Nurture, nature and dubious social skills: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of talent identification practices in elite English youth soccer

Introduction

Talent identification (henceforth TI) is, in its simplest terms, the process of identifying participants with the potential to excel in a given domain (Williams and Reilly 2000). While ultimately focused on prospective performance capacity in adulthood, the business of TI in sport is primarily (though not exclusively) associated with the recruitment and development of children who are deemed 'gifted,' i.e. those in possession of abilities already advanced to a level significantly beyond that which would typify their own age group. Following identification, those 'gifted' individuals are often the subject of longitudinal processes of Talent Development, which aim to maximise sporting potential and performances. Thus, in much attendant literature, TI is often portrayed as a relatively discreet precursor to the more extensively studied process of Talent Development (Christensen 2009).

The use of TI is endemic to many domains, not least art and music. It is sporting organisations that are, however, distinctive in having embraced it on a truly industrial scale (Williams and Reilly 2000). This is nowhere more pronounced than in soccer, the topic of this paper, in which far-reaching and well-resourced TI programmes (extensively utilising professionalised procedures such as scouting, testing and formal analysis of performance) have become cornerstone features of professional clubs and national associations, in both the men's and women's games (Christensen 2009, Vaeyens et al. 2013). The manifest aim underpinning such programmes is, fundamentally, to channel finite resources (such as

coaching, facilities, support services and playing time) towards athletes with the greatest promise to deliver elite performances for high-level success.[1]

In professional soccer, the efficacy of TI programmes is a ubiquitous concern due to the self-evident on-the-field advantages of (a) recruiting appropriately talented performers in a competitive, high-stakes industry, and (b) doing so ahead of ones rivals. In addition, TI can also provide commercial benefits for professional clubs outside of the direct field of play. For instance, talented athletes can be recruited and their registration later 'sold on' for substantial transfer fees. While most high-profile transfer activity does occur with adult players, a talented young player's registration can be a valuable prospective commodity in itself. As a result, clubs often begin scouting athletes as young as nine to eleven years with a view to identifying their largely undeveloped 'potential.' (Ford, Le Gall, Carling and Williams 2008). Moreover, the assessment of talent persists at regular intervals throughout a young performer's career. At such intervals, future opportunities for development are allocated to some players (and withheld from others) on the basis of given performances. Cushion & Jones (2006, p.145), for example, report that:

> "Places within an academy are usually awarded on the basis of a successful invitational
> trial, arranged by club "scouts" who scour the region for talented young players, and
> competition is fierce…Subsequently, if a new player is found (by the academy coaches)
> to be a better prospect, he can replace an existing player, who is then released."

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[1] Of course, and consequently, such processes (by necessity) marginalise those deemed less "talented" and, thus, TI can have both positive and negative implications for both sports and their participants on the grander scale.

TI is, therefore, not only central to the commercial and sporting performance of professional soccer clubs, but also determines access to quality sporting experiences and careers for large numbers of young soccer players. As such, the manner in which TI is *done* in real circumstances is of immense academic and practical relevance.

This paper aims to provide some qualitative elucidation regarding the practices of TI as experienced and interpreted by professional coaches at a variety of levels in elite English youth soccer. The research reported does not aspire to define or 'explain' the role of talent in sporting performance, but rather seeks to describe and analyse coaches' own understandings and interpretations of talent itself, and their experiences of identifying it. In this core sense we build upon several aspects of Christensen's (2009) study of how a small group of coaches, employed by the national governing body of Danish soccer, went about the practical business of identifying talent. With respect to her own participants, she centrally observed that (a) they were prone to use subjective, idiographic observation (rather than generalised, abstract metrics) to recognise talent, (b) they often linked talent itself to an ability to *learn* and, critically, (c) talent and its identification were taken to be immanently bonded to specific social contexts. Consequently, although the central phenomenological issue of social context necessarily delimits some direct comparability, not least because the institutional environments from which the two sets of participants were recruited are very different[2],

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[2] The Danish football coaches explored by Christensen worked in a centralised NGB. In English Football, meanwhile, TI is more commonly devolved from the central Football Association to individual clubs of the Premier and Football Leagues. This club context, in which the participants in the current study practice TI, is governed by a different set of pressures and concerns, not least those pertaining to short-term commercial success (see section on participant selection for further details).

Christensen's method and findings nonetheless are important touchstones for the present work throughout.

Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (henceforth IPA), thus, the manifest purpose herein is to illustrate how professional coaches working in elite youth soccer identify talent by initially encouraging them to unpack their *own* conceptual models of talent itself (Smith and Osborn 2008). Consistent with an IPA approach, these interpretations are then thematically contextualised with a view to clarifying how the coaches ultimately organise the business of doing TI in the hothouse of professional English clubs. It is contended that such an exercise can help facilitate practical communication between professionals, while also providing positive academic insights into the situated psychology of soccer-related TI itself.

Coaching, talent identification, and talent development

Research relevant to coaching in performance sport has, until relatively recently, been largely dominated by positivistic approaches which had, to a considerable extent, stymied detailed understanding of the complex and contexted social actions endemic to coaching processes themselves (Jones and Bowes 2006, Miller and Cronin 2013). It is the case in recent years, however, that the academic study of sport coaching has begun to draw upon a much wider range of perspectives, developing an empirical corpus that has provided practitioners and researches alike with pockets of detailed, experientially-grounded knowledge in areas such as coach education and coach behaviour (Jones, Armour and Potrac 2003, Potrac and Jones 2009). Such research has nevertheless often maintained a contextually logical preoccupation with 'expert' coaches (as defined through level of competition or win/loss ratios), with the aim of informing wider coaching practice in top-down manner

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(Nash et al. 2009, Nash and Sproule 2012). In terms of studying talent, one key corollary of primarily exploring the work of coaches who are *already* dealing with pre-defined 'talented performers' is an inevitable skewing of analytic focus towards pure 'talent development' (Baker and Schorer 2010, Christensen 2009), with its corollary emphasis on the acquisition and nurturing of ability (Martindale et al 2005, Henriksen et al. 2010). This valuable body of work does naturally, and helpfully, lend to the formulation of practitioner-oriented models for "what to do, and how" when working with talented athletes. As Christensen (2009) notes, however, its dominance in research has resulted in a rather more frugal body of work emerging on the foundational activities of TI itself. Moreover, and critically, it has in turn implied a somewhat artificial decoupling of development processes from the primordial business of establishing who is talented (or, indeed, what constitutes "talent" *and for whom*) in the first place.

Where TI has been specifically interrogated in coaching literature, it has often been addressed in a rather pessimistic manner, and often maligned as a process too often grounded in naturalistic decision-making, with practitioners placing an over-reliance on prior experience when identifying 'gifted' young athletes (Christensen 2009, Williams and Reilly 2000). Some authors have, indeed, claimed that extant TI in sport is almost *fundamentally* flawed by the lack of a consistent or 'objective' means for its execution (Regnier, Salmela and Russel 1993, Vaeyens et al. 2008, Williams and Reilly 2000). Consonant with the broader growth of performance analysis and other scientific measurement practices in sport, much academic and practice literature (such as that underpinning UK Sport's programmes for talent identification in Olympic disciplines) has therefore advocated a movement towards objective, efficient, statistically-informed assessment and selection methods (Waldron and Worsfold 2010, Vaeyens, et al., 2013). Although this corpus has yielded a range of practical

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models and recommendations *for doing* TI itself (Vaeyens et al. 2006; Vaeyens, Lenoir, Williams and Philippaerts 2008, Van Rossum and Gagné 2005), many authors engaged in the endeavour to 'objectify' the process do recognise that the models produced to date remain divergent in form, and their efficacy largely unproven in practice. Indeed, some (see Vaeyens et al. 2008, Abbott and Collins 2002, Vaeyens et al. 2013) have proposed that TI itself may simply be an ineffective process, due to the centrality of intangibles such as maturation and definitions of talent. In both research and practice, therefore, TI remains a problematic object; a work in progress.

Central to the purpose of this paper is the contention that, regardless of the theoretical efficacy of any normative guidelines on how to do TI, coaches in real-world contexts will not necessarily adhere precisely to them. This is not an issue of professional intractability on the part of coaches themselves. More foundationally, this contention is born of Harold Garfinkel's (1967) observation that no set of directives regarding social behaviour can *ever* be specified so to account for all empirical contingencies. As such, even if a prescribed model is nominally being utilised to-the-letter, there always remains some degree of situated (and thus experiential) interpretation involved in the making of any decision, and every such decision has demonstrable (and not necessarily predictable) human consequences. Thus, in many respects, the criticism that TI in sport is too 'subjective' echoes the largely futile complaint made in broader psychology that individuals, when drawing conclusions from available evidence, are prone to use metacognitive heuristics (Gigerenzer 2004, Miller, Rowe, Cronin and Bampouras 2012), mental shortcuts that use pertinent and/or easily accessible information to enhance the expediency of decision-making. These are, by their very nature, experience-based and therefore (in some sense, at least) 'biased.' However, and as Bennis and Pachur (2006, p.613) note, practical "...judgment and decision tasks are often

sufficiently complex that they would be intractable even if time and cognitive capacity were limitless." It is heuristic reasoning, therefore, that *facilitates* our very capacity to make decisions without falling into total judgemental paralysis. Comparing this mode of reasoning to some form of systematic probability calculus, and then levelling the accusation of 'subjectivity' is, thus, to draw an entirely impractical (and, indeed, unfair) comparison (Miller et al. 2012). There simply is no way, in most cases of real-world decision-making (such as that endemic to TI), to objectively weigh every single piece of potentially relevant evidence, in an entirely neutral way and within any normal window of pertinence.

TI is, then, and at its core, a process of judgement, operationalised against a backdrop of timing, resources and opportunity. The provision of a full description of how it is variably and contextually done by real coaches, thus, should arguably be a preliminary requirement to the production of abstract models, or legislation upon how it *should* be done. As noted above, however, and notwithstanding a few recent interpretative investigations, such as those conducted by Christensen (2009) and Johnson et al. (2008), such a description remains in a largely fledgling state within extant coaching research.

Defining and measuring 'talent' in sport

Underpinning many contemporary academic endeavours to normatively model (or legislate) 'effective' TI *for* practitioners in sport is the requirement for a universally-applicable definition of talent itself. Most studies do not, however, actively deliberate the vagaries of definition to any great extent. Rather, they tend to presume/posit (Miller and Cronin 2013) a given format for talent (with a primarily physiological *or* psychological character) and then move on to the production of systematic measurement schemes.

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In terms of definition, ~~and on the one hand,~~ hard physical performance factors such as endurance, power, speed or balance have often been used to characterise sporting talent. In such cases, systematic statistical approaches to TI have typically been applied. Although recognising the relevance of other potential influences, the seminal works of Reilly and colleagues (Reilly, Bangsbo and Franks 2000, Reilly, Williams, Nevill and Franks 2000), for example, focus primarily on assessing a set of anthropometric and physiological components deemed pertinent to performance in soccer. In particular, quantifications of Vo2 max and speed are used as a means of establishing norms for talent identification, and for differentiating between 'more' and 'less' talented athletes.[3] As Vaeyens et al. (2008) contend, however, the practice of using cross-sectional physiological, physical, anthropometric or technical variables as a basis for talent identification is laden with difficulties, such as:

1. Athletes may not retain variables through maturation to adulthood;

2. Maturation rates of young people are non-linear and inconsistent across athletes;

3. Practice histories of athletes may influence the development of variables, and;

4. The range of variables that characterise talent is numerous, diverse and athletes can compensate weakness in one variable with strengths in another.

Accordingly, it is argued by some authors that psychological traits are, perhaps, a more useful differentiator between more and less talented participants (Abbott and Collins

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[3] It is noteworthy that any assumed connection between physical development and talent raises the spectre of Relative Age Effect (RAE) when conducting TI in younger populations. See Cobley, Baker, Wattie and McKenna (2009) for a detailed discussion of this issue with respect to athletic development.

2004, MacNamara, Button and Collins 2010a, MacNamara, Button and Collins 2010b). Such claims are largely based on evidence that high-level athletic performers have been shown to possess superior levels of commitment (Baker and Côté 2003), determination and capacity for goal-setting (Mallett and Hanrahan 2004), and competitiveness (Durand-Bush and Salmela 2002). MacNamara et al. (2010a, 2010b), for example, outline detailed evidence underscoring the role of an athlete's psychology within different stages of the talent development process, and make clear links between measurable traits and performance-capacity (current and/or prospective). The authors also recognise, however, that this relationship is mediated by variables such as stage of development, specific demands placed upon individuals, the nature of the sport in question and the psychological skills of the performers themselves. These latter observations alone indicate that there is unlikely to be a single psychological profile that we can associate with success in sport, and thus that no retroactively derived constellation of qualities can be used to direct the identification of talent itself (MacNamara et al. 2010a, MacNamara et al. 2010b). This scepticism, also conversant with that of Morris (2000), highlights that the issue of 'reversibility' is as much a problem for psychological studies of talent as Vaeyens et al. (2008) contend that it is in the physiological domain.

In short, much as elite athletes' physiological configurations are profoundly affected by the training regimes and competition with they have engaged over long periods of time, so also are their psychological characteristics and predilections. As such, to 'reverse engineer' a given state of body *or* mind into a much younger and less experienced (i.e. broadly non-comparable) population with a view to identifying talent is an inexact science at best, and a 'fool's errand' at worst. What *is* abundantly clear, however, is that the various criteria for TI prescribed in the studies outlined above proceed, to greater or lesser extents, from relatively

static definitions of what talent itself actually *is*. In the business of producing statistical

measurement tools to facilitate TI (and indeed talent development), an ostensive definition of

talent itself is, of course, a foundational necessity. However, if not fully and robustly

grounded in the concrete experience of the individuals for whom talent is a day-to-day

concern, then such definition '…runs the risk of, at the very least, overlaying a gloss on

particular phenomena that is only meaningful to some participants and, at worst, providing an

interpretative frame that is meaningless to all of them.' (Miller and Cronin 2013, p.116). In

other words, while such work can legislate how TI *should* be done (from a largely academic

standpoint), it may fail to interpret how it is done by the people who actually do it in real, and

often (initially at least) uncontrolled, environments. An unhelpful division between research

and practice is, therefore, effectively enshrined in the investigative process, with

communication between the two realms being didactic (i.e. legislative) rather than discursive

(i.e. reciprocal).[4] Accordingly, this study seeks to encourage a reciprocal discussion by

describing and interpreting how TI is done by actual coaches in English soccer.

To reprise the foundational point articulated in the introduction to this paper, no TI

programme, however carefully specified its procedures may be, is ever executed within a

social vacuum; no practical activity involving situated interpretation ever actually is

(Garfinkel 1967, Miller and Cronin 2013). Moreover, soccer, is never *played* within a social

vacuum. For instance, and at the simplest of levels, the very perception of a supportive,

unsupportive or over-supportive family environment away from the field of play can have

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[4] Zygmunt Bauman (1992) famously draws attention to this 'Legislators and Interpreters' issue within a broader
deliberation of the shifting role of the academic within contemporary culture.

profound consequences for performance and, thus, for who may be seen to be 'talented' at all (Wolfenden and Holt 2005). As such, TI *in* soccer requires that a coach pay careful attention to a host of potentially relevant detail surrounding actual performance, not just the pure mechanics of the performance itself. For the researcher, meanwhile, there is an essential secondary level of awareness, pertaining to the experiences that a coach is drawing upon in doing this TI. It is in these respects in particular that phenomenologically-oriented research has a key role to play in the domain.

Methodology

This study aims to explore the identification of talent as practiced by English soccer coaches themselves, with a view to opening further discursive space on the practice of TI itself. In this sense, investigation focuses primarily on the classically phenomenological question "How *is* it done?" and the more typically interpretative question "How is the experience understood by coaches?" This contrasts with the dominant, field-specific concerns of "How *should* it be done?" and "What *should* coaches do?" (Vaeyens et al. 2013). As Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) propose, the cautious yet revealing approach of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is optimised to address such concerns.

Framework

IPA is a relatively recent addition to the toolkit of the qualitative psychologist, with a central mandate to examine how participants render intelligible their personal and social worlds. To these ends, "…the main currency for an IPA study is the meanings particular

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experiences, events, states hold for participants." (Smith and Osborn 2008, p.51). IPA draws

upon a range of phenomenological traditions, and in particular the pure phenomenology of

Husserl (1973) which emphasises consciousness and intentionality of experience in the

understanding of social phenomena[5]. IPA has, to date, found extensive application in a

number of domains, not least that of healthcare. While such studies often map individuals'

experiences of a variety of conditions and interventions (Hamill, Carson and Dorahy 2010,

Rhodes and Smith 2010), there is a growing body of work that moves beyond describing

episodic accounts of experience and further addresses the meanings held by professionals in

their own lines of work (Arvinen-Barrow, Penny, Hemmings and Corr 2010, Vachon et al.

2011). Recent headway has also been made in the broader sporting domain (Larkin and

Griffiths 2004, Sebire, Standage, Gillison and Vansteenkiste 2013, Warriner and Lavallee

2008). Notwithstanding a small number of pertinent exceptions (see Klockare, Gustafsson

and Nordin-Bates 2011), however, very few IPA studies directly germane to the business of

coaching have yet emerged.

Although the facility of IPA for the study of coaching is a clear proposition here, it is

also important to recognise that its flexible approach has also been criticised for not being

entirely consistent with any particular (pure) phenomenological school or standpoint (Giorgi,

2011). Indeed, it is arguable that in comparison to more structured phenomenological

methods (Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1975; Giorgi, 2012) IPA might best be described as

phenomenologically-inspired and interpretatively-focused, rather than outright

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[5] A full and detailed exploration of the intellectual underpinnings of, and influences upon, contemporary IPA can be found in chapter 2 of Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009).

phenomenological. Accordingly, and reflecting the double-hermeneutic element of IPA

studies, it is important for authors to carefully monitor and acknowledge issues of

trustworthiness and their own positions in the interpretative process (Brocki & Wearden

2006). This is attended to in sections below.

Participants

Elite English youth soccer is a complex institutional environment that has been the

subject of extensive change in recent times. Following the inception of the elite player

performance plan (EPPP), professional football clubs in England have undergone a quality

audit to classify their academies on scale from Category 1 to Category 4 (Premier League,

2011)[6]. While the full rationale and implications of EPPP are beyond the scope of this study,

EPPP provides a detailed account of environments and processes across English youth

soccer. In particular, facilities and budgets can vary greatly between soccer clubs in England.

For instance, coaches working in Category 1 academies will typically work under a head of

coaching who reports directly to an academy manager, and indirectly the management of the

first team and development (reserve) team. They will also work alongside sport scientists,

medical professionals, educational staff, and a scouting team who have some responsibility

for bringing young players to a club (Williams and Reilly 2000). In contrast, coaches working

at a Category 4 academy are unlikely to have such a wide, tall, or complex structure, and are

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[6] Category 1 academies have the highest contact time with young players, the most full-time staff and largest operational budgets. Category 4 academies have the lowest, least and smallest.

not likely to work with a dedicated scouting team. Thus a coach working in such an environment is likely to have more exclusive responsibility for talent identification *and* development.

IPA studies typically use small samples, facilitating high-resolution analysis of the meanings held by participants within a defined sample (Smith et al. 2009). In this project, with institutional ethical approval and full informed consent, N=7 academy soccer coaches were purposively recruited on the grounds of extensive involvement in the identification of talent. The sample, using contacts previously held and newly made for the project by the third author, a postgraduate student who was himself recruited to an elite youth soccer academy in his teenage years, provided a variety of experience across all four categories of academy, and all participants had experience of working in elite youth soccer both before and after the development of the EPPP. All participants were male, had a minimum of five years professional coaching experience, were current TI practitioners at time of interview, and their levels of experience of coaching and/or scouting in elite youth soccer are detailed in Table 1, below. In line with ethical requirements all participants are identified by nominal pseudonyms (i.e. Coach A, Coach B etc.), and the academies themselves are given labels rather than names to further protect participant identity. The EPPP category rating of the academies in question, at time of writing, is also noted. As evident, the participants' experience spans a number of academies, though there is also some overlap, e.g. participants C, D and G have all worked at academy X3.

Table 1: Participant experience in elite soccer academies

Participant	Age	Pertinent Experience
Coach A	34	• 13 years as coach at academy X1 (EPPP Category 1)
Coach B	40	• 4 years at academy X2 (EPPP Category 3)
Coach C	52	• 5 years as coach at academy X3 (EPPP Category 3)
Coach D	46	• 1 year as coach at academy X3 (EPPP Category 3)
		• 2 years as coach at academy X4 (EPPP Category 1)
		• 1 year as scout for academy X5 (EPPP Category 1)
Coach E	55	• 10 years as coach at academy X4 (EPPP Category 1) – including 5 years as head of the academy's Talent ID programme.
Coach F	26	• 3 years as coach at academy X6 (EPPP Category 2)
Coach G	62	• 7 years as coach academy X3 (EPPP Category 3)

Procedure

As recommended by Smith et al. (2009) data were collected using semi-structured interviews, grounded in open questioning, in person and at a venue of the participant's choosing. A summarised schedule of questions was sent to the participants in advance of the interview to (a) facilitate their own reflection on pertinent experiences and, thus, (b) to aid them in providing detail that might not have been revealed with the use of 'unseen' questions (Hays, Maynard, Thomas and Bawden 2007).

The interview framework itself was designed utilising a literature review conducted by the first and third authors, and the practical experience of the second author in doing talent ID in elite youth sport (specifically in basketball and rowing), and the third as a former academy recruit. This approach to instrument development is consistent with many studies in IPA (Brocki & Wearden, 2006), acknowledging a blend of academic research and practical

experience of the phenomenon of interest. The schedule itself was based upon questions and prompts designed to reveal experience, sense-making and specific contextual details, such as:

1) In your experience, what is talent in soccer? How do you recognise it?

2) What is a typical talent identification experience for you?

3) What is like to be a coach involved in talent identification at your club?

It is important to note that although the prescribed questions provided a general framework for investigation, the interviews-in-practice (conducted by the third author) were highly flexible, encouraging participants to deviate from topic and volunteer novelties whenever possible. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in full. Data were anonymised at the point of transcription. The mean interview duration was one hour.

Analysis

Analysis proceeded using the standard techniques of IPA (Smith and Osborn 2008, Smith et al. 2009), in which raw textual codes are combined into linked (subordinate) themes, and finally condensed into master (superordinate) themes that hold across the full corpus of data. A prototypical analysis was conducted by the third author, which was then revised and extended by the first (a social psychologist with extensive experience in qualitative, and particularly discursive, health and sport research) and checked and further revised by the second (a scholar/practitioner of sport pedagogy). The analysis was then further checked and revised by all three authors until triangular consensus (Patton, 1990) was achieved.

Results and Discussion

Analysis of data yielded sixteen pertinent subordinate themes that cross-linked into three superordinate themes. Each superordinate theme is described below, supported by empirical data and discussed with reference to pertinent literature.

Superordinate Theme 1: "Talent identification is more a socially nurtured process than a natural state."

The most persistent of the superordinate themes to emerge from the collected data relates to the participants' explicit assertion that talent is a flexible, socially-malleable and process-oriented thing, rather than a largely innate quality within an individual. Indeed, the claims made about the issue (irrespective of the level at which the coach had practiced, or the amount of time in the role) are often organised to acknowledge, but simultaneously downgrade, the significance of 'genetics' or 'inborn abilities.' For example:

Coach B: *"I think you are born with abilities, but I also think there is greater scope for them to be nurtured and moulded into great [players] with the right guidance…Too often in youth sport we have looked at what the kids can deliver there and then rather than what they have the potential to deliver. Talent is an on-going process that needs to be monitored and developed and until we understand that then the philosophy of recruitment and the selection of players will not change."*

Coach E: *"Genetics play a part, but then I think it comes down to opportunity which is the nurture bit. So the amount of practice time, being around the right environment and the right type of learning, being around the right coach."*

In these terms, TI itself is ultimately conceptualised as a longitudinal observational and interpersonal skill, rather than a simple matter discrete judgement. Indeed, over-reliance on discreet (or premature) judgement was recurrently deemed a potentially fatal error in identifying the best talent:

Coach B: *"So to find out what type of individual they were was really enlightening because I certainly know from experience that I would have made mistakes if I hadn't of done that in that I would have just dismissed a player because they weren't technically good enough at that time."*

Coach E: *"What are they going to be like when they are 22? That's what talent ID is all about. Not what you are seeing and hearing now, and that's why it is so difficult."*

Coach G: *"For me you very rarely identify the complete player [in the moment]. If I had to take ownership of what it was I was trying to achieve I would like to think my responsibility would lie in trying to increase that players understanding of the game and accelerate his learning."*

These exact forms of mistake were acknowledged to occur, however, as a borderline-inevitable upshot of constraints on time and resources in elite soccer:

Coach A: *"You can't accept every kid into some development system. It's just not workable so you have to make some judgement calls and probably a lot of coaches will make that judgement call on what's in front of them rather than what they can be."*

Coach F: *"If it was my full time job I would physically go and look for players for my age group but because of time constraints I just don't have the time. That's why*

*some kids get introduced into the system because of the wrong reasons in my
opinion."*

Thus, the business of TI familiar to these coaches is not separate from talent development
processes, but rather the two are reflexively aligned. Of course, the notion that *talent
development* is process-orientated and longitudinal is not the exclusive preserve of coaching
scholars, nor indeed a novel observation (see MacNamara, et al. 2010b, Van Rossum and
Gagné, 2005, Vaeyens, et al. 2008). However, while many studies (including this one) have
begun from the proposition/assumption that TI is a relatively static phenomenon by
comparison, this would not appear to be the case for the participating coaches.

These direct assertions by professionals in-the-field – i.e. that early or static measures
often prove untrustworthy when compared to long-term observation and interaction - might
well suggest that actually doing effective TI in youth soccer is largely incommensurable with
a great deal of extant research focused on the significance of decontextualized measurement
of talent in the here-and-now. However, and as Kurt Danziger (1990) famously demonstrates
of psychologists themselves, the manner in which invested individuals construct the object of
their concern is often largely driven by the ideological, political and practical business of
'doing their job' at given times, in given contexts and in given cultures. It is uncontroversial
to propose that the business of sport scientists in the present academic climate is directed by a
range of imperatives such as project funding, and the need to regularly publish results. This
climate often encourages a somewhat decontextualized and/or short-term approach to the
phenomenon of study, and a corollary focus on the use of statistical tools for predictive
measurement over genuine longitudinal investigation (Bampouras, Cronin and Miller 2012).
It also, in turn, necessitates that phenomena such as talent, be they physiological, sociological

or psychological in nature, are themselves conceptualised as relatively stable in order for the internal logics of such research to function.

Were *coaches*, on the other hand, to view talent as primordially static or immanent, then actually doing direct TI might well be reducible to administering a Vo2 max test and/or some mode of psychological profiling tool prior to a talent development process. The perception of competent control, or at least influence, over a socially or professionally significant process or phenomenon is a cornerstone of personal self-efficacy building and self-motivational capacity (Bandura 1977, 1997). Thus, to conceptualise talent itself in a process-oriented, developmental manner is a practical and social psychological necessity for coaches in terms of (a) seeing a definable role for themselves in nurturing talent *per se*, (b) finding the motivation *to* perform that role (c) generating positive self-esteem *from* its performance. This is not, for a moment, to suggest that the coaches in question do not *actually* understand talent in these ways. Rather, it is to highlight that the manner in which a phenomenon such as talent is constructed, and the everyday experiences of working with it, are deeply embedded within each other, and not simply organised by a linear relationship of observation to concept.

It is in this respect, and drawing on the work of Abbott & Collins (2004), we can examine the apparent theory-practice divide evident in the data not simply as a clash of professional ideologies, but as a core condition of different professional lifeworlds occupied by academics (theorists) and coaches (practitioners). This is particularly mirrored in the coaches' explicitly humanistic manner of constructing a talented athlete as a socially-contexted, multifaceted and therefore evolvable 'person.' In contrast with some of the more positivistically-oriented literature detailed above, which tends to portray athletes as discreet and semi-static constellations of measurements, the coaches participating in this study

emphasise how each assessment (or learning) context endemic to identifying an individual's talent is socially-specific, rather than universally-prescribable (Gilbert and Trudel 2004).

> Coach A: *"I think we need to realise that everyone's situation is unique and to act accordingly."*

> Coach D: *"I think we need to be wary of other people and all the influences on a player. For example, friends getting jealous. Every player's situation is unique and we need to assess and understand this when selecting players."*

> Coach F: *"I still veer towards the 10,000 hours theory. Granted it has to be appropriate and good practice, but we are there to set that kid up with the best possible future."*

In sum, for the participants, and as some commentators have observed (Reilly, Williams et al. 2000, Vaeyens et al. 2008), talent is a highly dynamic phenomenon that cannot be easily isolated or dissected. TI is, therefore and by extension, lived and interpreted by the participants as an equally dynamic set of social interactions, linked to environment and specific knowledges and skills that evolve over time. Perhaps most importantly, however, and as implicit in most statements above, the participants frequently framed talent itself as being - to a significant extent - *defined* by its capacity to develop under nurture.

> Coach D: *"This is where good coaching prevails, constantly challenging and asking questions of the player. If you just leave talent alone then it is highly unlikely that it will develop and improve…."*

Thus, and as observed by Christensen (2009), the participating coaches determined that what appears to be talent now may well not be considered as such later if it does not respond

affirmatively to good coaching. As such, and to conclude this theme, for the participants in this study at least, the dichotomy between TI and TD is - effectively - a *purely* academic one; identification and development are, in Talcott Parsons' (1937) terms, 'actions analytic,' rather than 'actions concrete.'

Superordinate Theme 2: "The right kind of psychology is important, but the wrong kind is devastating."

All participants recurrently highlighted the centrality of personality and general psychological makeup to their personal visions of a 'talented individual.' Their approaches to the psychological features of talent were, however, framed more in terms of the red light / green light reasoning that they elsewhere cited as inherently problematic when compared to a careful, humanistic and longitudinal approach.

> Coach E: *"If I was an academy director tomorrow, doing some sort of psychological profiling would be a must."*
>
> Coach F: *"Out of all the attributes that make a successful player, we think the psychological side is massive, so it's something we need to try and measure more effectively."*

A number of commentators have, as previously discussed, foregrounded the importance of monitoring such concerns in elite sport performance (MacNamara, et al. 2010a, MacNamara, et al. 2010b). What is of particular import here, however, was a sustained focus upon negation over affirmation. In short, when doing practical TI, the analytic eye of the coaches was largely focused more on the absence than the presence of particular (though often

unspecified) psychological markers, such that an individual might be swiftly 'filtered out' from the development process, or at the very least marked as a 'serious risk.'

> Coach A: *"For me the psychological area is one of the most important cogs in it. If you haven't got that then you have got no chance."*

> Coach B: *"Well I think if you have got psychological failings, or deficiencies might be a better word…that can really hamper you."*

> Coach D: *"Getting the balance right psychologically is huge because if you do not, potentially, it could have implications further on down the line."*

This high sensitivity to 'deficient' psychologies is in-practice, perhaps, inevitable when one considers the social and fiscal capital invested in each young player at elite level (Williams and Reilly 2000). On the other hand, for the absence of one or more of a set of relatively unstandardized psychological qualities to have an override-facility with respect to all other facets of talent would seem to imply something very specific with respect to the participants' core perceptions of personality itself. Fundamentally, contra to assertions made in extant literature (Thelwell et al. 2010, Vealey 2008) and indeed to many of the participants' own regarding the character of talent itself, some psychological attributes were assumed to be simply less *trainable* than other aspects of the athlete. For example, at no stage were unsuitable physical size, fitness or even ball-skills determined to be fatal flaws in an individual's prospects by any of the participating coaches. Having the wrong mind-set, however, was taken to be something that could stymie a player's progress from the very beginning.

In terms of the particular psychological qualities requisite to deem an athlete a 'viable' talent, participants displayed both convergence and divergence in different areas. The three core issues with respect to which there was significant convergence related to identifiably efficient perceptual-cognitive capacities in athletes:

a) Making the correct decisions quickly and consistently under pressure, i.e. *You find the most talented players make the best decisions.*

b) Heightened awareness of current socio-physical environment, i.e. *Talented players can just read the game.*

c) Effective anticipation of actions and collective consequences, i.e. *Talented players do not put teammates under pressure.*

These issues (decision-making, contextual awareness and team-working capacity) are also common topics in contemporary coaching psychology (Farrow, Baker and MacMahon 2013, Hodges and Williams 2012). Indeed, some participants not only explicitly identified them in an abstract form, but also implicated their importance through citation of practical 'fly or fall' training exercises specifically designed to visibly expose their quality (or lack thereof) in individuals.

> Coach A: *"A lot of our training involves decision-making. Loads of chaos, so you can start seeing who makes better decisions."*

Similarly, 'mental strength' was recurrently deployed as a self-evident 'must-have,' though seldom actually described. Typically:

Coach C: *"I definitely think to progress to that top level then being mentally strong is key."*

In cases where psychological skills were actually unpacked to any degree, there was some variety between participants in the interpretation of its constitution. For example, 'mental strength' (or 'mental toughness,' a notoriously slippery concept in sport psychology itself; see Butt, Weinberg and Culp, 2010, Jones, Hanton, and Connaughton, 2002) was taken by some to be reflected primarily in analytic/cognitive capacities. For others, more emotional qualities such attitude, passion or drive were deemed to be key. Similarly, 'the right attitude' itself emerged as a complex construct that was taken by to variably embody diligence, information retention and obedience at one end of an apparent and potentially contradictory continuum, and creativity, passion (again) and bravery at the other. Thus, when defining some broad psychological attributes that needed to be identifiable in a viable talent – or, more often, needed to *not* be identifiably *absent* - the coaches employed a range of variable and experientially-oriented resources rather than any consistent metric informed by literature. In short, an implicit 'I know it when I see it,' or more accurately 'I know it when I don't see it,' attitude appeared to prevail.

What these assertions, in their entirety, would seem to imply is that while participants viewed talent as an ongoing process (and their charges in a vividly humanistic way) *in general*, their experiences also led them to a more classically positivistic and Cartesian manner of conceptualising explicitly psychological 'deficiencies;' i.e. they were seen as semi-permanent and objectively discernible personal qualities. In the exclusive psychological domain, then, confidence was overtly voiced in the kinds of tools for static assessment (or 'profiling') that elsewhere were seen as poor substitutes for sustained practical interpersonal

interaction. These observations are consonant with findings from the Portuguese Premier Football League (Freitas, Dias and Fonseca 2013a, Freitas, Dias and Fonseca 2013b), which suggest that coaches therein often value, but are also often uncomfortable with, the development of explicitly psychological skills.

Superordinate Theme 3: "Social skills and talent have little interdependence."

Despite their recurrent characterisation of TI as an ongoing system of social interactions, the participating coaches placed consistently low value on their charges' actual ability *to* socially interact, or even to abide by general social norms, when assessing whether they were 'talented.' In doing so, they drew a much harder divide between social skills and those from the psychological and the physiological domains. For example:

Coach A: *"I have worked with players who psychologically are strong but socially not great and they tend to do okay. So I don't think the sociology side of it is a massive area. Just thinking of one lad who never got on with his group really, he was always the butt of all the jokes and went on a lads' holiday and someone stuck his toothbrush up his bum and now that lad plays for England so he hasn't done too badly out of it. Socially he is not great, but psychologically he is brilliant."*

Coach B: *"Socially [we might] suggest that players need to interact and have that confidence, that kind of self-confidence to be able to do that...but from my experience I have come across players who don't do that very well but have been successful."*

Indeed, difficulty with social interaction was sometimes rationalised as intrinsically connected to "tough" dispositions:

> Coach E: *"A lot of individuals who excel have had a difficult upbringing so I think this area is tricky. A real social malfunction earlier on in life can provide players with powerful coping strategies in a tough elite environment."*

Perhaps the most important issue to arise from this in psychological terms relates not to these relative imputations of importance, but to the manner in which the 'psychological' and the 'social' were categorised and evidenced by the participating coaches from the outset. As a broad rule of thumb, all on-the-field behaviours, and also all inferably positive off-the-field behaviours, were attributed to the player's psychology and, by extension, talent. Inferably negative (e.g. irresponsible, immature or anti-social) off-the-field behaviours, meanwhile, were taken to evidence 'poor social skills' which themselves were largely decoupled from the psychological (and therefore talent-relevant) domain. On a few occasions, the link between social skills and 'disposition' was explicitly articulated:

> Coach A: *"How you interact socially will be a reflection on what you are like psychologically. So that arrogance or edge combined with the respect from your teammates can only help."*

Even in these cases, however, the limits of what was taken to be 'talent-relevant' social interaction were specified very tightly; i.e. only that with team mates and coach. Moreover, what might well be considered a negative form of behaviour elsewhere (e.g. arrogance) was frequently couched in terms of its practical facility *within* those limits:

Coach E: *"There has to be something different about them…Some players can be too rounded and not have enough edge about them."*

Coach F: *"I think as a player you need to have a bit of arrogance, but also have that respect from your teammates."*

Coach G: *"Sometimes it's those lads that have got a bit of devil in them, and that are difficult to manage, that rise to the top."*

As such, in these cases, the notion of the 'Redged' (rounded but with an edge) personality – which was frequently viewed as significantly facilitating a young player's rise to elite status – was not assembled evenly across contexts, or even within them. Rather:

1. Immature, arrogant or anti-social interactions with individuals *beyond* the sphere of the team (and managerial) setup were viewed negatively, but seen as evidencing only poor social skills, and partitioned away from the 'psychological' realm.

2. Only the psychological realm was viewed as pertinent to the assessment and development of talent.

3. Social interactions with individuals *within* the sphere of the team (and managerial) setup were seen as relevant to psychological strength, and therefore talent.

4. Both positive and some more apparently negative interactions (particularly 'arrogant' ones) with individuals *within* the sphere of the team (and managerial) setup were viewed positively. They were thus likely to be seen as *evidencing* psychological strength, and therefore talent.

On the whole, thus, and in contrast with the English Football Association's 'Four Corner Model' which emphasises a balance between tactical and technical, physical, psychological *and* social development of young players, the coaches implicitly and explicitly partitioned the social activities and skills of young players away from performance scenarios when defining and evaluating talent. In terms of coaching practice, we might well view this kind of reasoning as anathema to proposals in work such as that of Côté and Gilbert (2009) and Vierimaa et al. (2012), which actively advocate the importance of promoting generalised, healthy social connections (with friends, peers and families) in facilitating effective psychological development in players. Moreover, it might seem academically suspect to 'cherry pick' certain domains and types of activity when assembling an account of an individual's psychology while sidelining others into a residual category. Selective and highly domain-specific reasoning such as this is not unique to the business of professional coaching in any sense, however. Much psychology (and particularly sport psychology) is similarly prone to isolate domain-specific behaviours, decoupling 'relevant' contexts from broader 'life contexts.' With respect to self-efficacy and confidence in sport, for example, Bandura's (1977, 1997) classic works have been criticized for paying inadequate attention to the non-sporting domains of the athlete's life. Hays et al. (2009), for example, argue that '…the sources from which athletes derive their confidence are not only sport specific, but also influenced by demographic and organisational factors.' (p.1198). Similarly, with respect to anxiety, Bandelow et al. (2004) are highly critical of any psychology that limits the anxiety-stressors examined to those occurring within the specific context of the anxiety-manifestation itself. To reprise an issue raised with respect to Theme 1 (above), however, in many formal studies a nominal boundary has to be drawn around the range of contexts that can potential be explored when investigating, for example, confidence, for the sake of sheer practicality. With respect to this theme, thus, the general model of conceptualising player psychology

operationalised among the coaches practicing TI can be seen as a necessity embedded in the practical conditions of actually being a high-level coach in youth soccer. This was itself explicitly articulated on one occasion:

> Coach F: *"It's a results driven business and are you really going to get rid of the player who might have…said something to upset some of the lads if he is the one you think can make it?"*

In short, in order to identify the best talent, one should not risk setting down evaluative criteria that could potentially damage the core TI enterprise itself, i.e. that of identifying potentially high-level players. Thus, and much as Harold Garfinkel (1967) notes that many professionals employ apparently contradictory or 'illogical' methods *in situ* in order to uphold the broader *spirit of the task*, the participating coaches herein use 'social skills' as a classificatory dustbin for non-productive behaviours that might otherwise result in the rejection of the very types of instrumental talent they are seeking.

Conclusions

This study sought to describe the talent identification as lived and interpreted by coaches in English soccer. The coaches participating in this study, operating in elite youth football in England, consistently defined general talent in soccer as a multidimensional, generally fluid and highly trainable phenomenon (given the right interventions). These claims to the trainability of talent were most confidently made with reference to the physiological, technical and tactical aspects of soccer, and underscored the mutual interdependency of how

TI and TD operate, in a longitudinal manner, in the practical circumstances of coaching. In these terms, the core concepts of talent advanced were 'nurtured' more than 'natural,' and the talented individuals were approached in a humanistic and individual way.

On the other hand, the psychological features endemic to talent, although taken to be crucial, were rather less consistently and clearly assembled. In contrast with large swathes of pertinent literature (Thelwell et al. 2010, Vealey 2008), personality traits were deemed more difficult to assess, semi-permanent and, thus, less malleable than other aspects of talent. There was also considerable consensus around the dangers of recruiting with players with the 'wrong' type of psychology, although exactly what this comprised was again rather variably constructed. Although the *wrong* psychology had emerged as a clear red light when assessing talent, the bulk of immature or disruptive behaviours and interactions were largely dismissed as evidencing only poor 'social skills,' rather than being taken to evidence a player's psychological readiness to develop in soccer itself.

It would, perhaps, be possible to take various aspects of the analysis above and utilise them to critically question the manner in which the participating coaches defined and worked with talent (via direct comparisons with extant normative frames for 'good practice'). We might argue that there was a lack of consistency and/or clarity around many key concepts, an undervaluing of social interactions and so forth. The slated point of the approach taken, however, was to elucidate the phenomenological links between experience, practice and worldview among participants (Smith and Osborn 2008). It has been recurrently highlighted in the piece, how ways of defining talent, are immanently linked to the practical, everyday business of actually *being* a professional coach. Thus, for example, the coaches' strong emphasis on nurture over nature, the apparent contradictions between their approaches to physiological and psychological issues and the manner in which they assembled 'social

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skills' in such a way as to exclude potentially problematic off-field factors, evidence the mutually-embedded nature of concept, practice and professional context. Rather than consistently challenge coaches to fall into line with normative models of how TI and TD *should* be done, thus, and as a number of distinguished commentators have argued with respect to medical and therapeutic practice (McLeod, 1992, Silverman, 1997), we might instead more thoroughly interrogate the real worlds inhabited by coaches, with all their own pressures and contradictions, and attempt more clearly to reconcile academic ideas about 'good practice' with grounded knowledge of practical everyday necessities.

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