



A Critical Appraisal of the Social Norms in Sport Coaching within Social Capital Theoretical Frameworks

Abstract

Over the last decades, the concept of social capital has been the research objective of many prominent sociologists such as Bourdieu, Coleman, Putnam and examined within diverse social and cultural contexts. The studies shed light upon disparities across different social groups, explained how they occur, facilitated reconsideration of the established social norms and policies. However, despite social theory strongly linked to sports coaching, the notion of social capital and its role in coaching practice remains poorly developed and researched. Firstly, the present article draws on the critical appraisal of the established social norms and policies in the sport coaching domain through the lens of social capital theoretical frameworks. Secondly, the recommendations are made for coaches and governing bodies responsible for the accreditation of the coaches.

Keywords: social capital, fast tracking, bonding capital, bridging capital, informal education.

Introduction

The first systematic approach to define the concept of social capital was taken by Pierre Bourdieu (Portes 1998), who stated that individuals utilize their position, status, relationships and connections within social groups as a valuable resource that can be used for their benefit (Bourdieu 1986). Thus, the amount of social capital enables an individual to exert power over others and determines the variety of opportunities available for this person (Purdy, Jones and Cassidy 2009).

“Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential **resources** which are linked to possession of a durable **network** of more or less institutionalized **relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition**” (Bourdieu 1986, p. 21)

As an illustration, Bourdieu’s approach has been widely used in the professional advancement area to analyse how individuals act to attain their career goals. On the contrary to Bourdieu’s concept, whereas social capital is a feature of individuals, Robert Putnam argued that social capital has a collective nature, and formed by

“features of social organizations, such as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions” (Putnam 1993, p. 167). The benefits which derive from membership in a group are the glue that holds individuals together. This approach emphasised the importance of participation in civic groups, volunteering and collaboration, which positively affects community well-being and enables them to function more effectively. Although these theoretical frameworks help us understand the economic and social benefits of cooperation, they reveal some “dark sides” of social capital and how it can generate social inequality and exclusion (Field 2006).

How is the theory of social capital related to coaching?

There is a clear connection between the coaching domain and the notion of social capital. Cushion and Jones (2006) stated that coaches are engaged in different social networks, which function as complex systems with roles, hierarchies, restrictions and diverse forms of capital. For example, the hierarchy in a football club is based on a different volume of social capital, which is determined by each member’s status within the club’s structure. In this regard, a football it can be considered as a social arena, where individuals act according to their social position and situation in order to enlarge their particular capital (Cushion and Jones 2014), for instance, coaches in opposition to the owner of the club, senior players in opposition to younger players. Moreover, the researchers emphasised the multifaceted and complex social nature of the sport environment, which cannot “be captured to any degree through a series of linear blocks and arrows” (Cushion and Kitchen 2007, p. 53). Based on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework, Alexander Blackett and his colleagues (2017) developed this idea. They suggested that individual coaching practice is shaped by other agencies, such as national governing bodies, club owners, or sport directors. This contemporary approach differs from a traditional view, which focuses more on “coach-athlete” interrelationships.

Is it not what you know? Is it who you know?

One of the most scientifically appealing researches within the sociology of sports coaching is a study of Steven Rynne. He uses Putman’s concept of bonding and bridging social capital (see Figure 1). The scholar compares how fast tracking coaches’ development and employment trajectories differ from those who have never been professional athletes.

"Fast tracking refers to the special concessions offered to **former elite athletes** so that their progress through formal coach **accreditation** structures is **expedited** (Rynne 2014, p. 300)".



Bonding Capital

- between people with similar background, shared identity and sense of belonging;
- inward-looking;
- protective;
- exclusive;
- high density of participants;
- good for "getting by".



Bridging Capital

- between people with different background and social identity;
- outward-looking;
- open;
- inclusive;
- relationships of exchange;
- crucial for "getting ahead".

Figure 1: Putman’s (2000) types of social capital

The researcher addresses a fundamental issue about former pro athletes are privileged to access an elite coaching environment and more preferable to secure coaching positions. Do you get a job because of what you know or who you know? Rynne’s study strives to find an answer. First, he discusses supposed advantages for those who performed at the elite level and those who did not. Subsequently, his research touches upon a much broader problem. How person’s playing achievements influence the quality of his coaching? In this regard, Schempp’s (2010) and Mielke’s (2007) studies take a closer look at this issue and suggest that accomplishments in your professional playing career do not predict your coaching success. However, in terms of social capital, Rynne (2014) states that coaches with playing experience possess a greater capacity and quantity of bridging capital, which positively influences their development pathway.

Therefore, even though a person could not be previously known to others as a coach, his high-level sport achievements could give an access to a more extensive network of people. In addition, the researcher highlights that being an elite athlete links a person to an exclusive type of behaviour that ties him with elite environment (Koniordos 2008). Such a strong connection implies a significant bonding social capital which, in turn, facilitates support and trusting relationships between those who work in these special settings (Putnam, 2000). Conversely, the example in Box 1 describes how a lack of bonding and bridging capital decreases tolerance and acceptances in elite coaching circles.

Box 1

In 2017 I participated in the UEFA "B" licence coaching course in Ukraine. I was engaged in some coaching debates with my peers. Half of them played at the highest national football level. Another half did not have such a background. In these debates, I noticed that the coaches without playing experience got less support from the tutors (who were also represented as high-level coaches) compared to former pro players despite the level and scientific rationale of the arguments. It felt like elite football is a private social club where everyone supports each other, takes advantage of its exclusivity with a little freedom for a different opinion. A key argument of former players was that you could not be a true expert if you have not played at the highest level. Unfortunately, this perception is deeply rooted in the Ukrainian coaching environment, despite the success stories of Jose Mourinho, Arrigo Sacchi, Thomas Tuchel and Julian Nagelsmann.

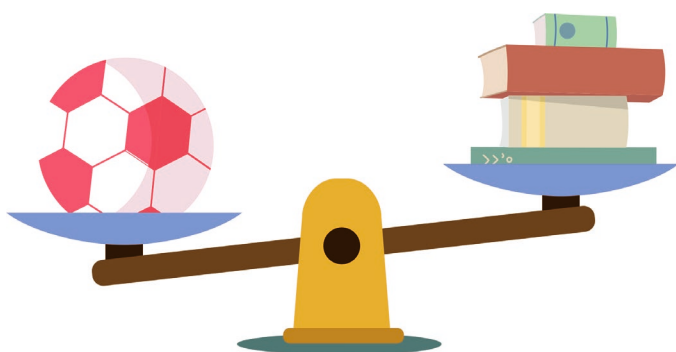
Despite its exploratory nature, one of the major weaknesses of Rynne’s study is that it draws upon the investigation of a relatively small group of coaches. Future studies in this area should consider a more significant cohort of people within a substantial period of time. In addition, the research would have been more interesting if it had included how social capital can be built and developed for traditional path coaches who did not have an elite playing career.

Do I know how to coach by playing the game or by learning it?

Portes and Landolt (2000) stressed that the concept of social capital has to be applied with caution due to the possible limitations derived from social ties. As an illustration, Blackett, Evans and Piggott (2017) drawing upon Bourdieusian framework, highlighted the disconnection between knowledge coaches acquire through formal education and clubs executives' requirements for recruiting the coaches. In terms of head coach roles, directors tend to favour prospective applicants who have previously been engaged in the same club network. In this regard, former football players or members of the coaching staff are prime candidates for consideration. Directors feel that trust, acquaintance with club's philosophy and informal knowledge obtained from playing at the highest level contribute to creating strong and effective coach-players relationships, and as result, lead to success.

"Informal knowledge is the lifelong process by which every person acquires and accumulates knowledge, skills, attitudes and insights from **daily experiences and exposure to the environment**" (Coombs and Ahmed 1974)

Thus, it indicates the low social capital capacity of formal coaching education and it supports the common opinion between researches about its devaluating role in coaching expertise development (Nash and Collins 2006; Erickson, Bruner, MacDonald and Cote 2008; Piggott 2012; Blackett, Evans and Piggott 2018). Moreover, it signals about excluding cohorts of potentially successful candidates from obtaining a head coaching position). Regarding my experience, it is assumed that the study of Blackett and his colleagues would have been more relevant if the researchers had tracked the progress and achievements of the employed coaches with playing experience. So, in my opinion, the question "do I know how to coach by playing the game or by learning it?" remains open and needs further investigation.



Insights for professional practice

1. For traditional pathway coaches

- Work extensively on expanding your network. However, you have to be careful and strategic about the people you approach. Try to identify those who share the same interests and goals or who are empowered to make decisions in the coaching field.
- Be a proactive member of communities of practice, coaching seminars and conferences. Be open-minded and do not be afraid to exchange your ideas and information with other coaches from diverse environments.

These steps will allow you to accumulate social capital and assist with achieving your career goals (Box 2).

Box 2

Recently I've asked my fellow coaches which factors can help to advance a particular coaching career? There were a variety of factors been presented from "luck" to "commitment". However, the senior and most experienced colleagues highlighted "Connections".

2. For fast tracking coaches

- Reassess your competencies. Critical thinking and reflection should support you with that.
- Consider that skipping the stages of formal education might leave you with some limited knowledge in sport-specific areas. Just because you were a top-level athlete in your sport does not mean you know how to coach it without advancing your knowledge. Likewise, if you know how to skydive, it does not mean that you can teach the others skydiving without any specific knowledge and appropriate qualification.

3. To governing bodies responsible for the accreditation of the coaches

- Provide equal access to the coaching courses. Considering the negative effects of social capital, do you "need to continue to privilege those who are already privileged" (Rynne 2014, p. 311), or should evaluate a person's competencies as a coach in the first place?
- Facilitate access for coaches without high-level performance background to professional football clubs. That will expand a talent pool and increase the number of potential candidates for the coaching roles.
- Reconsider and redesign current coaching courses due to their low practical value for the coaches and those who employ them.

Summary:

The concept of social capital is mainly unexplored within the coaching domain. Application of theoretical frameworks is able to shed light on many issues within coaching area, such as inequality and nepotism. The expediency of supporting fast tracking coaches remains ambiguous. This article is intended to encourage the discussion about the reconsideration of the established social norms and policies related to the employment and development of the coaches. Coach educators need to critically evaluate the quality of the formal education programmes to ensure that their social capital value increases. Despite recognized limitations (the research has been conducted within short period of time) it motivates the author to work on more comprehensive study.

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