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Exploring Sport As A Site For Children’s Relational And Socio-Psychological Development

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Abstract

Shifting family structures within Western society have arguably led to the weakening of child-parent relationships (Putnam, 2000). Though the evidence on relational outcomes offered by more diffuse family units is mixed (Field, 2008), there is an argument that a neoliberal social ethos that emphasizes greater competition between individuals in the pursuit of narrowly defined social ideals (e.g., according to health, education and career progression) is leaving less time for child-rearing (Coleman, 1987; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). This raises the question of whether alternate arenas can support children’s socio-psychological development. This research will explore whether sport is capable of providing an environment that can foster the formation of meaningful human bonds. It will also interrogate the extent to which these bonds can yield the psychological benefits (self-esteem and self-worth, amongst others) the child once may have accessed through strong familial relationships. The research will draw on the theories of attachment theory (to explore what psychological benefits or deficiencies relationships provide) and social capital (to understand how and why relational quality is changing and arguably deteriorating). These concepts will be applied in relation to ideas on sport and neoliberal ideals. Given that relationship quality and the ensuing psychological development offered by the family may be eroding it is imperative to investigate the extent to which alternative institutions can replace it. Sport, as such an institution, is often used to promote youth empowerment, social action, safer communities and improved health and well-being (see “Access Sport,” 2004, “Kids Company,” 1996, “Street Games,” 2007). However, the spotlight has rarely focused on the importance of fostering relational development. Before we encourage relationally deprived children to participate in sport we must understand how viable sport may be to compensate for current trends in familial relations.

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1. Introduction

“The modern family ... moves in the direction of becoming a set of independent parties, each going his or her own way, residing together for the material or psychic benefits common residence provides. It is not a family in which social capital exists and is directed toward educational development of the child, once that child has reached high school age”

(Coleman, 1994, p.71)

Human relationships have the capacity to provide people with the most intense feelings of happiness, fulfilment and satisfaction while they can also be the source for the deepest forms of pain, suffering and despair. In short, relationships matter. Bowlby’s (1969, 1982) seminal works identified the family as a key site for a child’s psychosocial development. However, the nature of child-adult bonds and connections between families started changing in the advent of post-modernity (Field, 2008; Halpern, 2005) and are arguably also eroding (Putnam, 2000). Amongst the myriad of accounts put forward to explicate this shift, two socio-economic transformations are significant: women entering the workforce in increasing numbers (Coleman, 1987) and the normalisation of neoliberal ideals (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010; Winegard & Winegard, 2011). The combination of both parents leaving the house for work in conjunction with an increasing focus on the individual (such as working longer hours, career progression or health monitoring) is affecting child-rearing on a psychosocial level. Given that parents have less quality time to spend with their children and the family as an institution appears to be changing, there are motives to question whether this new family dynamic is having an effect on children’s psychological and social maturation. The neoliberal approach towards this issue, as Lazzarato (2009) points out, is to “transform society into an ‘enterprise society’” (p.120); in other words, develop a service or institution that claims it can compensate and complement for aspects in children’s growth that the family may not provide. One such institution, heavily pervasive and popular in Western society, is sport. This positional paper will question whether sport, a site which often displays a neoliberal ethos (Coakley, 2011), is a potential platform for the development of psychosocial features that may be lacking due to familial pressures or deficiencies. In order to explore this topic, a novel blend of sociological and psychological theories shall be employed: attachment theory and social capital. Though the focus will be on attachment theory to investigate what relational conditions should be satisfied for children to reap the corresponding psychological benefits, there is a need to cross boundaries and unite attachment theory with the wider sociological world (Parker, 1999); for which purpose I will employ social capital theory. The use of social capital theory at the micro-level will complement attachment theory by exploring how and why family relationships appear to be changing and arguably eroding.

1.1. Attachment theory

Attachment theory’s (Bowlby, 1969, 1982) inception is rooted in the study of the family and on the mental health benefits children stand to gain from quality child-parent relationships. At its core, it posits that a deep and meaningful relationship with a person can act as a buffer from stress or threat (Cassidy, 1999). Put differently, it is not about seeking contact with another person per se but rather the emotional state of comfort, warmth and safety that contact unlocks (Carr, 2012). This trusted person is what attachment theorists would call an attachment figure; someone with whom getting close to at a time of distress generates a feeling of security capable of dispelling or palliating the anxiety generated by the threat. In order to access these psychological benefits from an attachment figure, an attachment bond must first be forged. Such a bond is characterised by three elements (Carr, 2012): proximity maintenance (a desire to be close to the figure), safe haven (the person is seen as a protective bubble from threats) and secure base (the attachment figure acts as a base from which exploration and development can stem). From the moment a baby is born he or she begins to bond with his or her primary caregivers. These caregivers, or attachment figures, are usually the baby’s parents, though it is not unusual for grandparents or child-care providers to fulfill the role (Howes, 1999). As children develop into teenagers and adults, they often add further attachment figures to their network, notably romantic partners (Kobak, Rosenthal, Zajac, & Madsen, 2000). Having an attachment figure is no guarantee of positive mental health benefits; the key resides in the type and quality of the
relationship with the attachment figure. Thus, the way a primary caregiver interacts with a child greatly conditions the child’s attachment style. This refers to the youth’s ‘template’ of how the world works or, as Ricks (1995) states, their “personal theory of reality” (p.212). Attachment styles are divided into three categories. The first, secure attachments, are characterised by a child possessing a positive outlook about the relationship with their attachment figure. These figures are trustworthy and will respond to the child’s distress. Anxiously attached individuals are ambivalent about the level of support they will receive when suffering and are doubtful about how much trust can be placed on their attachment figure. Finally, an avoidant style is marked by the child’s general lack of trust in the responsiveness of their attachment figure. As such, these youths tend to strive for emotional distance (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). It is important to remember that attachment styles are initially developed as a response to the interaction with primary caregivers but will, in time, morph into the template used to form relations with strangers. Beyond acting as a template for engaging with the social world, attachment styles also condition a person’s sense of self-worth. Whilst a securely attached child feels they are worthy of love, support and attention, an insecurely (avoidant or anxious) attached youth believes the opposite about themselves (Davis, Jowett, & Lafrenière, 2013). A strong and healthy parent-child relationship that fulfils the three attachment bond needs (proximity maintenance, safe haven and secure base) is likelier to result in a child developing a secure attachment style, whereas an unresponsive adult who does not attend to a child’s attachment requirements is prone to result in an avoidant style. In essence, depending on the type of relationship they have with their parents (or primary caregivers), children gain access to different quality resources which entail varying psychosocial outcomes. A securely attached youngster has access to a healthier set of psychological tools and mental states (such as affect regulation, greater levels of self-esteem and self-worth) that an anxious or avoidant child would struggle to acquire (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2012). Additionally, the securely attached person who implicitly believes people can be trusted will flourish when forming and maintaining new social relations, in comparison to someone whose default view is that others are neither dependable nor reliable. This disparity in resources is prone to significantly affect youths’ psychosocial development and is the reason why forming a strong parent-child attachment bond greatly matters. Attachment theory, as a psychological concept, has largely remained cut-off from sociology, politics and the world outside of the psychological sciences. The scope for attachment theory, as a valuable lens in theorising children’s relationships, has the potential to be significantly increased through wider application to the theoretical apparatus available within the sociological literature. Thus, there is a need to better understand and interrogate how changes in social structures and trends might have an impact upon attachment theory. In what follows, I seek to outline sociological thinking around the changing nature of families and social capital, integrating such ideas with attachment theory. Given the call for greater interdisciplinary collaboration between sociology and psychology (Parker, 1999), social capital theory (Coleman, 1987; Putnam, 2000) stands as an ideal sociological candidate because of its relationship focus and its conceptual breadth (since it permeates practically all forms of human interaction). Thus, blending attachment theory with social capital theory is a novel lens through which to look at human relationships.

1.2. Social capital and the changing nature of families: implications for attachment theory

Putnam (2000) defines social capital as “the connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p.19). The bedrock of social capital theory concerns the social network as a conduit by which the individual can access resources not normally available through their own means. In this sense the social network represents a form of ‘capital’ in its own right concerning the potential it offers the individual to leverage an advantage (Field, 2008). For Coleman (1987) the main source of social capital available to children is the family. He stated that: “what I mean by social capital in the raising of children is the norms, the social networks, and the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the child’s growing up” (p.36). In other words, the manner in which parents interact and engage with their offspring generates an ‘expectation’ of how the child should behave sociologically and psychologically. A loss in the transmission of social capital from parents to their children would likely stunt the latter’s psychosocial growth.

Coleman (1987, 1988) argued that familial bonds were weakening as a consequence of adults spending more time at work and focusing on personal pursuits (such as career advancement and appearances). This relational erosion, he
claimed, diminished the flow of social capital within families. However, we should be cautious of inferring a simplistic association in which weak ties become synonymous of ‘bad’ and strong ones of ‘good’. Granovetter (1973) illustrated how weak ties (emotionally shallow interpersonal links) in a business context are more likely to yield the positive returns of finding a job than strong ties (trusting relationships with a small group of people). Moreover, the Mafia is a clear example where “strong ties [do] not necessarily guarantee that trust is well founded” (Brown, 2010, p.33). Given how the social capital benefits a person can gain depend on a combination of the strength of ties and the quality of relationships with others, as well as the context where these bonds are forged, Coleman (1988) was not exaggerating when he characterised social capital as an intangible form of capital. This diffuseness renders social capital conceptually broad and applicable in theorising human relationships within diverse social strata. Its importance resides in that a large part of a person’s behaviour, how they think and how they act is going to be conditioned by the ‘resources’ or ‘lessons’ they have acquired from previous and current human connections. Supportive relationships with people that share one’s values enable individuals to achieve goals they would otherwise have struggled to reach (Field, 2008). However, although social capital can be gained from any human relationship this does not imply that the same resources are acquired from each relationship. Clearly, a child is far likelier to learn how to behave or deal with social situations from their parents (Halpern, 2005) than from their school bus driver. Nevertheless, the school bus driver does have a part to play, though smaller, in shaping the child’s social template or ‘personal theory of reality’ whose foundations were established by the parent-child relationship. For instance, the bus driver may seek to prevent bullying on their coach. By instilling social protection values, this driver is contributing to a few children’s social and psychological development. This example serves to illustrate the theoretical link that can be formed between attachment theory and social capital: both theories provide a ‘resource’. Conceptualising this ‘resource’ in terms of the conditions attachment theorists forward are essential for healthy psychosocial development will contend with some aspects of social capital’s intangibility. In other words, the benefits of strong or weak relationships within a context will not be determined by economic or social mobility notions but rather according to attachment arguments. Determining the extent to which Western family relationships are changing, from a social capital perspective, is not a straightforward task. Though the current evidence is mixed, (Edwards, 2004) remarks that the extant literature appears to point in the direction ‘social capital lost’ story. Whereas some authors claim that parent-child bonds are eroding (Coleman, 1987; Putnam, 2000), others argue that the family unit is changing, not necessarily for better or worse (Field, 2008; Halpern, 2005). In spite of the mixed evidence described above, there are reasons to propose that the quality of child-rearing the current parental generation offers have declined in comparison with previous generations. Firstly, as Coleman (1988) notes, a family where both parents work is becoming increasingly normative. The transmission of social capital is therefore impeded the less time parent and child can physically spend together. Furthermore, long working hours, beyond physical time deprivation, are likely to render parents tired and thus probably reduce the quality of time investment in their children. Putnam (2000) argues that television is the main culprit in the loss of civic engagement in the USA. Therefore, it is plausible to extrapolate this concept to encompass other technologies, in particular mobile technologies such as smart phones and tablets. Increased market exposure of these products has made them accessible to children, a demographic who until little more than a decade ago comfortably survived without a mobile phone. The engrossing nature of the applications available on these phones (social media, video reproduction, instant messaging) means that conversations with friends and colleagues often take place when both parents and children are at home. In turn, this constant focus on each person’s phone, tablet or laptop, is likely to diminish rather than enhance family social capital since information is shared with external recipients when it would have otherwise been discussed with family members or those physical present. Finally, the neoliberal ethos that drives socio-economic arrangements and has in many contexts been normalised (Peck & Tickell, 2007) seems to be impeding the formation of healthy child-parent bonds. Giroux (2005) encapsulates this ethos by explicating that “with it debased belief that profit-making is the essence of democracy, and its definition of citizenship as an energised plunge into consumerism, neoliberalism … celebrates a ruthless competitive individualism” (p.8). As such, neoliberalism appears to be negatively affecting elements which are usually deemed crucial for the formation of community and individual relationships. Winegard and Winegard (2011) exemplify this point by collating a breadth of studies which indicate a reduction in empathy (Konrath, O’Brien, & Hsing, 2011) and increases in narcissism (Twenge & Foster, 2010; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008), anxiety (Twenge, 2000), depression (Twenge et al., 2010) and the importance of money (Twenge & Campbell, 2010). For James (2007), neoliberalism encourages a
focus on the individual rather than the collective by infecting people with the ‘affluenza virus’, a socio-cultural norm in which people place a high value on superficial aspects such as appearances, money and possessions. In relation to children, this virus could manifest itself through parental desires and pressures for offspring to look successful in their scholastic and extra-curricular activities. Though it is true that these achievements might reflect a strong parent-child bond transmitting social capital, it is equally possible that parents’ energy expenditure on their sons’ and daughters’ appearance could come at the expense of quality relationships. Reconciling the seemingly broadening social distance between parents and children seems even more complex when we consider that “the institutions that have replaced them (the offices and factories that have replaced households or neighbourhoods as workplaces, the shopping malls and catalogues that have replaced neighbourhood stores as places to shop, the cocktail parties and rock concerts that have replaced gatherings of extended families as leisure settings) are inhospitable to the relations between adults and children that constitute social capital for the children’s growth” (Coleman, 1987). Thus, it is plausible to argue that changes in the Western modern family seem to point towards an erosion of child-parent bonds. The effects of this relational attrition, given the conceptual link established between social capital and attachment theory as ‘resources’ entails that a reduction in the transmission of social capital from parent to offspring is also very likely to result in a decline of attachment bond strength. The rationale behind this is that relationships that do not fulfill the three attachment needs proposed (proximity maintenance, safe haven and secure base) are prone to influence a child’s ‘personal theory of reality’ by setting their default view of self-worth to ‘unworthy of love’. Furthermore, by developing a template of social relations in which others cannot be trusted and are deemed unreliable means that children with such beliefs will be unable to access the feelings of warmth and security offered by attachment figures during stressful situations. Since the family as a source of children’s attachment-related needs seems to be diminishing and the resources parents are equipping their offspring with are likely to result in children’s stunted psychosocial development, identifying alternate sites that may proverbially ‘right the ship’ is an imperative task. Could sport be a platform where youths can ‘find’ the relationships and the ensuing psychological and sociological benefits they are ‘losing’ in the family?

1.3. Could sport be a viable site to compensate for trends in current familial relations?

Developing a sport intervention to positively affect youths’ lives is not a simple task. Donnelly and Coakley (2002) have outlined six aspects socially inclusive sport recreation programs must include unto such an end: 1) a safe environment, 2) the chance to show competence, 3) social networks, 4) moral and economic support, 5) autonomy to navigate how they gain experience, and 6) hope for the future. By the authors own admission, the list contains an intimidating array of requirements that must be met, otherwise sport “programs will never be a viable form of social intervention” (Coakley, 2002, p.28). Though a sport intervention tailored towards developing attachment bonds will possess slightly different components, this example serves to illustrate the difficulties sport must contend with and demonstrate it can overcome before we give credence to the often anecdotal praises ‘sport evangelists’ (Giulianotti, 2004) laud over sport’s social regeneration abilities. To date there seems to be a dearth of literature regarding sport interventions which focus on psychosocial development from an attachment theory perspective. Nevertheless, there is some evidence which suggests that sport may be used as a vehicle to support youths’ psychological and social growth (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). Well-designed programs can enhance self-esteem (Richman & Shaffer, 2000; Smoll, Smith, Barnett, & Everett, 1993) in conjunction with improving affect regulation and scholastic performance (Barber, Eccles, & Stone, 2001; Eccles, Barber, Stone, & Hunt, 2003). In addition to sport potentially encouraging social interaction by forcing individuals to work towards a common goal (Holt, Kingsley, Tink, & Scherer, 2011), these authors also suggest that ‘sport participation may be particularly important to these [low income] families’ lives because children gained personal and social benefits from activities they would not otherwise experience” (p.497). In spite of the aforementioned findings, academics such as Coalter (2007) and Spaaij (2009) urge caution when considering sport as an effective intervention tool due to its capacity to hinder social and psychological growth. Sport appears to have a series of barriers capable of inhibiting the transmission of healthy attachment resources to children. The driving purpose behind sport is often to teach a skill, not to focus on the development of relationships. Clearly, relationships are formed between coaches and athletes as well as between athletes, but they are usually by-products that come from working on the skill.
Contrarily, a site such as therapy is structured, by default, to form a relationship with the patient (though this does not mean all patient-therapist bonds are strong!). Therefore, whilst the majority of time in a sport session is spent on acquiring or mastering a skill or tactic, during therapy a conversation regarding the patient’s problems, hopes and emotions takes centre-stage. It would be imprudent to suggest that sport is completely devoid of opportunities for coaches to support children who struggle to form or maintain relationships. Nevertheless, it is worth questioning the underlying motives driving a coach’s actions: are they seeking to solve the issue at hand rapidly in order to increase the player’s on-court performance, or is the focus on attempting to gradually work with the child to improve their relational capabilities? In contrast, a therapist’s purpose is likely to be aimed at helping their patient’s mental health. This comparison between therapy and sport illustrates how the latter’s innate structure seems to place a higher default value on developing sport-related techniques rather than on the child’s psychosocial growth. The answer to this question is important in considering the pertinence of Granovetter’s (1973) claims regarding the value of strong versus weak forms of social capital, as there may well be a trade-off between these varying objectives and motivations of sports’ coaches. The contention advanced in this paper is that within a sporting arena it is likely that technical skill will be emphasised above relational capabilities, as there is a fundamental disconnect between the two ideals. Firstly, sport generally does not promote vulnerability as an ethos; on the contrary, it encourages clichéd terms such as ‘mental fortitude’ (Fullinwider, 2006). This approach complicates the formation of strong attachment bonds or connections that resemble attachment bonds, therefore minimising the opportunity of fostering secure attachment styles. Paradoxically, sport also creates situations that trigger feelings of vulnerability, such as forcing constant social comparison or through exerting pressure to achieve and win (Wankel & Berger, 1990). Negotiating this catch-22 scenario can be especially tricky for children who have been equipped with poorer quality resources from their familial relations which have resulted in low self-worth and self-esteem. Under times of stress or threat, humans become vulnerable and it is in this state that attachment responses are activated. Vulnerability should be welcomed in order to demonstrate that seeking the warmth and security attachment bonds offer is a key step towards healthy psychosocial development. Secondly, sport’s neoliberal ties and values (Coakley, 2011) are prone to inhibit relational growth. The previously mentioned focus on winning or achieving often paves the way for ‘status anxiety’ and individualism (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). Saul (as cited in Davies & Bansel, 2007), further remarks that: “institutions have increased competition, responsibilisation and the transfer of risk from the state to individuals at a heavy cost to many individuals” (p.249). In other words, the onus is on the individual rather than the collective. Team sport proponents would claim that footballers or basketball players need to work together to defeat an opposing team, thus demonstrating sport’s group-centred approach. Whilst on the surface it seems like a plausible argument, from a relationship building perspective it is problematic, primarily because it highlights that developing relationships with teammates is a by-product of how sport is structured (the desire to win) rather than encouraging the formation of relations for their own sake (which is what relational deprived children require). The need to win, to appear successful and be perceived as an individual achiever gets in the way of relationship development. In summary, within the sociological contexts of social capital, family and sport, this paper has interrogated where children may access the emotional warmth attachment theorists posit are essential for mental well-being. Applying an attachment theory perspective to the social capital debate, an argument has been made to suggest that Western families are changing and that, in part due to the normalisation of a neoliberal ethos, child-parent bonds are probably eroding. This reduction in the family as a source of social capital also suggests that the attachment bond resources children are receiving from their parents are diminishing. In turn, these weaker attachment bonds are prone to give rise to more negative attachment styles or ‘personal theories of reality’, thus hindering the quality of the building blocks youths’ can utilise in their psychosocial development. Sport is often touted as a site where these relational deficiencies could be addressed and overcome. Though this paper has shown that there are reasons to believe sport can act as a complementary or compensatory institution to the family, sport intervention programs aimed at attachment-based relational growth need to be carefully shaped and are likely to require dismantling part of sport’s default structures before they may work effectively.

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