, all the while negotiating the social expectations of their new arrangement. The effects of the removal of a docile player from their disciplinary space has been shown to have problematic consequences (Jones & Denison, 2017) and while the players were not being removed from the overall disciplinary culture of football, nor being asked to change their 'function', they were being relocated to a new and unfamiliar 'enclosure' (Foucault, 1991). Thus, the idea of removing the players from their known disciplinary space, alongside being away from the gazes they were normalised to crave, resulted in concern. In other words, this can be considered a symptom of the alteration on the arrangement of surveillance and therefore relations of power and should be a source of discussion for the ethical coach/football development professional. George gives an example of the loan being used in a way which justifies the player's concerns:

> … a lot of the time, people who are coming to the end of their second-year scholar and they aren't gonna get a pro, get sent out on loan to lower-lower leagues like, just to get some experience. So when they get released they've got at least some men's football on their CV do you know what I mean?'

Despite these reservations, none declined the loan offer. Due to the cutthroat manner in which players see their teammates getting dropped/ released, there is an understanding that attitude is a key indicator coaches judge (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021; Roderick, 2006a), and thus

players fear dropping in their coaches' estimation as they are the ones who hold their professional careers in their hands.

The role of a player's contractual status

Perhaps an unsurprising finding from the data was that those players who had secured contracts had a different orientation towards a loan spell. For example, Daniel, a player at the start of a 3-year professional contract, was perhaps the most outspoken in favour of loans:

> I just had a thought that every time I seen the career of a player, I had kind of seen in the early days they had gone on loan to try and get game time in a natural first team environment… If you can go out on loan and you can get that home comfort taken away from you, just to get that experience for living by yourself, coping, like cooking for yourself, I think it's brilliant really.

Daniel, unlike some of the other participants in more precarious contractual positions, perceived loans as a challenge and a chance to be more independent. Players tend to have little to no say on their contract offers in the early stages of their careers (when loans are more frequent). This leads to those who are uncertain regarding their contractual futures internalising a significant fear regarding the implications associated with a loan move. A fear which is echoed throughout the interviews.

> The one concern was that I wouldn't be getting my professional contract cause I didn't know if I would be getting it by that point. So I thought if I leave the club on loan are they really gonna see whether I deserve a contract." (Lewis)

Due to the uncertain nature of a footballing career (Brown & Potrac, 2009), a contract provides stability, at least for a few years. Before being sent out on loan, very few of the participants had a professional contract and were facing the final years of their youth

contract. Furthermore, due to players not having had a chance to test themselves in the top level, they are unable to demonstrate their worth, thus placing the club and coaches in the position of power (Parker, 1995). The contract then can be seen as a tool of discipline for those players who Magee (1998) might refer to as the 'exploited' or 'marketable' since it is those in a position of hierarchical power who decide who gets a contract and for how many years. Despite this, George utilises his contract and loan to negotiate some stability in his career.

> They want me to fight for my spot and basically what I'm saying to them is 'I need a new contract for some security if that's what's gonna happen'. Otherwise, I need to go on loan.

This is a clear example of how Foucault believed power to be relational to each social situation rather than flowing purely from a position of power, downwards – George's response indicates that given the relational nature of power the opportunity for resistance – however obscured, may be there. Nevertheless, the contract predominantly works as an additional form of discipline as it places further emphasis on the docility from the players - this can also explain the perceived inability of the majority of the players to speak out against their loan moves. The contract reflected the club's perceived productivity and worth of the player and acted as reassurance that the players were being loaned out because they were valuable rather than to be set aside. This was confirmed by the player's relief when offered a new contract.

> It was a bit of a weight off cause I didn't really need to be proving myself to anyone, at least for another year. It was good to go and play a game knowing I had the contract sorted. (Lewis)

> I feel quite secure, yeah because most of the boys get 1 years and they've given me 2 years with an options so it gives me a bit of security gives me a bit of time. So that was a good thing when I got offered the contract, that I was happy about. (Charles)

> So I had signed a one-year pro and then they said that they wanted to send me out on loan but before I went out on loan they wanted to give me a new deal. Which was interesting to be fair. Which I was honestly over the moon to be getting a new deal. I got a new three-year contract before I went out on loan. (Daniel)

Ultimately the contract acts as a reward for the 'correct' behaviours and values demanded by those in power. Through the individualisation of each contract in terms of length and wage, a hierarchical dynamic is also established within the players. This works towards what Foucault (1979) described as normalising judgement as players strive to obtain the best contracts resulting in self-regulation and modelling themselves after those in the top of the hierarchy, alongside the stability and security so sought after in professional football. The offering of the contract pre-loan allowed the players to feel security and with that security they felt more inclined to accept the loan offers, regardless of any reservations they might have held about their long-term future with their parent club.

Theme summary

The life of a professional footballer is riddled with uncertainties with clubs seeing a high turnover in playing staff as they fight to keep and attract the best players. Thus, it is rational for players to feel weary of being sent on loan. After all, players need to remain 'visible' in order to demonstrate their value to their parent club and be rewarded with the stability a contract offers. Despite their reservations, players must also refrain from speaking out as this is not acceptable in the professional football culture (Manley, Roderick, & Parker,

2012). Therefore, players must internalise their concerns and navigate the power-laden factors which dictate the longevity of their careers. From a poor run of form to an injury setback, clubs can decide whether the player is worth offering a new contract to. Factors which can be totally out of a player's hands can derail and end a career, such as injuries. Therefore, it makes sense as to why players are willing to relinquish their autonomy in such decisions such as going on loan. The trade-off being that the players get to continue their footballing careers and retain the sense of 'pride' their athletic identities demand for a career in which life decisions can be made without your input. The pressures the football players feel to accept a loan move are then continued when they are hit by the realisation they will have to adapt to a new disciplinary space, the focal point of the final theme.

Theme three - A New Environment

The third theme from the study considers the new environment that players were exposed to as a result of their loans. This theme identified that several key factors were central to how these players experienced their changing environments. These include being within a new changing room/ club context, managing and orientating to the new expectations of the new club (for some it is the first time playing for three points in a competitive men's first team scenario), experiencing playing in front of crowds, and managing the level of independence thrust upon them in their new loan context.

Changing room

Perhaps the most common concern that arose during the interviews was that of social anxieties, with several of the players remembering their fears associated with fitting in to a new social setting/ changing room. For example, Charles stated:

> I think it was just meeting everyone and wanting to make a good impression. That was it really. I think most players are nervous about the social side of things, walking into the changing room not knowing anyone is quite daunting.

Daniel, Seb, and George echoed this sentiment:

> Just kind of, how the lads would take me kind of thing. I have that worry of what if none of the lads like me, but I had (teammate from parent club) there on loan and he told me all the lads there were class and the gaffer. (Daniel)

> I think, probably, going into a men's changing room for the first time and sort of fitting in with that style of changing room (Seb)

> I was just like, nervous. Didn't know what to expect cause I was still really young and was stepping out my comfort zone massively. Was quite a shy person, walking into a changing room full of people like, it's so different to a full-time changing room. I was pretty nervous, and I didn't really want to do it to be fair. (George)

Perhaps the reason players like Seb mentioned the 'style' of changing room is the different atmosphere a young player experiences inside a men's changing room. Hickey and Roderick (2022) mention older players tendencies to 'test' younger players in a changing room, in a manner which they were tested as young players, almost as a ritual all players must endure. British football culture in particular can be defined by its toughness, masculinity, and 'banter' (Prendergast & Gibson, 2021). Traits that are necessary to navigate the social intricacies of a men's football changing room.

> "So I remember turning up to the stadium, going into the changing rooms and it was like, all proper, lads, all finished work, and now they're here, they've come to

> training. There was like, a lot of banter flying about, completely different to what the (Parent Club) changing room would be like." (George)

Here George demonstrates another example of how power is relational and a new social environment leads to new relations of power (Foucault, 1979). An environment where feelings and emotions must be masked as this does not represent the masculinity perceived by many to be what defines a footballer's identity (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006). Furthermore, due to the unreliability of a footballing career, many players depend on social circles made up of teammates and coaches (Roderick, 2006). This necessity to surround oneself in social circles shown to dictate the success or failure of transfers within professional football, a longing to 'belong' (Stamp, Potrac, & Nelson, 2021). A notion proven by several of the participants in this investigation as having admitted to keeping in touch with many of their ex-teammates and coaches. For example, when asked if he kept in touch with his ex-teammates, Max replied with:

> Yeah I do with as many as I can. So when I say my age group I mean just my year.

Thus, the forming of social bonds within a changing room are vital for the survival of a football player. This can seem a daunting task for a youngster, especially coming in from an academy/ U23's setting in which emphasis is placed on development and thus a 'softer' environment to those of a men's team in which 'winning is everything'. In a Foucauldian sense this can be seen as a change in the 'organisation of genesis' (Foucault, 1979), in which the players have been brought up in a certain footballing 'philosophy' that over progressive exercises have led to them playing a certain way and now having to adapt to a completely new 'philosophy'. The shift in mentality requires players to become increasingly resilient as interactions with coaches and teammates can be 'brutal' (Champ, et al., 2020). This was an environment few of the young players had experienced, which is highlighted by Charles:

> At scholar level you're forgiven more, because they coaches know you're gonna make a mistake and the players know you're gonna make a mistake, that's inevitable. At the loan clubs it's probably more ruthless or harsh if you make a mistake. You could cost 3 points and they will be on you back a bit more. I think anyone's gonna be on you if you make a mistake, I just think it's normal. Just don't do it again or don't do it regularly.

Once in the men's changing room, it is not uncommon for the senior players to test this resilience needed by the young players in the way of 'banter', teasing, and scolding (Hickey & Roderick, 2022). A dynamic which bears resemblance to Foucault's instrument of normalising judgement (1991) in which players begin to discipline each other due to their experiences and fear of standing out. In other words, the senior players may feel it is the norm to test the young players due to their own experiences as young players. In football teams, the senior players can be seen as an example of Foucault's technique of composition of forces as they become a smaller group of disciplined players which set the 'standard' of what being a professional football is and what the young players should strive to become (Jones, 2013). With this said, all participants confessed to having settled in easily to their new social environment. These initial concerns were alleviated when they came to understand that regardless of the level, every footballer speaks the same 'language' (Roderick, 2006a). This common 'language' being a biproduct of productive docility.

Expectations

While other research into the loan system highlights many of the same themes as this investigation, such as the changing of the social environment from academy to men's football (Abbott & Clifford, 2021), perhaps one theme which presented itself more clearly in this

investigation was the anxieties associated with living up to expectations at the players loan club. This ties into the notion that men's football is all about winning.

> They're not really bothered about developing the player or improving a player. It's all about 'what can we do to win the game today and how we gonna approach today's game'. (Seb)

The loaned players were not brought in for their development, they were brought in to help the team win. Which came with added pressure demonstrated by Charles:

> I think when I was on loan, you do feel more pressure, it's like a men's game, and then you feel like academy football is more relaxed sort of feel. I think when you keep making the step up higher up the leagues on loan the pressure becomes more because there's more people watching and stuff. Bit of a bigger deal the higher up it goes so yeah.

Players like Seb and Max also mentioned the pressure to live up to expectations placed upon them due to their parent club being several leagues above the loan club:

> …also playing in men's games where you're, I'd imagine if you're a non-league team and you have a professional or academy football player coming into your changing room, I'd imagine that they'd expect you to be a good player, or the best player they've got. I think that sort of feeling of living up to the expectations of the other players, yeah. (Seb)

> It was similar to what I just said, they're like, there may be thinking 'He's bang average how's he in league two when we're here grinding every day, working two jobs, football and their other job', trying to get to where I am. (Max)

As previously mentioned, the players had to adjust to a new way of understanding their place within football, a change in the 'organisation of genesis' (Foucault, 1979). This can help understand the sudden change in pressure as the players had to adapt to a tougher environment in which emphasis is placed on results. In addition to feeling pressure from their loan club and teammates, the players also placed a great deal of pressure on themselves. They felt the need to prove to themselves that they were good enough if not better, a sentiment also displayed by the participants in the psycho-social exploration of loans by Prendergast and Gibson (2021). It could be understood as the players' docility through years of being subjected to hierarchical observation, normalising judgement, and examination, drives them to desire the approval of their coaches, which in itself acts as a form of discipline. Additionally, by performing well during their loan, they can demonstrate they are still a valuable asset to their parent club and reassure their footballing identity - self-assurance being deemed a necessary trait to make it as a professional (Champ, et al., 2020). As well as having had to deal with the pressures to perform by their teammates and themselves, several participants also discussed having to adapt to dealing with the '12th man' – the fans.

The 12th man

Due to academy matches being centred around development rather than performance, they are not recipient of large crowds, nor the level of fanatical support that their professional counterparts (even at lower levels) do. During their temporary loan transition, the players are exposed to a different arrangement of hierarchical observation. This includes observation from new teammates, coaches, in some cases the media, and in regard to this chapter, the fans. Having initially theorised there would be more gazes upon the players at their parent club (for example in the form of monitoring devices and performance analysis processes – Jones, 2019), there was a failure to consider the possibility of the players playing in front of

crowds at their loan clubs. As the responses below will reveal, this is a relevant factor due to the pressures that come from playing in front of fans of a first team at a working football club.

Described as the '12th man' British football fans have embraced a passionate and at times dangerous relationship to football clubs, in which they take their role seriously in belief that their support can influence the outcome of matches (Guilianotti, 1999). It is this passionate affiliation fans demonstrate towards their clubs which can act as support when winning or scrutiny when losing. In this regard, the players recalled a mixed set of experiences with their loan club fans, the opposition fans, and the pressures that came with the expectations to perform in front of, at times, thousands of people.

> …one of the things I found quite physically challenging was actually going out at three on a Saturday or at night game and looking at the stands and I thought that was quite tough but I love that they've come to watch you and you just have to try and impress. (Daniel)

And, when playing for on loan for a semi-professional first team in front of a sizeable crowd, Seb recalled

> Especially if fans pick up on it from opposing clubs and they know that you're from a professional club, you can often become the target of the say 'banter' or 'abuse'.

Daniel went on to recall a moment in which he received abuse from his own fans due to a loss in a crucial game in which he did not even play in:

> They understood that it was going to be a sell-out and obviously the fans wanted you to win, so quite a few of the players were nervous. I was a little bit nervous going into the game and we got beat two-one. That I was devastated by. You could see everyone

> walking from the game and they were all devastated really, but it's just part of football and after the play-offs there were fans outside the stadium getting shepherded by the police. I drove my car out not expecting anything, I didn't play in the play-offs, but the fans were screaming 'You're effing shit!' all this stuff, saying 'You're an embarrassment to yourself' stuff like that, and I was a little bit taken back by that, but I understood it was just the fans being passionate.

The nerves described by Daniel can be chalked up to the exposure to a different arrangement of surveillance, through the act of having to play in front of fans in a different pitch (art of distribution) and in a manner which was results focused instead of development focused (organisation of genesis). An entirely new composition which can have challenging results for football players (Jones & Denison, 2019). Despite these added feelings of pressure and scrutiny, all the participants acknowledged the positives of playing in front of fans, with all of them recalling having enjoyed the pressure of the numerous eyes upon them:

> The crowds were a lot bigger in that league so that was again, another step up. I quite enjoyed playing in front of a bigger crowd. (Seb)

> They're a massive, massive club. Fan base is class. Away fans class. Home fans class. It's a massive stadium. We used to get like thirteen thousand which is not the best but we were bottom of League One. Away fans were class though. Great club. Great club. (George)

> …first game was a sell-out crowd with 3.5 thousand fans. Club T fans throwing smoke bombs on the pitch all of this that and for the other for a first game there I thought 'this was blinding I'm glad I said yes', and we ended up beating them and

> they had won 11 in a row before. In my first game, I turn up we beat them 3-2 and I'm thinking I'm absolutely buzzing here. (Max)

> The first game, understanding the fans, because I've never really had fans watching for that level, we played Club S away, and the fans wanted the gaffer out, so they were singing 'We want you out' and I was loving it. (Daniel)

To the gratification of football fans, support has in fact been shown to influence matches, for example the importance of crowds to provide a home advantage (Inan, 2020). It is clear that the support of fans can influence the feelings of the players as evidenced by Max and Daniel. It is what players dream of, to play in large crowds, receive recognition for their talents, and the fame that comes with it (Green, 2009). Playing in front of crowds ticks a big box in a football players identity and its therefore no surprise the players recalled enjoying the pressure of performing in front of passionate fans.

Theme summary

This final theme has worked towards explaining the difference in their loan experience to that of their parent club by understanding the pressures associated with adjusting to new relations of power through a Foucauldian analysis. A new changing room provided the players with new relations of power in which they felt the pressure of having to prove themselves in a new social dynamic. A change in the 'organisation of genesis' (Foucault, 1991), when having to shift their way of playing football to getting results rather than focusing on development added further pressure to the players experiences while on loan. Lastly, the change in arrangements of hierarchical observations and surveillance through the observation of the fans rounded off a pressure-laden experience in which a majority of players described a mixture of emotions regarding their loan experiences.

A Final Word on the Loan Experience

It is understandable that from the outside it makes sense that players feel a sense of relief or excitement when making the temporary transition to their loan clubs – game time is after all a prerequisite for progress within the sport when a player reaches a certain age – it can be a necessary rung on a ladder of progression. However, as the above discussion has illustrated, the loan experience is also one that is fraught with tension, anxiety, and dislocation. Foucault's thinking helps to understand that these players are experiencing a new social arrangement typified by different, fresh relations of power. Similar to the experiences of retiring football players who, in retirement face a new space with a different collage of disciplinary power (Jones & Denison, 2017), players sent on loan also are exposed to alternative arrangements of discipline typified by a lower-level club. In other words, in a new setting, without the familiar gazes of their coaches, competition with teammates, and use of intrusive surveillance techniques (Jones, Marshall, & Denison, 2016) experienced every day at their parent club, the players experiences are of course different, and Foucault's relational understanding of power explains that this is because of the alternative way that power percolates in their new loan context. In one example, Foucault (1991) used the idea of a panopticon in a prison to describe how prisoners begin to self-adjust when they believe they are under constant supervision, in this regard, perhaps the player, having a new arrangement, experiences new sensations, to extend the metaphor in a prison that has slightly different architecture, cellmates, and exercise yards. These feelings are sometimes akin to liberation as they feel less pressure to self-adjust and play with more freedom, but also sometimes give rise to feelings associated with the absorption of more intense disciplinary forces given the alternative demands of the new space they occupy.

Conclusion

It is evident transitional research, in the form of retirement or permanent transition, has played a large role in sports science (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). With loans being an integral part of many developing athletes in a wide array of sports, it was therefore curious to see a lack of research focused on this temporary transition – hence the reason for this research. Utilising a Foucauldian lens, this research was carried out with the ambition of better understanding the socio-political aspects of the loan experience for young working football players attempting to break into their respective senior professional teams. Foucauldian thinking was applied throughout as the context referred to a professional sporting instituion, a typically discipline laden institution within which disciplinary techniques and instruments are constantly being implemented (Shogan, 1999).

A total of 6 participants were interviewed which fit the criteria of young professional football players trying to break into senior football with at least one loan experience. An initial 12 participants were reached out to but due to a lack of interest (potentially due to the anti-academic culture surrounding football) only half agreed to carry through with the interviews. The use of semi-structured interviews proved beneficial but at times challenging due to the players inability to fully open up and speak out negatively in fear of contradicting their footballing identity (Gilbourne & Richardson, 2006) and the silence culture ingrained in footballing institutions (Manley, Roderick, & Parker, 2016). Regardless, a myriad of rich data was acquired from a relatively small sample. A benefit of the small sample size was that close attention could be given to each individual and his experiences. The interviews focused on a number of key themes such as the player's thoughts pre-loan, the politics surrounding the loans, and the experience of the loan itself. The results obtained from this research study indicated empirically that the loan system can be a cause of anxiety, frustration, and

disorientation in young players. From a Foucauldian standpoint these experiences can be understood in two key ways. Firstly, the conformity players demonstrate typically to this arrangement means that more often than not they must endure what is requested of them regarding loans and have little to no say in the decision to being sent out (regardless of their reservations). Secondly, a Foucauldian lens helps explain that the new power arrangements and disciplinary conditions that they must adapt to while on loan should be considered foremost when searching for explanations of player experiences. Furthermore, from the lower-league facilities to the men's changing rooms, the players' loan settings differ vastly to the those they are used to in their parent club and this includes an alteration in the different 'gazes' that are present that they must conform to. All the while, players also experience feelings of confusion and anxiety associated with no longer being under the familiar surveillance of their parent club.

Foucauldian thinking allows us to understand that the players mixed experiences stem from having to adjust to a new arrangement of power in a football culture. It is clear that the players encountered characteristics of the loan problematic and began to question certain aspects. Which in the disciplinary eyes of the football club, opposes the productive docility it has attempted to exercise into the players. Thus, many of the players were fearful of speaking out. The young players have had their 'bodies' tested and transformed into an 'effective' cog in the machine that is a professional football team through simultaneous techniques such as the art of distribution, control of activity, organisation of geneses, and composition of forces, alongside the means of correct training. With no malicious intent, coaches, and those in positions of power in professional football have based their methods on sporting 'truths' which have been allowed to develop without critical problematization. These discourses have in turn led the way coaches have handled the loan system with methods such as keeping

players in the dark and testing their resilience, and while the benefits of sending players on loan is evident for their development, there are certain critical questions coaches will need to begin to ask themselves in order to prevent the adverse effects encountered by the participants of this study. This insight garnered from conducting this research has allowed me to make a few suggestions for the British working football culture moving forward.

Suggestions for Future Practice

I would like to begin by indicating power is not inherently evil nor is all use of discipline wrong, however, when left unchecked, unquestioned, and when we accept everything as truth, we allow for power to become problematic (Foucault, 1991). With this in mind, my suggestions for the football culture are similar to those who have engaged with Foucauldian thinking in sports before me. In order to disrupt the problematic effects of disciplinary institutions, such as the feelings of anxiety and confusion faced by the participants of this study, those in position of hierarchical power must become more aware of the consequences of their methods by critically reflecting on how their knowledge has been shaped (Denison, Mills, & Konoval, 2015). In other words, coaches and managers should place greater emphasis on the problematization of their practices and question the 'truths' that are hard-coded in football culture. As an example, I would suggest managers problematize the belief that football is dependent on specific traits such as toughness and resilience, where these ideas stems from, and the way it guides their practices. This is in part because as shown in this study, an emphasis on being tough and developing a 'thick skin' is the justification behind young players being sent out to play **men's** football, into an environment where older players will test their resilience, with little to no communication from managers. While reflecting on how to guide practices may seem tough due to the competitive nature of sports (Gerdin & Pringle, 2017), reflecting on the need to place as much emphasis on certain traits

will allow the coach to better understand how this may impact their players negatively. This scenario culminates in some of the negative experiences shared by the participants in this study and left unchecked will have long lasting effects for athletes (see Jones & Dension, 2017 and their connection between a player's career and their retirement experience). Whilst, as Roderick (2006) has indicated it may feel challenging and frowned upon to go against the grain in a football context, questioning taken for granted disciplinary methods can lead to a healthier and safer football culture, in which we could hopefully see a reduction in drop-out rates, abuse, and mental health issues.

With regards to loan managers or those in position of power, this paper hopefully encourages problematization. Is there a way to incorporate the player in the loan decision? If not, why not? It is evident the lack of control or say in the decision to go loan can cause stress and anxiety in young players, thus encouraging their input and fighting the silence culture could lead to a player heading towards a loan with more tranquillity and confidence. With a better understanding of the discourses that are embedded within sports, every member of sporting institutions can change the way we enjoy sports, and whilst going against the grain can be tough, we each possess power than can change not just our lives but those around us (Denison, 2010). Thus, we each have a responsibility to ensure we change the negative effects of some of these discourses.

As the loan club this research can highlight the stress young players feel coming into a senior dressing room and the adaptation young players will have to go through going from a development-based environment to a results based one. Being aware and socially conscious of the young players' mentality can help strike a balance in which the player develops the physical and mental attributes required to perform men's football and aids the team's performance.

My final suggestion would be to continue research into the many facets of football and sports culture that have little to no attention to better understand the disciplinary lifestyles athletes must endure and provide innovative ideas in how to teach and implement a healthier way of experiencing sports. An example of this would be to carry out similar interviews but with those in positions of power regarding the loan process (coaches, agents, managers) in an attempt to gain a more robust image of the loan experience. While evidence of this can be seen in Prendergast and Gibson's (2021) paper perhaps a socio-cultural lens may provide a wider picture in which further suggestions could be made to ensure athletes experience a healthier loan experience.

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