An exploration of one former elite UK football academy player's lived experience of 'being bio-banded', through narrative inquiry: A focus on body-self relationships and identity construction.

A dissertation submitted by

James Du Feu Platt

In partial completion of the award of

Masters by Research (MRes)

'I hereby declare that the dissertation submitted is wholly the work of
James Du Feu Platt.
Any other contributors or sources have either been referenced
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together with the nature and scope of their contribution.'

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Abstract

Research on football academies specifically and the development of young players' development and wellbeing is growing (Adams and Carr 2017; Whatman et al 2018; Goldman et al. 2021). An interest in bio-banding, the process of grouping players based on biological maturation as opposed to chronological age, led the focus of inquiry where early maturing players are chosen to 'play-up'. To date we know very little about the experience and long-term impact of being 'bio-banded' on academy footballers. This research employed narrative inquiry (Sparkes and Smith 2014) to explore the lived experiences, body-self relationships and associated identities of a footballer who had experienced maturity matched practice in academies, and as a coach worked alongside bio-banding interventions. A life history approach was adopted. Two in-depth interviews with one purposively sampled former elite academy footballer who experienced the bio-banding process was conducted following a lengthy sampling and access phase of the research process. Adopting the position of story analyst, a multi-level structural and thematic narrative analysis was employed to interpret the processes and critical moments (Douglas and Carless 2009) within the narrative. In a reflexive methodology, particular attention is paid to the difficulty of accessing the profile of participants that met the study criteria and critical reflection on potential barriers to elite academy voices is given. The research provides an unheard voice that will help us to understand the meaning derived from being bio-banded, as an elite academy footballer, and its effects on long-term development. Recommendations on practices and policy to the benefit of player welfare are considered.

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Introduction

Becoming a professional footballer is a dream that is shared by thousands of young boys and girls across the UK, driven by both a passion for the game and the potential for increased financial benefits and social status. To help nurture and develop young players, professional football clubs' academies provide the elite environment required to develop the best players through the provision of top-level coaches, facilities, and support staff. Professional football clubs invest large budgets on the development of young talent, and although the holistic and personal development of individuals is a key objective, the main long-term strategy of the academy system is to recruit and develop the best young talent in order for the club to benefit from a return on the investment either through an improved first team squad or transfer value.

More recently, the awareness of those elite academy footballers who do not make the grade and progress to the level of professional has been highlighted in the media (Kelner 2021). This has coincided with a growing number of player care and wellbeing professionals being put in place within professional football clubs at the lite level, across the Premier League and English Football Leagues. Evidence suggests that athletes who are relatively younger or late maturing compared to their peers will experience inhibited sport-specific and psychosocial development when categorized by age (Goldman et al. 2021). Therefore, the practice of bio-banding is growing to address this.

Literature Review

Elite football academies across the UK exist to identify and nurture the best young talent, so that given time and resources these players can achieve both their sporting potential, and for some their dream of becoming a professional footballer. Football academies that are affiliated to a professional football club exist predominantly to supply players to help the first team of their respective clubs (Relvas et al 2010). However, further benefits have been recognized such as player development and the potential for financial reward (Bourke 2003; Richardson et al 2004; Laurin et al 2008; Relvas et al 2010). How these outcomes are achieved can vary greatly depending on both the sporting environment that exists within each elite academy, and the level of resources that are available. In 2012, the English Premier League introduced a new strategy for developing young players in the UK, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP), the mission being to develop more and better homegrown players through a player-led approach (premierleague.com 2022). Providing guidance and standards of practice for elite football academies nationwide shows a willingness from the sports' governing bodies to improve our understanding of the phenomena that exist within elite football academies in the UK; to support future decisions around policy, guidelines, and best practice.

Elite football academy context and structure

Academies are part of a wider business model within elite football; however, they are also strictly regulated and must provide certain criteria to achieve their category status and comply with the guidelines set out by their affiliated league governing body i.e. Premier League or English Football League. Academies are categorized from 1-4, with 1 being the highest; a category one academy will provide all aspects of the required criteria, lower rated academies will lack one or more of the criteria but can work towards these to improve their assessed rating. Assessment criteria includes providing elite staff specialising in nutrition, coaching, psychology, and sports science; offering full-time education to players over 11 years old; will target players nationally from under-14 level; provides a higher number of coaching hours per week; has a league organized games programme.

Additionally, academies at category 1-3 must provide all three phases of the 'Performance Pathway': foundation, youth development, and professional development phases. During the foundation phase (under-9s to under-11s) the emphasis of coaching is on developing technique and encouraging players to be creative in their play. At youth development phase level (under-12s to under-16s) still builds on the technical and tactical ability but also focuses on physical and psychological/psychosocial aspects of play. As players' progress through to the professional development phase (under-17s to under-21s) they will experience the professionalised environment including individually tailored rehabilitation, strength and conditioning, and education programmes alongside the opportunity to play and train alongside senior professionals. If a club is affiliated to the Premier League, especially if they have been a member for a number of years, then their academy will likely have the resources to have achieved category 1 status, and such academies will be able to acquire players from across the country. Academies operating at clubs from lower leagues will most likely be sourcing players only locally and therefore the experience will be different for those players, with less implication of long-distance travel and potential relocation. Even so, the necessity to complete several training sessions per week, alongside playing matches home and away will clearly have an impact on both the players and their families and sacrifices in other areas are required to sustain the elite academy journey.

Although there are guidelines and criteria put in place by the sport's governing bodies, these can be implemented differently depending on the club. Often, the individual club culture can affect how these guidelines are used and therefore the environment that the players' experience. In Norway, Gangso et al (2021) explored how talent development environments differed, comparing the top five and bottom five ranked football academies. They found that the perceptions of the players aligned with the classification allocated by the national governing body, in that the players from the top five ranked academies indeed perceived their environments to be superior and those players from the bottom five ranked academies described their environments as below par.

Bio-Banding and Maturity-Matched Practice

Over the past decade there has been a growing body of literature around the concept of 'bio-banding' and the effects that this has on elite academy footballers. Research has explored the process of bio-banding and its impacts on players' development both from a sports science standpoint (Mendez-Villanueva et al 2011; Johnson et al 2017; Cumming et al 2018; Abbott et al 2019; Johnson et al 2020; Kelly et al 2021); also exploring the sociological and

psychological effects that grouping players in this way may have (Cumming et al. 2017a; Reeves et al. 2018; Bradley et al. 2019). It has been suggested that further research should explore the potential benefits and risks of bio-banding to develop a better understanding of how to support players and ensure a positive contribution to their development (Malina et al 2019).

Bio-banding is the process of grouping players based on biological maturation markers such as size and strength, as opposed to the traditional method of chronological age grouping, to restrict injuries that may occur and level the playing field to focus on technical ability (Cumming et al. 2017b). Bio-banding also allows practitioners to consider the large differences in both physical and psychosocial development that occurs amongst adolescent athletes.

Sports science has explored the practice of bio-banding in relation to variance in anthropometric, physical fitness and functional movement characteristics (MacMaster et al 2021); player passing networks and implications of pitch size using a repeated measures design (Towlson et al 2021); its effect on physiological and technical-tactical key performance indicators using statistical analysis (Ludin et al 2021); and investigating body composition as an aspect of performance (Segueida-Lorca et al 2022). This illustrates the breadth of knowledge that continues to be gathered around the effect bio-banding has on the performance levels of the young footballers developing within the elite academy environment.

Bio-banding in its definition can be open to interpretation, and a common form of grouping in this way is known as 'playing up' (Malina 2019); whereby a young athlete is coached as part of an older peer group in order to provide a greater physical and technical challenge to enable their development. This process exposes the young player to higher levels of training and game intensity than they would normally be used to whilst playing in their chronological age group and is therefore designed to increase skill level through increased competition.

Whilst 'playing-up' is designed to provide a challenge to those players who are developing at a faster rate than their peers (Kelly et al 2021), at the opposite end of the spectrum any players who are perhaps developing at a slower rate may be encouraged to 'play-down'. This generally highlights those players that coaches believe to have the technical level to compete but who are 'late developers' physically, so may benefit from being able to compete in an environment where the playing-field in physicality terms is more level.

Due to the nature of elite sport performance, research around bio-banding to date has been largely quantitative and scientific in nature. Although there have been a number of studies conducted into UK elite football academies from a qualitative perspective, these have not used in-depth methodology to explore players' experiences. Further use of qualitative methodology is required to explore athletes' experiences and perceptions (Kelly et al 2021). Only one previous study has been found to explore perceptions and experiences of maturation-based grouping in academy footballers using in-depth qualitative methodology (Goldman et al 2021), conducted in Canada. This shows the research gap that exists in using this methodology tool to discover the phenomena that exist within elite football academies in the UK and highlights the importance of this study in providing a platform for in-depth understanding of this environment.

Identity Construction in Sport

Identity can be described as an amalgamation of both what is uniquely my own - 'who am I?' and my relationship with a broader collective or social group - 'how do others see me?' (Buckingham 2008). Adolescence has been highlighted as a critical period for identity creation (Marcia 1966, Erikson 1968) and that the formation of identity 'occurs within a context of relationships and roles' (Lavoie 1994). Marcia (1966) proposed an identity status model identifying four separate identity statuses that occur during adolescent experiences and are dependent on the level of commitment and exploration of the individual. Identity diffusion applies where an individual has yet to commit to an area of development and may have not yet explored such options; foreclosure describes an individual who has committed to an area of development without further exploration; moratorium applies to an individual in a state of exploration without clear commitment to a specific area; identity achievement being attributed to an individual who has committed to an identity following a period of exploration.

Historically, problematic experiences have been attached to an individuals' psychological development and not the culture surrounding them; however (Crossley 2000). Athlete experience is not only derived from an individual's own psychological processes but is shaped through interaction with sociocultural factors that exist within elite sport (Carless and Douglas 2013). Therefore, it is important to not only explore the personal narratives of the individual but also how this is exists within broader cultural narratives, to develop

understanding of narrative through the individuals' experiences and interactions with the environment around them.

Athletic Identity

It has been suggested that further qualitative research into the lived experiences of former elite academy footballers is required to develop an understanding of the effects that the unique academy environment has on athletic identity, particularly the role of exclusivity and social identity (Mitchell et al 2014). Allowing an individual to explore multiple avenues for identity development has been encouraged (citation), and this has been explored further within sport through the study of Dual Career (DC) pathways, which combine a career in elite sport with an additional focus on either education or work (European Comission 2012). DC's were introduced to ensure that youth athletes are given opportunities to develop themselves holistically to increase employability in other areas should they choose to, and have been shown to not only benefit sporting performance but broaden athletes' identity development and improve overall wellbeing (Stambulova and Wylleman 2019). DC research coincides with the introduction by The Premier League of the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012 as a long-term strategic framework for implementing a high standard of professional coaching and development practice throughout the elite UK football academy system using a player-led approach. This highlights a willingness by one of the sports' governing bodies to advance player development across the Premier League. However, although the plan provides a strategy for, and delivers an outstanding educational programme across the academy system with a holistic approach to development, the main aim of the EPPP is to 'develop more and better homegrown players' (The Premier League 2019). Although a cross-sectional approach has been used previously to investigate levels of athletic identity at elite level UK football (Mitchell et al 2014), the objective of the proposed study is to use narrative inquiry to explore the socio-cultural narratives that contribute to the lived experiences of a former elite UK academy footballer.

Bodies, Identities, and Narratives

Narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly 2000, p.20) has been defined as 'a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time… reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that made up people's lives, both

individual and social'. In this way, the researcher can explore the storytelling of the participants and how they shape their understanding of the experiences within the elite academy environment, how they experienced bio-banding and how this relates to the wider social context. Delving into the narrative histories of participants can improve empathetic understanding of participants experiences (Eisner 1997). Therefore, exploring the subjective stories of how athletes experience their bodies in the context of bio-banding environments within elite football academies has the potential for participants to address ideas around how they view who they were, who they are now, and who they see themselves as being in the future (Sparkes 1999).

Not only does narrative inquiry allow the exploration of bodies, but narrative also allows us to build our sense of identity and self (Eakin 2019). Human stories and experiences are often told in relation to time, and Phoenix et al (2007) found that young athletes' views on being an ageing sporting body were influenced by negative stereotypes and ideologies. This significantly shows that young athletes' ideas can be influenced towards a narrative of decline, potentially damaging to their psychological and social expectations as they transition through life (Smith and Sparkes 2009). Therefore, narrative inquiry as a methodology can capture the key concepts around bodies, identity, and transitions as the participants explore their experiences of bio-banding over time. Bio-banding can be viewed as an intervention that will have a potentially disruptive effect on the normative transition periods of young athletes (Wylleman et al 2004; Wylleman et al 2013), changing the chronological narrative of some players and not others, highlighting changes in the athletes bodies, and intervening during a vital period for identity formation (Brown and Potrac 2009; Mitchell et al 2014).

Narrative methodology, according to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), is as much about how a story is being told as it is about the content. Therefore, as participants' stories are culturally situated within the environment where they took place, this can reveal as much about the social backdrop and culture as it can about the individual. With a need to explore not just what phenomena occurs within the specific environment of bio-banding in elite academies, but also how and why, narrative inquiry provides unique access to this world through engaging with both the experiences of individuals but also the constructed meanings around the social environment. Although still relatively underused in the field of sport and exercise research, it has been suggested that narrative inquiry can improve our understanding of diverse areas such as sport psychology (Tamminen and Bennett 2017), sport management (Stride et al 2017), and sport tourism (Smith and Weed 2007).

Retirement From Elite Sport

Research into the psychosocial effects on elite level athletes, particularly those engaged in team sports, has highlighted key factors that can be detrimental to some individuals upon deselection (Agnew and Pill 2021). Although based on interviews with Team Managers in Australian State-league Football, Agnew and Pill (2021) found that players in this setting share common feelings and behaviours upon de-selection from elite clubs with those in the English football system. Particularly important within the athlete management aspect was the notion of 'caring' as described in Noddings 'ethics of care' (1984), whereby caring is made up of 3 distinct areas: affective engagement (empathy); mental imperative (intention); engrossment (mental attentiveness). Caring in this context was deemed to be influenced by the intention of the carer, and the findings pointed to clear differences between the elite and semi-professional settings.

Comparing the Australian Football model to that of the English game should include the awareness that some sociological and cultural differences may be present, however the athlete experiences and those of the staff tasked with caring for the athletes should be acknowledged. Athletes that were discussed in the study (Agnew and Pill 2021) were de-selected from the elite professional setting, equivalent to a top-level professional football club in England, and had chosen to continue their athletic career at a semi-professional level equivalent to a non-league club in the English football tier system. Team Managers in this context are described as fulfilling operational responsibilities such as 'recruitment strategy, media management, player organisation, coach and player contracts, inter-club communications and community programmes (Hughes et al 2010) duties comparable with that of a Director of Football in the English system. This is not to be confused with the role of the Head Coach where the focus would be on team performance goals, and although a common role within the Australian Football State leagues there may not always be the resources available for such a position within all semi-professional clubs in England.

According to Agnew and Pill (2021), due to the semi-professional status of the state league in Australian Football the resources available are substantially less than those of the elite level clubs in the AFL (Australian Football League), and this includes funds that can be directed towards player welfare. However, the findings of the study reveal that elite level clubs are likely to show a caring attitude towards their athletes for as long as they are under

contract but once the athletes' contract expires or is terminated, aftercare and support is uncommon. This is in contrast with the ethos displayed by semi-professional State League clubs whose Team Managers seek to provide athletes with care and support even outside the remit of their job role and responsibilities, providing a higher level of care although less resources are available to them. Agnew and Pill (2021) attribute this to the creation of a caring environment within State-based clubs that does not seem to be present within the commercially oriented environments of Elite-level AFL clubs. There are currently no equivalent studies that have explored this phenomenon in the context of elite and semi-professional football clubs in England, therefore further exploration of these themes within elite football clubs and academies in the UK could prove valuable.

Research on football academies specifically and the development of young players' development and wellbeing is growing (Adams and Carr 2017; Whatman et al 2018; Goldman et al. 2021). Importantly, young adolescence is a key period where identity is being formed and football academy players are at risk of over investing in a footballing identity (Mitchell et al 2012). This said, football academies are environments where athletes will experience transitional periods (e.g. change of coach, moving through age groups, period of injury) (Stambulova 2003; Larsen et al 2014). The practice of bio-banding arguably disrupts traditional transition through the academy from chronological age-groups to groups based on biological maturation markers. In essence the body is categorized and so experienced in new ways. Taking the view that identities are socially constructed and grounded in bodily experiences and interactions over time (Sparkes, 1999) bio-banding will impact the experiences, body-self relationships, and associated identities of young footballers at a pivotal time in their lives as they are categorized as early or late-maturers. To date we know very little about the experience and long-term impact of being 'bio-banded' on academy footballers. Further, Morris et al (2015) suggests further research is required to understand transitions in youth football and this research focuses on bio-banding as disrupting traditional transitions in football. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the scientific applications of bio-banding through a qualitative lens, exploring the lived experiences of elite academy footballers.

Methods

Theoretical Approach

A narrative inquiry approach (Smith and Sparkes 2009) was chosen as the methodological basis for the research, as well as providing a large part of the theoretical framework to meet the objectives of the research. It is important to acknowledge that in the context of this study, the term 'theoretical framework' has been attributed to both the theoretical underpinning uncovered in the literature review and the theoretical understanding that runs throughout the methodology. There is an intrinsic link between the theory of narrative that supports the rationale of the study, exploring the lived experience of the elite football academy environment, and the theory of narrative inquiry which provides the basis for the research methodology.

This approach was used so that the stories and lived experience of the participants could be explored thoroughly and in the context of their journey over time through the academy system. As the stories are told, the individual participant could then be placed into the context of the surrounding environment including the social, cultural, and institutional factors that exist (Clandinin and Rosiek 2007). This is important when exploring and analysing the narratives that are embodied by the participant but also those that prevail in the unique context of the surrounding elite UK football academy environment. Narrative methodology, according to Coffey and Atkinson (1996), is as much about how a story is being told as it is about the content. Therefore, as the participants' stories are culturally situated within the environment where they took place, this can reveal as much about the social backdrop and culture as it can about the individual. With a need to explore not just what phenomena occurs within the specific environment of bio-banding in elite academies but also how and why, narrative inquiry provides unique access to this world through engaging with both the experiences of individuals but also the constructed meanings around the social environment. Smith and Sparkes (2008) propose that narrative inquiry, although previously underutilized within sport and exercise psychology, offers a credible alternative to post-positivist and neo-realist methodologies.

An interpretivist philosophy was adopted in relation to the research project, which aligns with the qualitative epistemological and ontological background of narrative inquiry (Sparkes and Smith 2014). As discussed in the literature review, this provides both a flexible and reflexive approach to exploring the lived experiences of participants, being guided by the assumption that there is no social reality; 'realities are multiple, created, and mind-dependent' (Smith and Sparkes 2009, p.3). An acknowledgement of cultural praxis, the idea that cultural identities are fluid and socially constructed within social interaction and discourse (Stambulova and Ryba 2013). This allowed a deeper and clearer understanding of the social and cultural issues that exist within the lived experiences of marginalized groups, of which elite UK football academy players can be classed as due to the limited knowledge that exists to date.

For the context of the research, it was also important to consider the cultural identity of the researcher, and how this has an impact on the data collection and analysis process. This can also be a factor in relation to the researcher/participant relationship, any power imbalances that may occur therein, and differing values and beliefs.

In relation to this particular field of enquiry, as the researcher it was important for me to acknowledge my position and background to demonstrate reflexivity. Football was an integral part of my life since childhood, both playing and watching the sport as a fan, although not reaching any level of professionalism in the game. During my time studying at university, I took the opportunity to volunteer within an elite football academy analysis department, and from this viewpoint I was able to observe the environment from within and be immersed in its practice. This led to my decision to focus my undergraduate dissertation on the elite academy environment, and this then followed on to influencing my proposal for the current research project. Beyond my football background, consideration was also given to my identity as a white British male of a relatable age to the participant, and from a similar geographic location, characteristics that should be acknowledged as beneficial in terms of gaining access and building rapport. These characteristics were important both before the interviews began and maintaining a connection throughout, reacting to the content and context of the storytelling through familiarity with the topics, and responding instinctively to cues that I may not otherwise been as well-placed to do had these characteristics and background been different. It is important to acknowledge then that any experience of the elite environment that I have gained is from that of an intern and researcher, not in any playing or professional capacity.

Sampling

A criterion-based sampling strategy (Sparkes and Smith 2014) was chosen due to the specific nature of the research aims and objectives, initially targeting the elite academies directly through contacts previously made by the researcher. Criteria targeted former elite UK academy players who had experienced bio-banding during their time within the academy system, experiencing a minimum of 3 seasons, preferably progressing to senior youth squads.

This proved successful in the early stages of contact and discussion however, communication became difficult, and no participants were forthcoming. Although there was an early interest in the research from the gatekeepers within the academy, the reality of providing solutions to participant sampling proved to be a barrier to progress and eventually communication was lost. This was a setback for the researcher as the process took several months, and so alternative solutions were required so that the project could progress.

Although the strategy to target elite academies directly proved unsuccessful, secondary strategies were used to reach out to as many potential participants matching the sampling criteria as possible. These included using contacts put forward by the primary academic supervisor for this project, which resulted in the recruitment of one participant. A snowball sampling strategy was attempted using the careers-oriented social media platform LinkedIn, as a way of promoting the study to professionals in the elite football academy community. A post was published with participant criteria and description of the study, with contacts asked to suggest anyone that they thought may be suitable. Although this technique was not initially successful, a second post was published with the addition of a sampling survey created through Jisc Online Survey, to outline the participant criteria and the research topic. Potential participants were made aware of the themes of the study and could confirm their eligibility through the survey, and this was distributed by the researcher and by a contact holding a senior position in an elite academy to add gravitas to the study. It was important to explain the background and theory with regards to bio-banding, as there is the potential that players who have been through the academy system may have had experience of bio-banding but not have realized this at the time or afterwards. This is because the bio-banded or maturity matched elements of training or games are implemented by coaches and sports science staff within academies and the explanation of why such practices are being implemented may not always be relayed to the players at every academy or known by the term 'bio-banding'. After almost twelve months of implementing recruitment strategies, it was decided that the methodology would be changed to a single participant case study, due to lack of participants. With this change of methodology, the focus of the study would now be

on gaining a greater depth of data on a single participant so that the stories and narratives within could be explored and analysed to meet the research aims and objectives. As the participant matched all aspects of the sampling criteria it was deemed an acceptable alternative to progress with the study. Our participant was then contacted via email provided through the online survey and invited to take part in the study.

Although the research methodology was adapted to explore the lived experience of a single participant, the purpose of the study remained to provide an in-depth examination of the phenomena of bio-banding within the elite UK football academy environment. Using a single participant still offers usefulness and generalizability, reached through the connection of the reader to the lived experience being showcased. In this way, the stories being told provoke 'naturalistic generalizability' through the recognition of similarities or differences between the stories being told and the readers own lived experience (Smith 2018).

Participant

Due to the difficulties in recruiting participants who met the selection criteria and were willing to take part, the study focussed on a single participant in the form of a case study. To protect the anonymity of the participant a pseudonym was devised, so for the purposes of telling his story the participant is known as 'Adam' and the club where he was a player and is now a coach is known as 'United FC'. Adam is 29 years old and currently works as a member of the coaching staff at United FC, having formerly progressed through the youth team from 12-18 years old. Following his release, he gained a university degree and has completed a UEFA B licence amongst other significant coaching qualifications, returning to United FC on a full-time basis four years later; he is now an established member of the coaching team.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted online via Zoom as this was deemed the platform of choice by both researcher and participant, both for accessibility and so that they could feel comfortable and relaxed as possible. A short introduction was included to build rapport between participant and researcher. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participant online and were recorded so that they could be transcribed later by the researcher, with the duration of the first interview approximately 80 minutes and the second approximately 60 minutes. Interviews were recorded digitally and transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Using the philosophy and assumptions of narrative inquiry previously outlined in the literature review, thematic narrative analysis was utilised to reveal detail around 'socio-cultural fabric of lives, subjectivity, feelings, agency, and the multi-layered nature of human experience over time and in different sets of circumstances' (Sparkes and Smith 2014, page 131). Structural analysis was used alongside this to explore how the stories of the participants' experiences are put together and the kind of narratives that construct them (Sparkes and Smith 2014, page 133).

Transcribed data was re-read so that the researcher could fully immerse themselves, data was then annotated with observations and to determine any recurring themes and connections with the literature. Throughout the analysis of the data, six separate themes were discovered to be prevalent across the narrative structure:

1. Early character development and football memories
2. Transition into the elite academy
3. Bio-banding experiences
4. Experiences of elite academy culture
5. Transition out of the elite academy
6. Self-reflection on footballing journey

These themes were then grouped into pairs (i.e., 1 and 2, 3 and 4, 5 and 6) and plotted on a narrative timeline to determine the most coherent order in which the researcher would tell the participants' story.

Ethics

Risk assessments were carried out and recorded prior to the interview process and shared with supervisors. All potential participants received information packs prior to data collection and any issues around sensitive topics and information were discussed with full transparency between all parties. Ethical approval was granted by Bournemouth University prior to any data collection taking place.

Due to the potentially sensitive nature of the topics involved with this study, confidentiality and anonymity is provided to the participant and club involved through the use of pseudonyms and creative non-fictions, removing any identifying descriptors. The lead

researcher considered how their positioning may affect the data collection and analysis process. A rapport and level of trust with the club and participant was built throughout. Importance was placed on protecting both the researcher and participant by discussing any sensitive topics that arise with the supervisory team, to ensure that these are handled in the correct manner. Due to the nature of ethics being contextual it was important that the lead researcher practiced 'virtue ethics' (Sparkes and Smith 2014, page 209) using their moral values and skills to negotiate any ethical issues reflexively.

Findings

Becoming the 'Footballer in the Family'

Adam's connection with both football and in particular United FC grew from childhood trips with his father and grandfather to watch the team play, at the home stadium. This in turn led to Adam becoming a fan of United FC and developing a passion for playing the game, inspired by watching his favorite players on a matchday:

> *'yeah they used to have season tickets, so we used to go every weekend'*

> *'my dad supported them… so that was probably quite a big influence… but that's probably where it started, I was probably about eight or nine sort of age really… and then I kind of went from there, got into the academy at twelve or thirteen sort of age and away we went'*

Adam grew up close to playing fields which allowed him to play football regularly with friends and family members, and this then led to Adam joining a local team:

> *'we went over the field one night and there was a team training which was my age, and then I just started training with them… and basically it transpired that the next year the coach didn't want to do it anymore, and my dad volunteered or helped out.'*

Adam discussed how the dynamic changed after his dad became the coach:

> *'I had about maybe half a year to a year with that first coach… and I guess that was quite social because I didn't really know any of the kids and that sort of stuff. After that it probably got a bit more serious because my dad was in charge if that makes sense. You're not representing your dad, but your dad wants you to do something so you've gotta try and be the role model in the team, informally or formally.'*

> *'Dad was the manager, I was one of the better players in the team, but also the captain who played centre-back. So I think there's a few natural by-products of what's going on there, but I think as a result, it probably was a little more serious for me than maybe others…'*

These reflections show how at the age of nine, participation in football had already changed from being a purely social activity that was played primarily for enjoyment. Adam was now taking football more seriously and there was a degree of pressure attached to his participation, with new motivating factors emerging:

> *'Yeah, I've never really thought about it before, but it's a natural consequence if your dad's taking the team then you've probably gotta be… a bit more responsible, a bit more ''role-modely'', that sort of thing…'*

Adam's formative years in football starting off at grassroots level point to where his motivation to compete as a footballer may have developed from an early age, the desire to perform well for his father and showing leadership qualities as captain of the team. Other factors may also have played a role in Adam's ongoing development and relationship with football as he discusses:

> *'… so lots of determination. Lots of… I guess old-school football in British culture, sort of, so worked hard, be brave, those sort of things. I'd do the hard stuff basically. Then when I was… so I'd say that I was an early developer as well… especially around eleven and twelve I was probably slightly bigger than the boys, a bit stronger. So then it becomes a bit… not easier, but you can do it a bit easier than the rest of the lads can so…'*

Being competitive, hard-working, and brave were key aspects of Adam's identity as a young footballer, and he also recognized his status as an early physical development compared to his peers compromising another aspect of his sense of self. Adam's physical attributes allowed him to compete on the football field as he explained:

> *'I was aware I was quicker and probably stronger… yeah, I'd probably back myself against most people if that makes sense just because, yeah being a bit more developed I guess.'*

> *'I'd say that I would've been one of the more competitive people yeah, which is weird because I wouldn't say that so much now… I am really competitive but I guess I can dial it down loads now… whereas when I was younger I would be all in, like ''well this is going to make or break my weekend if we don't do well here''. So yeah, I was probably over-competitive when I was younger…'*

As topics targeted by the research aims and objectives, physical maturity and development are discussed here for the first time in the study and were key themes that surfaced throughout the analysis process. It is important to acknowledge this point in the narrative of Adam's experiences as an early awareness of his physical capability, as these themes will be explored further throughout his academy journey as the idea of 'playing-up or down' based on physical development is introduced formally.

It was at this time aged around nine years old that Adam was first invited for a trial to take the step from grassroots football to the United FC academy:

'…it would have been like a pre-Academy or a Talent Centre sort of thing where you essentially try to get in at the United FC Academy, I used to go down there… I remember the sports hall that we were in, and I remember the journey, I don't remember too much about what we did in football… and then ,yeah I didn't get in which is… I can still see the letter actually, it's a little bit weird but I can still picture that letter and it said no, which is fine.'

Details of this time such as being able to visualize the letter seem to have remained with Adam, suggesting that it must have been an impactful and memorable experience in his formative years. Receiving a letter of rejection from United FC at a young age would have understandably been a difficult moment, and describing his feelings towards it as 'fine' may be a way of downplaying his disappointment at the time:

'I remember being disappointed yeah definitely… I do remember being disappointed because I thought I'd done alright but… I think I thought I'd done alright I don't know. But the hardest thing for me is when I did join I knew the other boys had been in for three or four years, so I always felt like I was playing catch-up. Probably knocked a bit of belief in some ways because you're always second-guessing yourself but… I'd compete because I knew I had to compete because I knew I wasn't as good as them technically or tactically, because I just haven't had the experience. Yeah, so I always felt I was kind of playing catch-up really.'

This builds on reflections that Adam had previously made in his first interview around the transition phase into the academy:

' I was on trial for a fair amount of time, or it felt like a long time, maybe six weeks? I was pretty aware that I wasn't as technically… or didn't understand the game as well as the other people in the group. So I knew that I was pretty behind a number of people in that group and especially with that sort of age group the under-twelves, most of them had been together for a long time… so I was coming in fairly fresh and I probably spent a while trying to get used to what they'd been learning for four years.'

Although the feelings of disappointment and rejection were clearly felt initially, Adam also describes a more long-term effect which followed him even after being accepted into the academy at twelve years old. This moment has seemingly had an impact on Adam's self-belief and confidence when he compares himself to his peers that had been enrolled at a younger age, effectively seeing himself as behind them with regards to footballing development and therefore needing to 'play catch-up'. Although still being able to compete physically, the feelings of inferiority in terms of technical and tactical ability seem to signal the emergence of a 'catching-up' narrative in Adam's story as a young footballer which

contrasts with the prevailing 'performance narrative' normally associated with elite sport and academies. Adam had previously displayed some elements of a 'performance narrative' during his grassroots experiences where competitiveness and winning acted as his motivation, and so the transitional nature of this period in Adam's journey could be viewed as disruptive to his narrative, from the elation of being accepted into the academy to the realization that he may be some way behind his peers.

Having had such a setback at an early age, Adam recovered and at the age of twelve was enrolled into the academy of United FC which was a moment of achievement felt by both him and his family:

> '… I remember that mum and dad came to the game and they were both really emotional because you know… they were just really proud of me really, of where I was… and then I just felt really cool, that was cool I guess for me yeah very cool, I'm enjoying this… you know you've got to work hard and take it really seriously because you want it to be a thing don't you so… crazy.'

This moment clearly meant a great deal to Adam, to achieve his dream of becoming a United FC academy player and to make his parents proud. Now that the dream has become more tangible this has given Adam a powerful incentive to work hard and make the most of an opportunity that had earlier passed him by. This moment also introduced the idea that Adam would begin to embody the identity of an elite academy footballer as he explains:

> 'Yeah you feel different anyway because… your identity changes, ''this is the kid who plays football'', and also yeah your world is so different…'

> '… I think about my parents as well, they'd be like oh yeah my son plays for United FC… not just go around bragging but like, you know in conversations… he's the footballer in the family, all that sort of stuff… whereas your identity personally is more, well that is what I do, that is what I'm known for but maybe there's more to me than just football!'

> '… and that was just like, your thing… and then because no one else is doing it you are different aren't you, because it's a different world. But even like when you go out about fourteen or fifteen, your mates are going out on a whatever day, Saturday night or you know maybe start drinking at parties all that sort of stuff. I just can't do that, it's just… I've got a game Sunday… even if I wanted to I can't do it so… yeah you do feel, I wouldn't say isolated but you do feel either in the bubble or outside of their bubble I'm not sure.'

Adam recalls here how as a twelve-year-old boy, his narrative is rapidly changing as he enters this new world of elite sport. Interestingly, although Adam enjoyed the accolades of embodying the identity of 'footballer in the family', he still attempts to separate this from his own personal identity; that there is more to him than just the 'footballer' role through which others define him. Expectations placed on him are now starkly different in comparison to both his grassroots football experience and with his peers whose lives take place outside of the elite football academy 'bubble'. This is highlighted further as Adam describes his intense schedule:

> *'… they go home to whatever they're doing, playing the X-Box. You're going home… I had to walk home, make my own dinner, I get picked up, I'd go to train and I'll come back whatever time nine or ten at night then try and get a shower, get some sleep and then back up again walking in to school or getting a lift to school… and then you're absolutely knackered the next day because you've just done basically six hours' worth of travelling and training, and prep stuff three times a week or twice a week… and this is at the age of thirteen or fourteen, when you think about it there's quite a lot going on there…'*

> *'But then also when you went to school it was like, probably an appreciation that they don't really get what you're doing as well. You know, we're training maybe once a week Saturday morning grassroots and playing Sunday… gone from that to training two or three nights a week and then a game away at Arsenal… so yeah I'd say it's quite a big transition, quite a jump from grassroots to a professionalized environment…'*

Adam talks here about the significant changes that joining an elite academy had on the structure of his life at that age, describing the 'professionalised environment' that he has now found himself in. This new environment not only contrasts significantly with that of his peers but could be compared in similar terms to that of an adult athlete in a professional role, given the time commitments and the potential stressors and responsibilities placed on Adam. Having previously highlighted a 'catching-up narrative' and the pressures that this may be putting on Adam, his environment is also indicating a 'performance narrative' may be occurring simultaneously, further reinforcing his identity as an 'academy footballer'.

Adopting a 'performance narrative' in such a professionalized environment can be seen as important for young players who aspire to succeed, and it may have been very difficult for Adam to exist within such a culture without constructing a narrative that drives the adoption of this mindset:

'…when we'd go into the academy it's like, well, I don't wanna lose clearly, that's why you're very competitive. But if we lose and I've had a really good game then I'm not overly worried as much because that's what I'm there for, to do well. So if I do well but the team haven't played great, I'm not going to take it as hard as if we won and I've played rubbish.'

'… it's all about my own development within the team, and I guess the focus has naturally changed as a result. But then yeah, when you're going to a more professional environment it's more about you and the individualized approach.'

Whereas at grassroots level Adam was focused on the team doing well, now on joining the academy his concentration has moved to his own development and individual success. This shows a nuanced side to his 'performance narrative' that is very much based on individualism, focusing on his personal performance and self-belief; what he can control and improve. In addition, the potential reward of becoming a professional footballer and embodying the dream of every young player was a strong motivating factor for Adam, particularly now finally being given the opportunity to represent the team that he had grown up supporting.

Prior to joining the elite academy environment Adam had already shown awareness of how he was developing physically at an earlier age than most of his peers, and even referring to himself as an 'early developer':

> *'I'd say that I was an early developer… well especially eleven or twelve, I was probably slightly bigger than the boys, a bit stronger. So then it becomes a bit… not easier, but you can do it a bit easier than the rest of the lads can so…'*

It was important to understand this aspect of his identity as the lens through which any bio-banding practice was being viewed. During the second interview with Adam, he again touched on his physical development this time in relation to his transition to the elite academy:

> *'I think the reason that I got in was because I was fairly early maturing when I was twelve. So physically I was quick, strong, tall, struck the ball well, needed to work on my technique but I think they took a punt on me getting there… and then also that supports the team, in a weird way because if you've got a few big players in your team then the smaller ones can get on the ball and you can keep the ball a bit better, so maybe it was a bit of a balancing act for me getting in a bit later…'*

Looking back on his experience of being brought into the academy environment from the perspective of now being a coach, Adam seems to be questioning the reasons for his integration into the academy at the age of twelve. This level of reflection on the topic was not seen during the first interview, but having some time to reflect on this period in his development may have provoked Adam to use a more critical view on his relatively late inclusion in relation to his peers:

> *'the boys that would have gotten there at a fairly young age would've had all of those experiences before really, which is interesting'.*

Although at the time when Adam was with the academy the area of bio-banding was still in its infancy, he could still observe the practice of players 'playing up or down' depending on their physical attributes, through both his own personal experiences and those of his teammates who were developing physically at different rates:

> *'you were coached in your age groups and stay in your age groups… the only time you moved up was if you were doing well or they needed a player… and again, that wasn't really communicated particularly well. So I played up, sporadically I guess, every year'.*

Adam reflected on his own experiences of 'playing up':

> '… apart from maybe being a bit bigger or maybe a bit quicker, being able to handle it… I think looking back, I don't even know if it's because I was good or just because I was big? You assume when you're younger that it's because you're good…'

> '… but there wasn't 'oh you're going to spend a period of time here because you're actually growing more than your age at the moment', that wasn't ever communicated, whereas we do that now quite frequently…'

This shows an important point of reflection on Adam's experience of growth-related practice, highlighting the importance of communication between coaches or sports science departments and the players. Without explanation of the rationale behind using such practice, the players can try to make sense of it themselves. If the connotation of 'playing up' is that a player is doing well as Adam described, then moving a player down for the benefit of their development could be interpreted as negative. Adam recalled how a teammate being 'played down' was viewed at that time by himself and the rest of the group:

> '… there was a few that were early developers and did well… we did have some late developers… we had a player in our age group at under fourteen's and he was struggling but was struggling to compete, so he played with the thirteens's for most of the year. I think the perception at the time is that he was not doing very well, from the players' point of view I guess, or he's struggling to compete. But then when he was sixteen or nearly seventeen he just seemed to get real quick and really strong… yeah, he just kicked on because technically he was always pretty good.'

So, although the practice was being used to aid the development of Adam's teammate, the rest of the group saw this as negative and that the player was falling behind. Similarly, to the experience of Adam who gained a positive sense of self and feelings of confidence from being 'played up', a player who is struggling to compete physically could feel negatively towards themselves if the reasoning behind the decision is not communicated effectively, even though their technical and tactical ability within the group is high. Adam was asked about the level of understanding amongst not only coaching staff, but players and parents within the groups that he coaches today, and whether this differs from when he was an academy player:

> 'Yeah, I think so. I think it's getting there. I still think if you play up, people think you're better… so I think yeah, it probably does still exist to some degree… I don't think you're ever going to get rid of all of those biases, but I think as a coaching staff now… there is probably more expectation though that if you are playing down then

you need to do better… so if you've got thirteens's playing down you think ''come on, you've got a year on these boys''… maybe not physically, but you've got a whole training year…'

'…likewise when they play up, you think we'll see how they get on… for example, we've got an under twelve that's playing in the fourteens's because he's six foot now… so physically he might be alright, but he's still got lots to learn cos he's still twelve… so there's probably less expectation that he's going to do well there…'

'… but from a parents point of view, and especially when they start comparing to each other, ''this player is playing with the fourteens's, my boy is playing with his own age group, he's fine''… no, not necessarily, we're just trying to give them a different challenge…'

This demonstrates that biases do still exist in relation to playing players outside of their chronological age groups, and this relates to coaches as well as the players and parents. Although Adam has experienced the process of being played outside of his own age group, there still seems to be an acknowledgement that coaching staff may be more lenient on those players who are chosen to play up than those that are chosen to play in an age group below their own. As Adam was an early developer this may explain how he could find it more difficult to empathise with a player who is a late developer, despite an awareness and understanding of the implications that can bring. These biases do seem to place more importance on the amount of time spent within the elite academy, having an extra year of experience and opportunity to learn, above any potential physical limitations that a late developer may have. Communicating the reasoning behind bio-banded practice with parents could also be key, as Adam mentions that comparisons are made between players' who are seen to be playing up and 'doing well' and those that are not, when this may be simply down to their individual physical needs. If parents do not understand the reasoning behind such decisions, then this could lead to players being misinformed about their progress and development within the academy, and mixed messaging should this contradict the information that the coaches are giving them.

Although Adam generally perceived his identity as an 'early developer' to be positive, there were changes developing as he reached the later stages of the academy and started to suffer from injury setbacks. Reflecting on the injury setbacks effecting his ability to compete, Adam also spoke about other players' catching up in their physical development:

'…I think it probably became a bit more difficult when I was getting injuries and whatnot because I was like ''well that really does impact my ability to do those things

because I can't compete as much as some other people''. But yeah in terms of being caught up and that sort of stuff, that's probably a lack of awareness really…'

'…I knew I was big and strong at the time, I knew I'd been playing up a few years, fairly regularly probably because of that, looking back on it. I dunno maybe sixteen or seventeen I started to realise other boys were getting a bit quicker. But yeah not, I don't think it was massively consciously…'

Adam displayed a strong work ethic and was fiercely competitive throughout his time at the academy, fully focused on how he could improve himself and his performance day to day. As he talks about having a lack of awareness that his competitive advantage may be being eroded as other players around him catch up physically, the focus is more on the effect of sustaining injury. As an individual player in the academy Adam had no influence on the physical development of others around him, so from a performance aspect there would be little point focusing on this. However, with the presence of increasing pressure to push his own physical limits in order to compete with the now physically faster and stronger players around him, this could lead to an increased risk of sustaining an injury.

During the last year of scholarship, Adam suffered a muscle injury that would add even further uncertainty to his environment and disrupt the flow of training and development. Suffering a muscle injury during such a crucial period was noted by the researcher as the beginning of a transitional period that would eventually see Adam become de-selected as a player at the academy. Although he had started the year positively, suffering from a muscle injury and being unable to play for a period of months was disruptive both biographically as well as physically, and had a detrimental effect on his chances of being offered a professional contract:

> *'I think I was hoping for an extension to really get fit and ready to give it a go, but that didn't happen. So, it was like I'm not sure what to do… it's a difficult balance because you want to be fully invested in getting yourself this professional contract and you think that if you don't put all your efforts into that and think about alternatives then you're not giving everything or you're doubting yourself…'*

Adam recognizes here that at the time of his injury there may have been cause to consider other options for future development other than professional football. However, within the 'performance narrative' that he is fully invested in at this stage this would be detracting from the primary focus and goal of becoming a professional footballer. Once again, the idea of self-doubt that had appeared at the onset of the 'catching-up narrative' also presents itself to reinforce the 'all or nothing' nature of the 'performance narrative' within elite football academy culture. That is to achieve success the focus must be on football training and

development, both physically and mentally, with minimal consideration of education and preparation toward a career outside of football. Although this narrative is understandable for a sportsperson who has secured professional status, given the extremely low statistics on how many academy players go on to make a living as professional players, there does seem to be a markedly low amount of consideration for such an outcome. Adam reflected on his attitudes towards this as a young player:

> *'I think when you're in the system, it's really difficult to think outside of it… you do have time to think about that but you probably don't think about it, because you're thinking about football really.'*

> *'I remember when I was sixteen and I knew I got the scholarship, college were asking what are you going to do at college?... and I thought well I'm not doing college here so that's irrelevant to me and I'm going on a different path so… then the education was more to get it done so you can get your football done…'*

> *'I think the narrative has changed, but if you ask most boys in the academy about education they'll say they need to get it done and it's good for their overall development but the focus is on football'.*

Having been in the elite academy environment for four years, Adam recalls how his feelings around attending college were very much a secondary consideration at that time in his life. This highlights the presence of themes such as 'performance narrative', his embodiment of a footballing identity, and being inside the elite academy 'bubble'. This also introduces the idea of 'identity foreclosure' where Adam only sees himself as an academy footballer and cannot consider that this identity may be different in the future.

As an early developer Adam had been playing-up for most of his time in the academy and was aware of his strengths regarding his own physical development. As discussed previously, during the last two years at the academy other players around him had started to catch up noticeably in terms of their physical development. Adam talked about his relationship with his own body at that time:

> *'So I took it quite seriously… my diet was really good… I'd basically work my socks off all the time. So I was fairly happy with my body, in a sense… I was really tired all the time though. So looking back on it, I would have given myself… just been a bit cleverer because I think I went full-tilt every day…'*

> *'… I can't really remember too much about the injury, apart from that obviously it was painful… but it was just like a muscle niggle in the groin, so it sometimes would be fine and sometimes it wouldn't be fine… and then the weirdest exercise would cause*

me pain and I'd just think I can get through it, I think because it's not really stopping me doing anything, it just hurts when I do stuff.'

'It took a while to really understand what was hurting and why I couldn't train… probably about four or five months… I still don't really know if I'm back to what would have been full-strength. I'm not sure if you're completely, you know at sixteen; seventeen; eighteen if you know enough about the ins and outs of your body in order to fully prepare it… so that was probably challenging looking back on it.'

Although Adam was conscious of the need to look after his body nutritionally and was taking his training seriously, this seems to have resulted in him potentially overtraining to meet the demands that he felt were required to succeed. This points to his embodiment of a 'performance narrative' whereby working harder and with intensity at all costs are perceived by young academy players to be key attributes in the eyes of elite academy coaches, therefore playing through pain and injury becomes a necessary aspect of their footballing identity (Sothern and O'Gorman 2021). Even though the lack of rest and sustained periods of intensity may have contributed towards Adam's injury problems, the concurrent narratives of 'performance' and 'catching-up', alongside his strong footballing identity made it particularly difficult for him to stop these behaviours. Therefore, if he had the requisite knowledge of his own body at that time to be able to make informed decisions regarding his training levels, the presence of ingrained narratives and identity driving him may still have been too strong to ignore. This points to the role of his coaches and support staff as a crucial one in terms of intervention, being able to recognize the powerful narratives at play in such a situation and take steps to save the player from themselves.

Although experiencing a sustained period of injury, Adam was still fully focused on recovery and getting back to full fitness during his final year at the academy. He discussed his rehabilitation programme and experiences of training away from the rest of his teammates:

' So essentially went into the physio every day and then you'd have a series of exercises to get on with and then depending on the schedule you might be doing running or jogging, or might be a gym programme or… fitness on a bike or low intensity stuff, which just drains you because you just want to go out and… you know, you got to do it which is absolutely fine, so you just get on and do it…'

'you might see the boys at lunchtime and they've had a worldie of a session, and you think ''I wish I could've been doing that, I've just been sat on a bike for thirty minutes sweating'', so… yeah, wasn't particularly fun, but again you appreciate that's what it is as well…'

'there were some benefits… when I was injured there were some pros that were injured and we had the same physio room, so that was quite cool, you know talking to some of them or just probably staying quiet and just listening… so not really a bonus, but a by-product of being injured… so that was quite cool.'

This illustrates how Adam was feeling during his period of rehabilitation working away from the team, which the researcher interpreted as an isolating experience for Adam. Individual sessions seem to have exacerbated feelings of anxiety, of wanting to prove his abilities as part of his 'catching up narrative', and as Adam describes himself this was a mentally draining period. However, there does seem to be an acceptance of the process and that this is part of the elite academy footballer identity that he is embodying. Furthermore, this identity is concurrently reinforced through the seemingly positive experience of going through rehabilitation alongside full-time professional players.

Leaving the Academy and What Happens Next?

Having progressed through the academy system from the age of twelve, Adam was released in 2011 at eighteen years old. He reflected on his memories of receiving the news:

> '… when I was released it was maybe four people in the room, three people in the room plus me, and it was… yeah I can't remember… it, it was maybe a twenty minute chat and that was it… and I can't even give you like a main reason, apart from there's a five year plan and unfortunately, basically you're not included in it…'

> 'But I can't remember in terms of any ''you need to get better at this or we need more of this'', I can't… like if you asked me what the main reason you got released I'd say well, it wasn't part of the plan. That's all I can remember.'

Adam's memories of the meeting were not entirely clear, and he was unable to detail any further feedback that he may have received as to why he was being released at that time. This was clearly a very disappointing moment, a shock and potentially traumatic, which could impact on his ability to recall the moment with more clarity. However, there did not appear to be adequate information effectively communicated to Adam in order for him to process his release and make sense of this moment fully. Education and preparedness for release were topics also discussed, expanding on the ideas around identity foreclosure noted previously. With the introduction of the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) in 2012 just one year after Adam's release, he reflected on the impacts this has had on the academy players of today in contrast with his own experiences:

> 'I mean the club valued it… but I think the coaches didn't value it as much, their job is to get players through and education was a by-product of that, and also the players that I was with didn't really care about it…'

> '… there's much more awareness around it and the EPPP has helped massively because it's made everything a bit more standardized, and there's targets around education; there's targets around making sure players have got pathways; player care is now more prominent than it ever has been. So there's loads of developments that have happened now.'

> ' … coaching has changed and the environments within United FC has changed loads as a result of that and just general football development. So I hope now that it wouldn't be as hard maybe, I don't know… I guess, yeah hopefully they've got more support now and a little bit easier in some ways to do that, to move on I guess.'

Through his work and experiences as a coach at United FC, Adam was well placed to talk about the role of the EPPP in the practices seen within the elite academy system today, with education and aftercare being key topics that arose during the discussions in relation to preparing players for life after football.

Having been released at the end of the season, Adam talked about his feelings at that time and how he dealt with the transition to life outside the academy 'bubble':

> *'So when I got released, I didn't really have anywhere to go. I didn't really have any plan academically, and it was like Jesus I've got maybe a month to figure out what to do. You've got no income either… and then what do you do, do you need to get work? Do you need to borrow money? It's just… it just blows your mind really.'*

> *' all of a sudden when you don't have that around you, you then think I want to be the best person I can, but then that means I've got to cook dinner, or I've got to buy my own dinner… plan to cook it. I've got to work out for an hour and a half if I want to do what I want to do. I haven't got time for this! Pay for a gym membership, and I've got to get there myself as well… it's just, yeah it blows your mind…'*

> *'… it's more of a culture shock, you get so ingrained into the way you do things there or at that particular time of your life and then… you're so far removed from that environment it's unbelievable… you know, your routines gone; your structure is gone; your support network for the last six years is gone, and then all of a sudden you've got to think by yourself…'*

Adam described the transition to no longer being part of the football academy environment as a particularly unsettling, challenging, and difficult period to process. Being released in May meant that there was not much time to either find a new club to start training with, or to find a suitable university course to enroll on, limiting his options and adding to the pressure and uncertainty that he was feeling. If Adam wanted to continue his development and train in the manner that he was used to, he would have to support this financially and carry out the necessary tasks that previously would have been provided for him; a huge task whilst also dealing with the psychological trauma of the release. Seemingly, although players within the elite academy system are at this time expected to conduct themselves professionally and mature at an accelerated rate to that of their peers, this does not necessarily translate to being able to adequately deal with their release. In Adam's case this is due in part to not being able to rely on the complex network of support that was available to him whilst training as an elite academy player. These aspects of his transition are areas which should be acknowledged as requiring additional support should the same situation arise in today's elite academy system.

Adam reflected on how he progressed in the years following his release:

> *'I went to uni in the end but I had to play catch-up, because I didn't get the qualifications that I needed to get in straight away… that was probably the drawback of the system when I was in it'.*

> *'… the other learners at university, well a lot of them had just come out of college and hadn't you know… my journey from sixteen to eighteen couldn't be any different to most people's… yeah completely different people… and I lived away from home since I was sixteen and then you've got kids, or people coming in that've never even coached or been around football, so then I was thinking I don't fit in really. Like, socializing I didn't really do a lot of…'*

> *'… it's just such a weird environment when you've been in such a professional environment, or perceived to be a professional environment, you come out of there you… I think this is probably common for most academy boys, they come in with their life skills or their social skills, all that stuff is so far advanced than most of the average kids because they just don't get exposed to that sort of stuff.'*

As Adam found himself further disconnected from the academy life that he knew, his surroundings at university were in stark contrast to the professionalized environment that had supported his 'performance narrative'. However, Adam's values and beliefs around hard work and dedication in order to maintain high standards of performance were instead translated to academia, leading to feelings of alienation from the students around him who had not necessarily grown up in an elite sporting environment. Interestingly, Adam noted that feelings of 'catching up' remained even upon leaving the academy, as he attempted to reintegrate with his peers who had followed the more standardised path through the school system. Alongside the recognition that life outside of the academy 'bubble' would take some time to adjust to, Adam also reflected on the relationships that he now had with peers and how these had changed over his time throughout his academy journey:

> *' … I wouldn't say it's hard, but one of the things that was a bit weird was once I'd finished at the academy, not that I didn't have a friendship group, but the friendship group was in a different world as well because they'd obviously gone to college together a lot of them, they're now going to uni together, whereas I've been living at the academy for two years… so then when you finish playing, your friendship groups aren't as strong or they're doing their own thing, so then you probably are a bit isolated because you don't have your academy group and you don't have your friendship group, you're living in a different area…'*

'… then you've got to in some ways reinvent what you're going to do, so that was quite challenging… interestingly, some of the best mates I'm with are probably with my primary school friends. I think because you are… because they went to a slightly different secondary school but you're still in touch with them more because you are friends with them, and then they're the ones, yeah my go-to's now. Yeah, I'd never really thought about it like that before but, yeah probably the most consistent…'

Having embodied the identity of a footballer since the age of twelve and been seen as such by his family, friends, and peers, Adam's reality now was very different. An important element that seemed to compound his feelings of isolation was the loss and lack of support from friendship groups that he may have felt that he could rely on at this time of transition. It appears that the relationships that had been formed with fellow players during his time at the academy were not lasting, perhaps due to the intensely competitive and individualistic nature of the environment. With Adam committing himself fully to the academy for such a sustained period, it appears that this may have been detrimental to any relationships that may have been formed concurrently outside of the 'bubble' with his friends from secondary school. As Adam sought to find his place back in the 'real world', the relationships that were formed prior to the development of his 'academy footballer' identity that were the most consistent, meaning that he could reconnect with his primary school friendship group for support during this time in his life. This is an interesting point of reflection, suggesting that these relationships had been solidified prior to the emergence of both his 'performance' or 'catching up' narratives, and before the embodiment of his identity as a footballer.

Adam's identity as an elite academy footballer had played a key role in his life during the six formative years he spent in that environment, and whilst discussing how his life had moved on in the subsequent time following his release, he reflected on how his identity had shaped this transition:

'… you don't take it for granted but it's a little bit, this is just life, this is the way it is… I guess it's cool, but it is just another day for me if that makes sense. But then I guess the tricky thing with the identity stuff is, when I did get released it was like, well my whole life I've been a footballer… I've been the kid who plays football, the footballer in the family, your mates think you're a footballer, and all of a sudden you're not… internally that's probably where I found it difficult, I was like what do I do now? Do I carry-on playing football or do I not carry-on playing football? If I don't carry-on playing football, what does everyone think of me? Because they put so much effort into me as well…'

' I appreciate what the family, our family have done, for training that sort of stuff… I did feel like I… not let them down but, it would have been nice to say thanks if that makes sense, because you don't feel like you've really… you've got a great experience out of it but you've not got anything tangible, which is probably the hard bit because you can't really say ''cheers, look where we've got'' sort of thing…'

This suggests that Adam's feelings around his identity on leaving the academy were strongly affected by the perceptions of those around him. Although he was experiencing identity foreclosure on a personal level, this was also seemingly reflected by friends and family to the extent that it added to the pressure that Adam felt to continue being a 'footballer'. Similarly to his joy and pride when joining the academy as a twelve year old, Adam's feelings of remorse around the intangible nature of his experience illustrate the collective aspect of his journey, particularly in relation to his parents. With no tangible reward to provide closure to the elite academy experience, this suggests that it can be very difficult to move on for a released player, particularly where the individual's identity is closely linked to the unique environment of an elite football academy, and for Adam this may in part explain his return to United FC as a coach.

Adam discussed how he felt about returning to United FC as an ex-academy player:

'I think the door was always open, so if you wanted to go back in to be around it then absolutely you're welcomed in… the academy manager at the time was really good, he tried to help me out to go to uni, and he said that if I wanted to do my coaching qualifications that they'd fund it etc, and they did in the end which was really good. But I think it's just difficult obviously, not a failure thing but… you get institutionalized, and you've stayed around the club it's difficult because you've gone from being a player, to then not being a player, to potentially being a staff member.'

'… I don't just want to be given something because I was an ex-player sort of thing, or I don't just want to be known as just the ex-player. I want to be known as a really good football coach or a really good whatever I'm going to do… and even now it's like ''yeah he's got really good experience, he was in the academy blah blah blah''… yeah, but you know, I'm not that person anymore… I've not changed, I'm the same person but I've developed you know, I'm not just a footballer anymore. Whereas I was back then, and that can be quite difficult sometimes.'

As Adam transitions into his role as an elite academy football coach, there is still a lingering connection to his previous identity as a player. Despite Adam's ability to see himself differently now, having progressed through university and coaching qualifications, his history within the club as a player is problematic when attempting to change his identity in the eyes

of others. This has been a prevalent theme throughout Adam's experiences of the academy, and even as a player he felt that there was more to him than 'just being a footballer'. It appears then that the identity of an elite academy footballer is an extremely difficult one to shake off, especially if this has become a primary characteristic of how you are defined by the world around you, even when the individual no longer embodies this identity themselves. Narratives of 'performance' and 'catching up' have appeared to structure Adam's journey both during and upon leaving the academy and rejoining the 'real world', however there is an observable narrative of 'proving yourself' that has had an overarching influence that is still present today.

Finally, Adam reflected on whether his previous experiences have influenced how he interacts with young players in his role as a coach:

> ' I think I can empathise with the players better. So, I coached the twelves this year and I was thinking that's pretty much the age I joined… and I know the world's completely different from when I was twelve but… I guess what it means to be a footballer and to want to be a footballer doesn't really change… the experience, the expectations, the challenges at school or, I guess the lifestyle around it is very similar…'

> '… it's like, when I'm talking to parents it's really helpful because I can say I know exactly what you're going through… I can imagine exactly what that's like because that's how I felt as a player, let alone how my parents felt you know.'

> '… when I'm speaking to the boys I can say… whatever happens go and smash it, go make the most of it, go and enjoy it rather than have any regrets. Because that's probably the one thing is I… maybe because I always felt like I was playing catch up, I always worked really hard because I felt I had a lot to catch up on, so I had no real regrets when I left… even if I disagree with the release, I know I personally think I've given this a fair, fair go. So when boys aren't doing that I'm thinking come on boys, I know it's difficult to appreciate time and all that sort of stuff but you need to enjoy and maximise everything you can while you can, so I think that helps.'

> ' I think understanding what it feels like when you've got… I was probably in a unique position where I felt I was always playing catch up like I've said, but there were times that boys were doing better than me and boys were getting contracts or whatever where I felt behind, and then all of a sudden I was training up again so I understand that swing a bit better.'

Adam's experiences as an academy player at United FC seem to have given him a unique perspective on the environment through which the players who Adam coaches are now experiencing themselves. His empathy towards their identity as academy players facilitates an understanding of how best to coach them in any potentially difficult situation and helps when communicating with parents. This shows how the academy experiences of a former elite academy player can help to shape how they will develop as a coach, allowing them to implement an emotional understanding alongside the practical and technical knowledge that is required to coach at the elite level. These factors should therefore be acknowledged and valued as important aspects of their coaching persona. Adam can use his own story to educate young players around the unpredictable nature of the academy journey including any potential setbacks that may occur, reflecting on his ability to process his release positively and not hold on to regrets associated with his time at the academy. Adam's new role as coach alludes to a new 'relational' narrative becoming prevalent in his life, giving structure, and meaning through being able to use his own life experiences and contribute positively to the lives of others (Douglas and Carless 2009).

Discussion and Conclusions

Conducting a narrative inquiry case study allowed the research to explore Adam's identity development in depth and across multiple transitions through his journey as an elite academy footballer. This includes being able to address physical maturity-based interventions helped to shape Adam's experiences and perceptions of his body. Findings highlight the relational processes that exist within elite football academies that play a role in the narrative discourse, not only in the form of the prevailing 'performance narrative', but also the embodiment of more nuanced narratives such as the 'catching up' narrative uncovered through Adam's experiences.

During the first transition phase where Adam begins to embody a performance narrative based upon the identity of an elite academy footballer, the emphasis shifted from the team to the individual. Previous experiences relayed in coaching literature (Potrac et al 2012) reference the highly competitive dog-eat-dog culture and environment of elite football academies. This highlights an apparent difficulty in constructing meaningful relationships within such an environment, so that when an individual leaves they feel immediately cut adrift and isolated with no communication with the world from which they have left, a world which played a definitive role in their identity and sense of self. There are important concerns then to be made around the importance and status of friendships within a competitive football academy environment. Are such environments conducive to sustaining such 'friendships' and should academy staff place greater emphasis on encouraging more meaningful bonds are all pertinent considerations, which this study was able to uncover through exploring the personal narrative of the participant.

It was important to not only consider the content of Adam's stories, but the motivations and connotations involved in why he chose to tell them and in this form. Smith and Sparkes (2008) note that narrative can be used as a form of 'social action', and therefore that Adam could be using these narratives to highlight areas of his experiences that he feels are underrepresented. In this way, there is the potential for Adam to make a difference in the lives of others and at an institutional level by raising awareness of how these aspects of his life experiences help to construct the narratives which have been influenced by the sociocultural environment around him. Indeed, although Adam did not himself disclose any overt mental health issues during his time at the academy he was seemingly left to manage emotional challenges by himself, with such behaviours used by players to protect their status as elite academy footballers not conducive to maintaining mental health and wellbeing (Sothern and O'Gorman 2021). This was particularly apparent during the final period of his

time at the academy through injury and subsequent release, which highlights the particularly sensitive nature of this transition. Although player care is now given much greater consideration by clubs, this narrative inquiry demonstrates the importance of viewing the transition out of an elite academy environment not only as a moment in the life of a player, but as a longitudinal process with multiple contributing factors.

Although bio-banding as a structured intervention was not in use during Adam's time at the academy, his experiences of identifying as an 'early maturer' and subsequently 'playing up' were influential in shaping his ideas around his status within the peer group, which highlights the relevance of these findings to the design and implementation of bio-banding interventions and practices taking place in elite football academies today. Adam's experiences illustrate the relational nature of identity, and in this way, bio-banding can be described as disruptive to any pre-existing narratives. This is displayed through its ability to create a new narrative based on the physical development of an individual player at any given moment throughout his/her academy journey. Additionally, as adolescents construct identities and ideas of self, based on long-term views of the future, continually categorising and de-categorising individuals without effective communication could have a potentially negative and de-stabilising effect on individuals.

Adam demonstrated elements of identity foreclosure through developing the strong narrative identity of an elite academy footballer. Although there is excellent provision for education within the elite football academy environment, it is important to highlight the potentially limited opportunities for identity exploration for players during this important adolescent phase of development. This can be seen both wherein Adam talks about his own experiences of education stating, 'I'm going on a different path' and 'get it done so you can get your football done', but also acknowledging that his current group of players 'say they need to get it done and it's good for their overall development but the focus is on football'. So, although players are encouraged to fulfill the educational requirements and pursue their own holistic development, it does not necessarily result in sustained identity exploration and the development of multiple identity strands. Indeed, although Adam indicated that there was now a greater appreciation from coaches at United FC towards education, there is evidence to suggest that even in recent studies conducted in other domains, coaches' beliefs were that academic study acts as a distraction from an athletes' sporting career (Rothwell et al 2020; Saarinen et al 2020).

Adam's storytelling illustrates how he has used narratives to make sense of his identity and idea of self (Eakin 1999), sustaining an identity based around that of the elite football academy and club culture, but also developing a relational identity (Douglas and Carless

2009) through his new role as an elite academy coach. Studies have shown that instilling coaches with ethics of care is important for creating sustainable practices for elite athletes (Dohsten et al 2018). However, this may be difficult to implement within the 'rules based' approach to caring found within elite football academies (Cronin et al 2020), whereby the competitive context means that coaches are constrained to 'care about' both results and stakeholders of the club. Adam's reflections on himself as a coach display empathy, based around his own experiences as a player and therefore showing relatability to both the players that he coaches and their parents. This shows that an ethics of care may depend to some extent on a coaches' own journey and having developed a degree of empathy through life experiences like those experienced by their players, whereby coaches should be willing to be reflective and deconstruct their own narratives so that a sustainable caring discourse can be established (Jones 2009). It may be valuable for clubs to consider the makeup of coaching staff within the academy environment and ensure that a multitude of footballing experiences are represented. Having several coaching staff bringing experience of release may enhance relationships with players and parents alike, especially with a view to providing more sustainable practice and empathetic support.

Elite football academies in the UK provide a high-performance environment where talented young footballers are given every opportunity to fulfill their footballing ambitions. Developing within such a professionalised environment instills a multitude of values around hard work; self-belief; focus; drive; determination; fairness; integrity; and maximizing individual potential. Providing unique adolescent experiences in comparison with their peers therefore offers advantages to academy players who can call on these traits both in a future footballing career or, as is statistically more likely, when returning to normal society outside of the academy 'bubble'. However, introducing young boys to this environment at an early age as they develop through adolescence appears to influence the breadth of exploration which can be achieved in relation to identity formation. Increased identity exploration and broadening the scope of potential narratives from which young athletes can draw is aligned with the aims of a Dual Career (DC) discourse, which has been shown to benefit the individual holistically (Stambulova and Wylleman 2019).

Previous findings (Archer 1985; Meeus et al 1999) support the idea that adolescent girls develop stronger relational identity and a wider variety of goals and aspirations simultaneously in a more complex identity development framework. This suggests that further studies should also focus on the experiences of female elite youth footballers to not only determine any similarities or differences that could benefit both the football specific and holistic whole-person development practices of both sexes, but also to develop further understanding of sex-specific phenomena that occur within elite girls' football. Recent

research has shown a perception that female athletes are less likely to excel in their sport so require a focus on multiple careers, meant that coaches advised increased athletic identity for female athletes to be successful, concluding that 'these gendered discourses influence athletes' DC aspirations and the gendering of DC pathways' (Saarinen 2022). It is therefore suggested that the gendering of pathways within elite football academies should be explored, whereby young male academy players may benefit from the broader narrative scope provided by a DC discourse.

Although the research project encountered challenges around sampling and therefore switched focus to a single-participant study, it allowed a more in-depth exploration of Adam's story. This displays a key benefit of qualitative research, and the role of the researcher, as a tool to explore such phenomena in this way, due to its nature to be evolving, flexible, and reflexive. Although the study did not explore bio-banding from the scientific perspective that it set out, it uncovered new phenomena such as the 'catching up narrative', and broadened understanding of the 'performance narrative' in this setting. These findings are both useful in informing good practice but also highlight areas for future research. This could be broadened further by invoking 'naturalistic generalizability' (Smith 2018), should the reader connect with topics, themes and experiences within the stories and be inspired to share their experiences in future studies. Further narrative research should focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the long-term effects of today's bio-banded practice, and indeed the wider elite academy experience, on young athletes' identity development. In-depth narrative inquiry could provide further insight into the experiential nature of the elite football academy environment; however, barriers will need to be overcome when gaining access. This could provide valuable insights from which to guide the development of player care and wellbeing strategies for both individual clubs and governing bodies. Due to the apparent biases and connotations that persist around early and late physical maturity, further research is also suggested into how these may be addressed to lessen the impacts on identity disruption.

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