

Craft Idiocy, Erikson and Footballing Identities

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In our opinion the current talent development strategies and schemes of the England Football Association and clubs resulted in the development of unhealthy personalities and an un-mature sense of self-identity through the high exposure to a single area of competence. In particular, academy players are in danger of developing self-identities that are characterized as foreclosed. In some way this mirrors the concept called 'craft idiocy' (Marx, 1955). Craft idiocy refers to the notion that through their specialisation experts know aspects of their immediate tasks but lack understanding of other methods and abilities and are thus at a disadvantage within societal interrelations. Although there are some positive aspects of a strong athletic identity, there appears to be a growing body of literature that highlights the negative consequences of such a self-concept (e.g., lower psychosocial maturation, lower interpersonal maturity, and lower career planning development). The danger is thus that footballers invest heavily in an athletic identity only to find themselves 'craft idiots' once the game is over. We suggest that Erikson's theory of psychosocial development provides a useful framework for the exploration of a 'healthy' development.

In discussing the division of labour and machinery in his treatise on the Poverty of Philosophy, Karl Marx (1955) describes a concept he termed 'craft idiocy'. The underlying idea being that factories need increasing specialist knowledge for production. In such situations individuals gain a high level of ability within a single aspect of their environment. However, he or she fails to comprehend the other domains they are in contact with. Hence, the individual through their specialty knows the expert aspects of their immediate tasks but lacks understanding of others methods and abilities and is thus at a disadvantage within societal inter-relations.

Surprisingly, craft idiocy is not a term which is widely used when discussing Marx's work and there are few references to it in contemporary sociological communications. Although the reasons for this are not immediately apparent but it could be suggested that by its very nature and implications craft idiocy critiques many of the academics who would discuss such a concept. Non the less, craft idiocy, we will argue, applies nicely to our current discussion and understanding of talent development in sport in general and football in particular. This point is well illustrated by a statement made by Ron Tennick of the English Rugby Football Union (RFU), commenting on the current talent development strategies of the English Football Association (FA) (in Bent *et al.*, 2000; p. 135):

'They are going to finish up with people who can play but they ain't going to have a great deal of intelligence to do anything else'

Talent development in football and identity formation in sport

In 1993 the English FA released Howard Wilkinson's Charter for Quality, a document that provided a new vision for the way in which talent was going to be developed in Britain. Its aims were to encourage greater participation in the game and to allow the most talented children to gain access to the coaching available within the top clubs. In particular the document provided the basis for the development of the Football Academies, specialist training centres attached to the professional clubs focusing on the nurturing of young talent. Thus Wilkinson's intention is that talented youngsters, from under the age of nine, can get access to coaches who are able to teach the techniques and intricacies of the game from the advantages available in elite facilities (Bent *et al.*, 2000).

Such a move has not been without its critics. There is concern over the time commitments made by young players, the expectations generated through participation by both children and parents, and the repercussions of non-representation of school, district etc teams by the area's best players (Bent *et al.*, 2000; Conn *et al.*, 2003). Moreover, it is perhaps the questions concerning the effects of early specialization and the age at which specialist training should begin for optimal talent development that are most interesting (Abernethy, Cote & Baker, 2002; Cote, Baker & Abernethy, 2003). In this respect children as young as four and five have been ear-marked by clubs. The question at which specialisation should begin is especially pertinent when evidence within the American model of sports development, which is now arguably being introduced into Britain and is mimicked by the football system, suggests that such intense focus can have implications not only in terms of a concept of 'sporting craft-idiocy' developed through specialization but also the notion of a craft-idiocy in its original and more sinister definition of an impact on the individual's wider life experiences. Specifically, a body of research within sports psychology has recognized the impact that the athletic domain of the individual's identity can have on the experiences perceived whilst participating in youth sports and in particular academy and student systems (Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004; Wylleman *et al.*, 2000).

It has been suggested that when individuals invest energy into a perception of themselves as an athlete they develop a component of their self-identity termed an 'athletic identity' (Brewer Van Raalte & Linder, 1993). The greater the amount

of focus, energy and importance invested into this self-identity the greater the desire of the individual to see themselves and be seen by others as an athlete. Thus, although Brewer *et al.* (1993) initially describe self-identity as a multidimensional construct, it has been suggested that with sufficient focus an individual may begin to only perceive and portray themselves from within a single domain of the life experience. This view was implicitly supported by Adler and Adler (1993) who suggested that players on basketball scholarship schemes had undertaken role engulfment of the identity into a single aspect of the self, that of the athlete.

Although, Brewer *et al.* (1993) cite research (e.g. Danish 1983) that portrays some of the positive aspects of a strong athletic identity there appears to be a growing body of literature which highlights the negative consequences of such a self-concept. In particular research has suggested that adolescent athletes have lower psychosocial maturation, lower interpersonal maturity and lower career planning development than non-athletes (Blann 1985; Petitpas 1981; Petitpas & Champagne 1988). Studies have also reported that negative emotional states (e.g anxiety), low self esteem and mood disturbance (e.g. depression) have been associated with injury (Brewer, 1993; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Linvill, 1987; Weichman & Williams, 1997) and career termination and transition (Crook & Robertson, 1991; Gordon, 1995; Grove Lavalley & Gordon, 1997; Lavalley Grove & Gordon, 1997; Webb *et al.*, 1998) due to a high investment in the athletic identity.

Importantly, perhaps in terms of the current English FA's talent development plans, there are suggestions that athletes, particularly student-athletes, may fail to develop healthy personalities and mature senses of self-identity through the high exposure to a single area of competence. Specifically, research has suggested that student-athletes predominantly have self-identities which are described as 'Foreclosed' (Brewer *et al.*, 1993; Good *et al.*, 1993; Murphey Petitpas & Brewer, 1996). The term 'Foreclosed' being derived from the work of Marcia (1966) who expanded upon the theories put forward by perhaps the most influential psychologist in the field of self-identity development Erik Erikson.

Erikson, psychosocial development and identity

Erikson's (1950, 1959 & 1968) theory of psychosocial development in general and identity formation in particular is, like many developmental theories, based upon a framework of developmental stages (eight stages of crisis). Initially an individual has an identity based upon notions of introjection, i.e., the individual's notion of 'who they are' and 'what they are' being derived from the incorporation of the operations of significant others. As one progresses through childhood this introjected identity develops into a self-concept based upon identification. This means that the individual consciously takes on the roles, values and behaviours of important others (their sporting hero). However, the crucial development of the life-cycle according to Erikson occurs during adolescence when the individual begins to structure an identity based upon the recognition of aspects of childhood identifications that are perceived to relate to self-derived goals, interest and aspirations. This forms the basis of identity formation, the specific psychological development of the adolescent. Importantly, the unique aspects of Erikson's work allow for the recognition that identity formation:

'.. has its own developmental period during adolescence and youth, when biological endowment and intellectual processes must eventually meet societal expectation for a suitable display of adult functioning (Kroger, 1996; p. 17).

Consequently Erikson discusses identity formation in terms of how an individual learns to adapt their genetics and experiential learning to the demands of the culture and society they find themselves. The products of this adaptation, achieved through an individual's attempts at identity formation, are discussed by Erikson in terms of a bi-polar continuum. The individual can either obtain an identity structure defined as 'Achievement' in that the identity is derived from an exploration of earlier identifications and a commitment is made to those aspects which are seen as self-defining in terms of aspirations or else neither exploration nor commitment is made and the identity obtained is termed 'Diffused'.

Expanding upon this bi-polar continuum Marcia (1966) provided empirical evidence of those structures that lie between these two extremes. Recognising the principles, based upon the absence or presence of exploration of alternative identities and the commitment towards identity goals inherent in the development of identity achievement, Marcia (1966) theorised four identity statuses into which individuals can be categorised. The final of these milestones, 'identity achievement' being described as those individuals that have undergone a period of crisis, have undertaken subsequent exploration of alternatives and are consequently committed to self-determined goals. Such individuals have flexibility, openness to new experience, and the ability for self-reflection. On the other hand, individuals who have not undertaken a period of crisis nor have developed commitment for a set of goals are termed 'identity diffused'. Identity Diffused individuals are considered as the least advanced of the identity statuses. Individuals who are undergoing the period of identity crisis and exploration but as yet have no commitment to self-determined goals are termed 'moratoriums'. These individuals are described as having conflicting elements within their identity structure and have been shown through empirical study to exhibit higher levels of anxiety than the other statuses (Marcia, 1980). On the other hand, 'foreclosed' individuals are those who have obtained commitment to an identity but have not undergone a period of crisis, i.e. an exploration of alternative identities. Marcia (1966) suggests that the foreclosed person is simply a reflection of the parent and the identity structure is often formed prematurely, i.e. the individual would appear to have not made a shift from the childhood 'identification' stage of identity to

the more mature 'formation' stage. The process of identity formation for a foreclosed status is based primarily upon social comparison, i.e. there is little internal reflection in the identity process as the individual derives the 'self' from identification with others. Empirically, such individuals have been shown to have strong commitment to goals and the lowest anxiety levels of all of the statuses, whilst they are described socially as being happy and smugly satisfied (Kroger, 1996; Marcia, 1980). However, despite these apparent strengths in the early commitment to an identity structure,

'The strength of the foreclosure is a rigid and brittle strength rather like glass; if you push at it one way, it is very strong; if you push at it in a different way it shatters' (Marcia, 1979; p. 9).

Thus although the 'foreclosed' individual appears to have the benefits of a strong identity structure in line with an 'achieved' individual, this strength is less able to cope with external forces due to the inability of the individual to undergo periods of crisis. Foreclosed self-identities start to explain some of the negative experiences of athletes. Furthermore, the earlier suggestion that such narrow self-identities are symptomatic of Marx's craft idiocy are supported by a comment by Erikson,

'...there is another danger to identity development. If the overly conforming child accepts work as the only criterion of worthwhileness, sacrificing imagination and playfulness too readily, he may become ready to submit to what Marx called "craft-idiocy"' (Erikson, 1968; p. 127).

We interpreted this that Erikson suggests that if, during an individual's late childhood/early adolescence, there is little chance for exploration of self-identity beyond narrow notions of 'work' the individual is unlikely to develop a healthy personality structure. Consequently, for an individual to make a 'healthy' shift from the childhood self-identities based upon identification with others to the mature sense of self-identity based upon formation there must be opportunities for exploration of how one could and does stand within the society based upon what one has in the way of 'talents' (i.e. the recognition of genetic and experiential factors). Furthermore, Erikson provided a theoretical framework within his psychosocial theory of development that allows for further recognition of this point and which also highlights the factors behind the development of the healthy personality.

In brief, Erikson's psychosocial theory of development suggests that following childhood, in which the healthy personality develops positive balances between trust and mistrust, autonomy and doubt, and initiative and guilt, the individual enters a crisis for the development of senses of industry as opposed to inferiority. The senses of industry are based upon the recognition of what the individual has in the way of talents, i.e. abilities and which of these are acceptable within society as being a basis for success. This then is the fundamental basis of an 'identified identity' in that the individual recognises which aspects of significant others they are able to replicate, feel comfortable with and allow for the recognition of the self by others. However, it is recognised that the notion of learning what one is good at may be proposed as being a life-long process, yet it is during these earlier years that the crisis is vital for the healthy personality especially when it is observed that Erikson contends that the sense of industry provides a basis for the development of a sense of identity, the crucial aspect of adolescence. Thus Erikson's theory suggests that to know who one is one has to know what one is. Therefore, the fourth stage is one in which the individual begins to first feel that they can be someone productive within the society through their abilities for industry or else they gain a sense of inferiority through a lack of identification of suitable talents.

The sense of industry or inferiority gained is proposed as being the initial basis upon which the individual begins to create an identity for him or herself. Consequently, it is being suggested that what we conceive as our abilities become the foundations for the building of who we are and importantly who we wish to become, the recognition of which are the psychosocial task of the adolescent, i.e. identity formation. In turn, this self-definition or identity becomes the sense beyond which the individual is able to undertake the next crisis of intimacy versus isolation. In other words it is suggested that if a person is able to understand their own goals and directions they will be better able to negotiate these with another individual and thus be able to enter into mature, loving and sexual relationships.

Importantly, to reach this mature sense of self-identity Erikson suggests that an individual must have undergone two major processes during the preceding crises, exploration and commitment. That is, the individual must have undergone a process of self-exploration in which various avenues of expression are investigated before commitment is made to those that are deemed to hold the greatest value. As Kroger (1996) describes, it is only when the adolescent is able to discard some and select other identifications of self held in childhood through perceptions of talents, interests and values can identity formation occur for the individual. Consequently, it may be proposed that for the healthy development of an individual they must undertake an exploration of multiple sources of industry so that during the crisis of identity formation there can be, as suggested by Waterman (1985), a commitment to goals, values and beliefs which the person finds personally expressive.

This then becomes the risk of the immersion of young individuals in highly focused, specialised sports participation during this crucial period of development. If football clubs are, as is suggested by the Charter for Quality, training players from the age of eight onwards in specialist centres of excellence for three hours per week (not including travelling) is it realistic to consider that such individuals are undertaken exploration of multiple senses of industry? The FA does recognise the

need for a balance between education and sports commitment however there is anecdotal evidence that players do not recognise the importance of an academic career as they are now 'signed' to a club. There are concerns over the dangers of both the child's and the parent's expectations due to this increased participation and elite level training. Consequently, if both the player and their parents begin to invest strongly in the individual's athletic identity the opportunity for exploration may be diminished. Furthermore, there would appear to be little evidence that early specialisation in a specific field improves the development of talent (Cote, 1999).

Cote (1999) suggests through interviews with athletes who obtained 'elite' status in their performance that there are three stages to the development of talent in sports. The first is termed the sampling years and is proposed as being a time during which children should be encouraged to experience multiple sports. These experiences are emphasised for the feelings of fun, pleasure and intrinsic motivation that the development of a variety of motor skills during sports 'play', as opposed to genuine competition, can produce for the child (Passer, 1996). The second stage is called the specialising years and Cote states that, in individuals who have gone on to achieve at elite levels, this typically occurs around the age of 13. During this stage the individual through both external support via parents and coaches, and importantly due to intrinsic pleasure and success begins to develop specific sports skills. However, the emphasis is still upon fun and enjoyment in sport. There is a need for a balance between 'play' and 'sports practice/training' at this time to avoid attrition. The third and final stage of Cote's talent development is termed the investment years and these are characterised by the commitment to obtaining elite levels of performance. It is suggested that this commitment is reached around the age of 15, interestingly an age at which it may be proposed that an individual is preparing to initially enter the adult world, i.e. they are at the end of compulsory education etc. Consequently Cote's suggestions support the earlier theoretical framework proposed by Erikson in that for an individual to be able to develop themselves in terms of a healthy personality and the fulfilment of potential within society they must be allowed to explore multiple aspects of industry before making a commitment to those aspect which are seen as fundamentally self-expressive.

However, we suggest that the current systems used by the FA are not allowing for this exploration and healthy development but rather are generating a commitment to a self-identity that still based upon childhood identifications and not the formation of a mature construct. Furthermore, due to this lack of self-expressive formation players begin to demonstrate the negative consequences of trying to maintain an unrealistic self-identity in the face of a sporting reality which is very much dynamic. This is not to say that football is the only sport which must be aware of such dangers. Britain is already instigating new forms of development for rugby, and with the opening of the new English Institute for Sport in Sheffield sports such as athletics, boxing, and netball will be already planning their strategy for new talent. Consequently, it may be suggested that despite the possibility of an increase in elite performance in British sport there is also the likelihood that many more individuals will invest heavily in an athletic identity only to find themselves 'craft-idiots' once the game is over.

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