Journal of Expertise
2018. Vol. x(x)

ISSN 2573-2773

Harnessing Socio-cultural Constraints on Athlete Development to Create a Form of Life

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Abstract

The role of task constraints manipulation in pedagogical practice has received considerable attention in recent years, although there has been little focus on the role of socio-cultural constraints on an athlete's development to elite performance. Here, we aim to integrate ideas from a range of scientific sub-disciplines to consider why certain behaviors and cultures (socio-cultural constraints) may exist in sport performance and coaching. Using recent conceptualizations of affordances in ecological dynamics, we explore how socio-cultural constraints may influence an athlete's development and relationship with a performance context. We also highlight how workplace practices eminating from the industrialization of the nineteenth century in countries such as the UK may have influenced coaching practice and organizational behaviors from that time on. In particular, features such as strict work regimes and rigid role specification may have reduced personal autonomy, de-skilled performers, and induced a "body as machine" philosophy within sporting organizations. These traits could be considered counter to expert performance in sports where creativity and adaptive decision-making are important skills for athletes to possess. We propose that ecological dynamics is a theoretical framework that enhances the understanding of the influential nature of socio-cultural constraints on the development of athlete performance. Key ideas suggest that sport pedagogists and practitioners could develop methodologies which help design practice landscapes rich in information to encourage athlete autonomy to search for relevant affordances which invite functionally relevant actions for competitive performance with physical, psychological, emotional, and social dimensions. Future research is needed to explore a range of sports in order to identify and clarify the relationship between socio-cultural constraints and expertise acquisition.

Keywords

ecological dynamics, affordance landscapes, socio-cultural constraints, learning design, expertise acquisition

Introduction

Expertise in sport is multidimensional and emerges from the rich, continued interactions of an athlete with a range of task and environmental constraints in performance, simulated in practice (Davids, Button & Bennett, 2008). Ecological dynamics is a powerful theoretical framework for understanding how sport practitioners can support athlete development, predicated on these complex and dynamic interactions and emanating from person-environment relationships (Davids, Handford & Williams, 1994). A key principle of ecological dynamics, relevant for the challenge of athlete development, is the interacting influence of task and environmental constraints on an athlete's ability to become attuned to the opportunities for action invited by objects, surfaces, features, terrains, and other people in a performance setting. This key principle is known as *affordances* in ecological dynamics (Davids, Güllich, Shuttleworth & Araújo, 2017). An increasingly functional relationship with a

performance environment is the basis of expertise from an ecological dynamics rationale (Araújo & Davids, 2011). These ideas suggest that athletes who have been trained to select from a rich and diverse range of affordances available in a competitive performance environment will be better prepared to perceive information, adapt their actions, make decisions, and interact skillfully with ecological constraints of competition.

James Gibson (1979, p.119) argued that "the *affordances* of the environment are what it *offers* the animal." For example, in rugby league a ball offers itself to players for kicking when traveling on the ground or for intercepting with their hands when it is moving through the air; a slow player invites a quicker player to run past him/her; a hard pitch offers itself to be sidestepped upon. Recently, Gibson's initial conceptualization of affordances has been revisited to emphasize the invitational characteristic of affordances to individuals with the relevant experiences, skills, and capacities (Withagen, de Poel, Araújo & Pepping, 2012; Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014; Withagen, Araújo & de Poel, 2017). Here, we elucidate what these refinements imply for making sense of the variety of socio-cultural practices that are embedded in what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein termed *forms of life* (Wittgenstein, 1953), which consist of behaviors, skills, capacities, attitudes, values, beliefs, practices, and customs that shape the communities we live in. The features of a form of life subsequently shape how we live (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014).

Extrapolating these ideas, we contend that there are current examples of "forms of life" identifiable in sport (e.g., related to skiing in Northern Europe, soccer in Brazil, cricket in South Asia, and rugby union in New Zealand). In specific sports, these forms of life demonstrate the influence of specific socio-cultural and historical constraints in the development of sporting excellence. They can explain why certain performance styles are developed in certain regions and why they are valued and exploited to establish dominance in elite sport. Athletic sprinting in Jamaica, for example, is ingrained in the sporting culture and has a history and tradition of excellence that is strongly influenced by the G. C. Foster College for Physical Education and Sports, where the country's athletic coaches are educated in a Jamaican "way of sprinting" (Moore, 2015). In these sporting cultures a form of life can be highly influential in how sport practitioners construct and design the micro structure of practice, which may have positive or negative effects on athlete performance. However, the notion of different countries or regions being associated with a particular style or way of practicing and performing in a sport is rather simplistic, lacks theoretical substance, and requires conceptual clarification in order to help us understand the basis for performance development. For example, to enhance athlete development, is it feasible for one country to simply imitate a way of practicing or performing associated with another (highly successful) nation in a sport (Harris, 2017)? Simply imitating the traditional practices of another nation may present performance challenges without first exploring, understanding, and embracing the form of life that influences the factors that lead to another nation's success in competitive sport.

Here we contend that differences in quality of performance and playing styles are substantively based on a specific "form of life," often developed under specific historical and socio-cultural constraints in particular geographical locations in the world. Forms of life are predicated on highly specific customary, habitual, highly developed, yet responsive modes of performing, competing, training, and practicing which result in the preference to design specific types of *affordance landscapes* in athlete development programs. Exploitation of the invitational nature of affordances when designing affordance landscapes in practice task designs (Withagen et al., 2012; Withagen et al., 2017) should aim to make the emergence of effective skilled action more likely. In these affordance landscapes, specific practice task designs guide developing athletes in their search for functional relationships with performance

environments founded on skill, expertise, and talent (Davids et al., 2017). Although recent clarifications of Gibson's conceptualization have made valuable contributions to the literature on affordances, little is known in sport domains about how a form of life can help sport practitioners harness local socio-cultural practices to influence affordance utilization and acquisition of sporting expertise. Understanding more about this issue can help sport pedagogists identify and exploit key socio-cultural constraints to enhance the quality of athlete development in specific sports (Uehara, Button, Falcous & Davids, 2016; Araújo et al., 2010). First, we provide a brief historical case into why "forms of life" and associated behaviors and customs may exist and influence sport expertise.

Historical Influences on Sport Performance and Coaching: The case of United Kingdom Rugby Football League

As with any social phenomenon, the extent to which history influences socio-cultural practices cannot be ignored. In the case of sport coaching in the United Kingdom (UK), for example, industrialization during the nineteenth century influenced social structures and trends, which in turn influenced workplace practice and behaviors from that time forward, shaping training methods in later years (Lyle, 2002). Increasing industrialization during the 1800s was successful, in part, due to the production line ethos, which was later strongly influenced by the American mechanical engineer Fredrick Winslow Taylor's systematized approach to industrial efficiency. During a lecture on industrial efficiency in 1907, Taylor (2008, p. 215) provided insights into the work place practices that contributed to his systematic management methods. His advice was straightforward:

> *Managers should not allow employees to think for themselves* but make sure they simply carry out tasks as instructed, our scheme *does not ask any initiative in a man*. We do not care for this initiative. All we want of them is to obey the orders we give them, do what we say, and do it quick. That scheme of giving minute instructions to every man, that is assigning him a task, having that task all planned for everyone [emphasis added].

Of interest is how these idea's filtered into cultural practices in institutional programs in education and sport, affected the development of individuals. British rugby football league is one sport with a relevant socio-cultural-historical backdrop to provide insights into how coaching behaviors and practice design shape how players acquire performance skills. Historically, rugby football league's roots originated in the north of England, where playing regions had been built on the key industries of the Victorian era (1837 to 1901). The writings of sport historian Tony Collins (2006, p. 149) provide insights into how these strong social-cultural-historical roots may have influenced the values of rugby league players, suggesting that "the attitudes of rugby league players were, therefore, shaped and defined by the world of industrial labor, which was intensely physical, often aggressively oppositional to management and, above all, almost absolutely masculine."

It is understandable that the reductionist nature of Taylor's methods and the attitudes and behaviors associated with industrial labor were manifested in other parts of society at that time, including the sport domain (Kiely, 2012). This transference can be seen in coaches and trainers application of "production line principles" to the design of systematic training programs aimed to enhance athlete performance (Smith & Davids, 1992). A stronger focus on enhanced athlete performance was perhaps due to the increasing professionalization of sport performance through structuring practice and training requirements during the early 1900s (Day & Carpenter, 2015). The adoption of ideas from Taylorism and the industrial workplace by sporting forms of life resulted in the commodification of athletes and the design of sports performance programs where strict work regimes and rigid role specification reduced personal autonomy and induced a "body as machine" philosophy (Smith & Davids, 1992).

Taylor's legacy is still evident in the sport domain today, where "reproductive style" coaching approaches that favor the decomposition of movement into anatomical units to "reproduce"' skilled actions are still common (Davids et al., 2017). In rugby league, for example, when learning the "6 o'clock pass," performers are required to (1) point the ball to 6 o'clock, and (2), pass over the front foot (Rugby Football League, 2014). These traits were valued in the socio-cultural contexts of the Victorian era in the UK but, in contemporary society, run counter to attributes considered conducive to team sport performance where autonomy within collaborative efforts, creativity, and adaptive decision-making are viewed as important skills for athletes (Memmert, Baker & Bertsch, 2010; Araújo & Davids, 2015). As discussed next, socio-cultural constraints shape the way that an athlete develops a relationship with available affordances to invite functional actions and behaviors during competition.

Sporting Forms of Life, Affordances, and Athlete Performance

A key tenet of Gibson's (1979) theory of affordances is the relational nature between affordances and an ecological niche. Within an athlete performance context, this is especially related to an individual's current available experience, abilities, and capacities captured in their *intrinsic dynamics* (dispositional tendencies) in a constraints-based framework (Schöner, 1994; Vallacher, van Geert & Nowak, 2015). Gibson (1979) and, more recently, Rietveld and Kiverstein (2014, p. 326) suggested that affordances are not simply action opportunities offered by the environment, but are dependent on the "abilities available in a particular ecological niche"; important to this point is how an ecological niche can be "shaped and sculpted by the rich variety of social practices humans engage in." Rietveld and Kiverstein's (2014) conceptualization of affordances connotes the mutuality of the athlete-environment relationship which is embedded in *forms of life.*

The theory of affordances embedded in forms of life provides a powerful rationale for the application of this key idea by sport practitioners to consider the (socio-cultural and historical constraints in) environments which shape expectations and beliefs on how athletes should behave, perform in competition, develop, and learn. For example, Taylorism and systematic workplace practices may have influenced the view of performing, developing, and training of an employee who then went on to coach and play team sports. This conceptualization is important for considering how to maximize the design and resourcefulness of practice environments and the socio-cultural practices in which athletes engage around the globe in different societies, and in communities with distinct social, physical, and geographical locations. This conceptualization can provide a lens through which practitioners may understand the potential for transfer of (successful) practices and methods from one cultural context to another.

Across sports, forms of life are recognizable within coaching values, practice, and behaviors, which are constructed by the relationship between wider social values and key individuals involved in specific sports (Day & Carpenter, 2015). An individual who transitions between social contexts (i.e., communities, workplaces, and the coaching arena) is influenced by normalized social values which continuously influence the relational nature between affordances and the ecological niche (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Consider a form of life in British rugby league, where "percentages, position and possession have been the prevailing mind set of late" (Woods, 2017, p. 7), and the players are considered almost as mere machinery in the greater strategical planning of the high performance sports organization. The consequences of this form of life are exemplified by the perceptions of ex-Great Britain Rugby League International Phil Clarke (2016, p. 11), warning against the normalization of "machine-like" behaviors in athletes:

> I worry that we are *stifling the talents of more players* by getting them to *play like robots* [emphasis added]. The obsession with completion rates discourages

> players from taking a risk. We need to radically alter that thinking and encourage players not to worry about being wrong and losing the ball, mistakes will happen.

This account is consistent with the occupational ideals of Taylorism, prevailing assumptions of managerialism, and the socio-cultural-historical insights into rugby league provided earlier. This process-oriented approach that adopts a dualist stance (i.e., separating mind and body) can be embedded in the socio-cultural practices that are manifested through a sports or teams coaching practices and behaviors (Lombardo, 1999), where coaches design practice tasks based on the decomposition of complex individual or team skills (Chow, Davids, Button & Renshaw, 2016). Although structure and organization may have benefits during athlete learning, over exposure to practice landscapes that reduce opportunities for action and promote systematic and predictable behaviors can affect an athlete's responsiveness to relevant affordances. This perspective is exemplified by ex-Great Britain international Phil Clarke (2016, p. 7/10) who describes a common structured playing style:

> *The "structured" play of who stands where, runs into which hole in their opponents' defensive line, passes behind which team-mate*, it's a bit like watching a driverless car …. *There is a bigger danger that the shift away from autonomous thinking in attack* will become boring if it hasn't already. Worse still, *we are in danger of damaging young players by encouraging them to copy this style of play* [emphasis added].

Withagen et al. (2017) have argued against this mechanistic conception of human behavior, instead favouring the role of *agency* (i.e., individuals can make their own way in the world) to better understand how affordances *can* be designed to invite or solicit functional behaviors. The notion of agency does not mean athletes should be "programmed" to respond to certain affordances, but should "unreflectively" interact with the affordances available in a performance environment that invite their actions (Rietveld, 2008). Importantly, advocating that athletes have agency and can, therefore, act autonomously in *their* performance environment, prioritizes the person-environment relationship as the important scale of analysis in regards to developing human movement behaviors (Withagen et al., 2017). This idea implies that sport pedagogists, and the socio-cultural practices they influence, must support the autonomy needed by athletes during competitive performance. They can develop the autonomy of athletes by facilitating their active exploration of a landscape of available affordances during practice, which helps them to perceive and pick up action opportunities which exist in a performance environment (Araújo, Davids & Hristovski, 2006). This re-conceptualization proposes a significant role for coaches as "designers" of affordance landscapes, as part of a comprehensive "form of life" in high performance and elite development programs, which simulate critical aspects of competitive performance environments. Although this approach to expertise acquisition is theoretically coherent, within professional rugby league, experiential knowledge of experts has pointed to the existence of a form of life that is more consistent with mechanistic and reductionist approaches in line with traditional working practices.

A challenge for sport pedagogists is to develop evidence-based methodologies which help them move away from mechanistic and reductionist approaches that force athletes to seek putative "common optimal movement templates" in training (Brisson & Alain, 1996). Rather, sport pedagogists and practitioners could work collaboratively guided by a universal, principled theoretical framework with other practitioners (e.g., strength and conditioning specialists, psychologists, trainers, coaches, performance analysts, skill acquisition specialists) in a "Department of Methodology." The aim of a Department of Methodology could be for group members to collaboratively design practice landscapes rich in information (i.e., visual, acoustic, and haptic) based on a powerful

and comprehensive theory of human behavior to guide implementation of methods, encouraging the exploration of affordances utilized to shape and guide performance behaviors with physical, psychological, emotional and social dimensions (Davids, Araújo, Hristovski, Passos & Chow, 2012). Collaborative work in a Department of Methodology, based on an ecological dynamics rationale, could lead to an agreed understanding of when, how, why, and by whom particular fields of a landscape can be searched during practice. If sporting forms of life provide athletes with opportunities to explore practice landscapes varying in informational constraints, providing what Bernstein (1967, p. 204) called "repetition without repetition" (i.e., athletes exploring and discovering multiple performance solutions to achieve the same goal directed task), they are more likely to develop the functionality required to continuously co-adapt their behaviors to a range of evolving environmental and task constraints (Seifert, Button & Davids, 2013; Pinder, Davids, Renshaw & Araújo, 2011). Individuals who improve their situation in a performance setting by unreflectively responding to relevant affordances (solicitations of the environment) are considered to have an *optimal grip* on the situation (e.g., simultaneous attunement to multiple relevant affordances) (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014), which is the basis of autonomous behaviors in sport performance contexts. The notion of *skilled intentionality* (an individual's tendency towards an optimal grip) can provide sport practitioners with a suitable conceptual framework to understand how to support athletes' to become attuned to a *field of affordances*, underpinning their agency in competitive sport. Skilled intentionality is founded on the intertwined relationship among emotion, cognition, perception, and action of athletes who are challenged by sport practitioners to adapt to dynamic constraints of specific fields of an affordance landscape. The aim is to support each athlete in gaining an optimal grip on the relevant affordances in a landscape to develop a functional relationship with the performance environment (Araújo & Davids, 2011).

The phenomenological notions of skilled intentionality, optimal grip, and field of affordances applied to athletes, signify the following: (1) They have developed high levels of functionality to adapt to varied challenges in performance settings, enhancing their decision making capacities and the autonomy needed to interact with teammates and opponents; (2) they have adapted to the relevant physical conditioning to function at high levels throughout competition; and (3) they have developed the resilience and emotional regulation strategies needed to flourish in competitive performance. Consequently, an athlete's concerns and abilities are constantly evolving, signifying that their functionality towards an optimal grip on a field of affordances is adaptable to varied situations (Rietveld & Kiverstein, 2014; Bruineberg & Rietveld, 2014), through their ability to develop a functional relationship with dynamic performance environments (Araújo & Davids, 2011). This point is demonstrated by the experiential knowledge of Castleford Tigers Head Coach, Daryl Powell (2017, p. 4). At the time of writing, Castleford Tigers were top of the British Super League table, having scored 149 more points than their closest rivals (BBC, 2017).

> *For me, you should have your own philosophy and culture as a coach – and at Castleford we believe that we're different*. I like the way we play and I'm excited by it – I'm coaching them, so I should be. If you're not excited about what you're doing, you should be doing something else. *We have a way of playing, but we're always tweaking it. If teams expect something from us then we'll throw something else at them. We're hard to coach against and we won't change that. As a coaching group we like to be inventive* and I know the players enjoy playing the way we do [emphasis added].

This extract suggests the existence of a form of life (philosophy and culture embedded in a

methodological framework) that refuses to subscribe to conventional styles of play, discussed earlier by Phil Clark. Consequently, the team has a different way of playing that exploits evolving practice landscapes that require players to use information to continuously co-adapt their actions to the movements of opponents and teammates in achieving task goals (Chow et al., 2016). Being embedded in a form of life of this nature means that players become sensitive to and utilize (rapidly appearing and dissolving) affordances in dynamic performance contexts that are not effectively simulated under the narrow task constraints of traditional socio-cultural practices (i.e., styles of play). These ideas imply how transitioning of teams between performance states of stability and relative instability can emerge to underpin successful performance in sports such as rugby league.

Conclusions and Future Research

We argued that the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which athletes develop an increasingly functional relationship with a performance context are important constraints on expertise which are relevant to understand in sport. This category of constraints is currently lacking in substantive empirical research, especially with respect to its effects on expertise in sport (Uehara et al., 2016), although there are strong theoretical and philosophical ideas which implicate the importance of these constraints in shaping behaviors. An important challenge for sport practitioners is to elucidate the role of socio-cultural constraints in the design of affordance landscapes to enhance the development of sport expertise. In tackling this challenge, high performance sport can use a powerful theoretical and methodological framework to guide sport practitioners in exploring socio-cultural constraints to facilitate an athlete's utilization of the multitude of available affordances to suport skilled action. The role of ecological dynamics in this task will focus attention on the person-environment relationship, leading to a better understanding of the relationship between socio-cultural constraints and the emergence of an athlete's skilled behaviors (Araújo, et al., 2010).

To address these challenges Bronfenbrenner's proposed bioecological model of human development provides methodological guidance for identifying relevant socio-cultural constraints that affect the development of athletes (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and this model looks beyond the athlete's immediate environment (although important) to explore the wider socio-cultural constraints that influence skilled behavior (Gabbard & Krebs, 2012). The evolution of the bioecological model of human development (Rosa & Tudge, 2013) does not provide a universal explanatory theory of skilled behavior (Araújo et al., 2010). However, adopting the model can provide methodological guidance to analyze the relationships that evolve between an athlete's exposures to a multitude of constraints (e.g., person, process, context, time), the influence these constraints have on affordance utilization, and the socio-cultural practices that are embedded in sporting forms of life (Krebs, 2009). To explore these relationships a mixed methods research approach can be employed to detail a form of life in a specific sport, establish the relationships between a form of life and an athlete's capacity to utlize available affordances, and analyze the task-specific relations between athletes and dynamic practice and competition settings. An ecological dynamics examination of the person environment relationship will allow a functional analysis to identify how perception and action can be harnessed to pick up and utilize affordances by individuals (Warren, 1988).

Authors' Declarations

The authors declare that there are no personal or financial conflicts of interest regarding the research in this article.

The authors declare that they conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with the Ethical Principles of the Journal of Expertise.

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Received: 20 September 2017
Revision received: 27 November 2017
Accepted: 6 December 2017