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Exploring English Youth Academy Footballers' Experiences through Role Strain Theory

Rick Hayman

University of Northumbria at Newcastle, United Kingdom, rick.hayman@northumbria.ac.uk

Remco Polman

Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia, remco.polman@qut.edu.au

Erika Borkoles

Griffith University, Gold Coast, Australia, e.borkoles@griffith.edu.au

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Rick Hayman

Northumbria University

Remco Polman

Queensland University of Technology

Erika Borkoles

Griffith University

Hayman (rick.hayman@northumbria.ac.uk) is corresponding author.

Abstract

Throughout adolescence and early adulthood, talented athletes must dedicate increasing personal resources to their sport. Recent empirical research found that applying Role Strain Theory (RST) was useful to contextualize the combined experiences of international junior golfers, acrobats, gymnasts, and Australian rules footballers and how they coped with the competing role demands of sport and education. Findings demonstrated how role strain (RS) severity and regularity fluctuated during their youth careers but subsided during the later teenage years. Surprisingly, limited research exploring how youth academy footballers simultaneously combine sport, education, and social demands exists. This study determined the extent to which RS was experienced by six high-performing male youth footballers who each had between four and five consecutive years' experience within the foundation and youth development stage squads at an English professional football academy. Implications for most effectively supporting elite-level youth players during crucial developmental and transitional career stages are provided.

Keywords: *academy football, adolescence, role strain theory, transitions*

Recent contributions to the sport talent development literature have focussed heavily on capturing athletes' experiences whilst they seek to transition from non-elite to elite performance levels (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Much of this research has concentrated on the athlete 'dual-careers' phenomenon, defined by Geranosova and Ronkainen (2014, p. 53) as "the challenge of combining a sports career with education or work." Historically, this body of work has been explored theoretically through the Holistic Athlete Career Model (HACM; Wylleman et al., 2011). Informed by applied studies across multiple sports with athletes of varying ages and abilities, this model is internationally acknowledged within the literature and summarises what physical, psychological, psychosocial, financial, and academic demands athletes are likely to encounter during their sports careers. Some key findings to emerge are that junior athletes need sufficient time and resources made available in order to balance sport training and competition demands with other life roles, such as friendships, school, paid and voluntary work, plus other sport and

leisure interests.

An adequate sport-life balance allows the athlete to encounter good quality of life, well-being, and healthy adolescent development, as well as making them less prone to high stress levels, burnout, social isolation, athletic identity foreclosure, or drop-out (e.g., Gray & Polman, 2004; Stambulova et al., 2012; Stambulova et al., 2015). Role Strain Theory (RST), defined as a "felt difficulty in fulfilling role obligations," (Goode, 1960, p. 483) can occur in each role a person performs (Hecht, 2001). Previous RST research has been applied to examine school students' performance and well-being (e.g., De Bruyn, 2005; Fenzel, 2000), strain in dual careers (e.g., Nordenmark, 2004; Pitney et al., 2008), and more recently to strains experienced by adolescent athletes (e.g., Van Rens et al., 2016).

Goode (1960, p. 483) defined role strain (RS) "as a sequence of role bargains, and as a continuing process of selection among alternative role behav-

iors, in which each individual seeks to reduce his role strain." RST, in this respect, focuses on four interrelated stressors: overload, conflict, underload, and ambiguity arising from life role demands (Fenzel, 1989; Holt, 1982). The study by Spencer-Dawe (2005) found combining single-parenting with employment to be a significant source of role strain for lone mothers, particularly when they worked long and inconvenient hours or held demanding positions. Earlier work by Fenzel (1992; 2000) provided further evidence of how RS can be experienced by young adolescents when transitioning from primary to secondary school, with consequent reductions in their self-esteem, self-worth, and academic achievement.

RST seems particularly relevant for examining the strains experienced by adolescents who combine high-level sport and education. Previous research has examined the consequences of pursuing dual careers and identified strains in educational settings as well as some of the psychological consequences (e.g., life satisfaction, self-esteem). When applying RST principles within the context of a high-performing adolescent athlete's daily life, overload occurs when demands exceed personal resources. This can occur within one role (e.g., mental and physical abilities; Fenzel, 1989) or between roles (e.g., time; Hecht, 2001). It can involve participating regularly in several sports all at once, which can leave limited or insufficient time to see friends and/or complete schoolwork (Van Rens et al., 2016). Conflict happens when disagreement occurs between what an individual intends to do, and the demands or expectations imposed by the system and/or others. An example would be contrasting athlete and coach beliefs toward prescribed training load and frequency (Van Rens et al., 2016). The underload element of RST emphasizes a perceived underutilization of an individual's capabilities and lack of challenge, including competing in lower-level competition (Hayman, et al., 2019). The final RST concept is role ambiguity and refers to limited understanding or clarity of one's responsibilities, such as the mixed messages presented to young athletes about the different priorities in their sport, school, or social life (Van Rens et al., 2018).

Recent research has enabled RST to become an alternative theory through which to explain the

experiences of junior international Australian rules footballers (AFL), gymnasts, golfers, and acrobats as they sought to progress their sports careers to the next stage. The study by Van Rens et al., (2016) was the first to move beyond the HACM framework to explore stressors associated with youth athletes' development. The RS experiences of 20 elite youth AFL players (aged 13-17) were investigated and interpreted utilizing RST. All participants regularly encountered multiple instances of role ambiguity, role overload, and role conflict as they pursued their ambition of transitioning to elite senior performance levels. Van Rens et al., (2018) provided further conceptual additions to the literature in finding total life satisfaction of 112 junior elite AFL players to be negatively associated with all four RST components.

In more recent work, Hayman et al., (2019) applied RST to capture the experiences of eight high-performing English junior male golfers who all had combined multiple sport, social, and educational role commitments during their adolescence. All encountered manageable but persistent RS during childhood. As they became teenagers, however, RS severity and regularity increased incrementally until aged between 15 and 16 years. It was at this point in their careers when they gained significant experience of playing and succeeding at national-level youth golf events that their approach to golf became progressively more strategic and considered. With full support from parents, extended family, and close friends, they all chose to specialize in golf, the consequences of which was a significant reduction in RS frequency and intensity.

Hayman and colleagues (2020) also explored the transitional experiences of world-class English junior acrobats through the lens of RST. During childhood, low-level but chronic RS was encountered, enabling positive acrobatic development, life satisfaction, physical and mental well-being, and educational progress. All reported how RS severity and regularity fluctuated intermittently during late childhood due to increased training, competition schedules, and inability to meet family commitments. Early acrobatics specialization plus supportive parents, teachers, and coaches at all career stages proved key in regulating RS levels during early teenage years and beyond.

Finally, Van Rens et al. (2016) developed and validated the Role Strain Questionnaire for Junior Athletes (RSQ-JA). This resulted in a five-factor model (overload in school; overload in sport and between roles; between-role conflict; underload; ambiguity). The shared variance between the five factors in this study ranged between 0.004 and 42%, indicating some interrelatedness among factors.

With the primary aim to improve the quality and quantity of home-grown players produced by English professional football clubs, the Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) is a long-term youth development strategy introduced in 2012 by the Premier League (Noon et al., 2015; The Premier League, 2011). The plan stipulates academy registered players must undertake intensive training (four to five times per week) and competition (once per week) schedules throughout the season. It is categorized into three stages: Foundation (Under-9 to Under-11), Youth Development (Under-12 to Under-16), and Professional Development (Under-17 to Under-23). However, the approach has received strong media criticism for its failure to sufficiently support the holistic development of young players within the system and for neglecting their physical (susceptibility to burnout and injury) and psychological (identity foreclosure) welfare (e.g., Calvin, 2018; Noon et al., 2015; Rongen et al., 2018).

Aims and Purpose

This study is timely, as creating further empirical evidence informing how to best retain and develop future generations of elite male footballers is a strategic priority for professional teams and national organizations globally. But surprisingly, limited research of this nature specific to the football context exists. This especially is the case for high-performing youth players positioned within English professional youth academy settings. Extending upon the work of Van Rens et al., (2016; 2018) and Hayman et al.. (2019; 2020), the primary aim of this qualitative study was to apply RST for the first time to explain male youth academy footballers’ experiences of combining sport, education, and social role demands over a period of four to five years.

Method

Participants

The sample comprised six male academy footballers (mean age = 14.7 years) within the Youth Development Stage (Under-12 to Under-16) from an English category one professional football club academy. Helsen et al., (1998) defined expert sports performers as those who compete at international and/or national levels. In this study, the term “high performing youth footballer” was used to categorize participants aged 14 or 15, who all had four and five consecutive years’ experience of undertaking full-time academy football training and competition demands. Once institutional ethical clearance was granted, face-to-face debriefs addressing the study aims, objectives, and procedures to follow were completed. All participants were aged under 18, so parental consent permitting their child’s involvement was obtained in all instances.

Table 1

Participant Information Summary

Participant	Age (years)	Academy Entry Age (years)	Consecutive Years Academy Experience
1	15	10	5
2	15	10	5
3	15	11	4
4	15	11	4
5	14	10	4
6	15	11	4

Procedure

Consenting participants were informed how they could withdraw from the study at any time without providing any reasons for doing so and were assigned numerical pseudonyms to protect anonymity. The proposed interview schedule was pilot tested by two male county-level footballers, both aged 15 years, which confirmed an approximate duration of 45 minutes. Each interview was recorded and undertaken at a convenient time, date, and location for participants. In each case, this was within a safe, private, and comfortable room located within the academy grounds. When undertaking qualitative research, the interviewer must build rapport and trust with the interviewees. In this particular case, the lead author was previously an elite junior athlete, which he used to aid the process of establishing a positive and empathetic bond with participants (Patton, 2014).

To ensure participants felt relaxed and at ease to share personal and sensitive information, each interview started with an informal discussion focusing on how they first became involved in football (Rapley, 2004). The interview format captured how demands arising from combining sport and other role commitments impacted the participants and whether RST was applicable in explaining their specific experiences. The lead author undertook the role of “active listener” to assist participants in communicating their unique stories in their own way rather than following a standardized list of questions. Participants were encouraged to talk about all their life roles, including sports, school, friends, family, and other hobbies (e.g., art or music). In the first instance, the interviewer explored the participants’ football involvement and experiences throughout childhood to mid-teenage years. An example question included, “Describe how you find keeping up to date with your schoolwork during the football season.” Follow-up questions further probed their experiences of fulfilling other sport, educational, extracurricular, and family commitments during this time.

In the second stage, specific challenges encountered in meeting role demands were explored. Example questions included, “How would you describe your usual week during the football season” and “What do your school friends think of your

commitment to football?” As in stage one, ad hoc supplementary probing was used, such as, “What was the reason for doing this,” “How could this have been made easier,” and “What factors made you want to continue?” This flexible questioning approach ensured participant centeredness, making it possible to follow up conversations where appropriate (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Data Analysis

Interviews lasted between 35 and 48 minutes, were audio-taped, transcribed verbatim, and subjected to thematic analysis guidelines published by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each transcript was read on several occasions by the first and third authors, with notes reflecting theme statements and their meanings placed within margins. The same authors then independently annotated each interview transcript with their personalized thoughts and interpretations of the data. Initial thematic coding employed a deductive approach, which is recommended for qualitative analysis when existing theories are being tested (Elo & Kyngas, 2008). Once the deductive approach was complete, an inductive approach was undertaken to ensure any additional higher-order themes were included and to allow for derision of lower-order themes.

Several very minor differences between the two separate coding results promptly were discussed and resolved. Primary associations and connections based on similarities and patterns between derived themes were made, resulting in the development of three main themes. When finalized, interview extracts representing each theme were selected. The final analysis stage involved developing written accounts from identified themes. These were reviewed and redrafted several times.

Results

Chronic Physical and Mental Fatigue (Role Overload)

In this study, the consequences of role overload resulted in all participants reporting feeling persistently tired during all stages of their football academy careers. They talked openly about the physical and mental tiredness caused by fluctuating and excessively intensive training demands and compe-

tition requirements, whilst simultaneously managing such demands with competing educational and social commitments. In the United Kingdom (UK), football academy life mostly is separate from the school system, which makes the integration of school and sport commitments much harder. This results in mental and physical exhaustion for aspiring footballers, as reflected in the quotes below:

“It gets to the point where the end of the season cannot come soon enough for me because I am just physically and mentally tired and glad that we have two months off.” (P1)

“I make my excuses to not have to get involved in any school sport teams because I do so much at the academy and [am] always feel tired out.” (P3)

“I have lots of late nights and tired mornings with training at the academy and the toll of traveling up and down the motorway to get there most evenings.” (P5)

“I have not been on form or playing very well in the past months, which I think is to do with having so much schoolwork and staying up late to do it and it has just left me getting really tired.” (P6)

School-Sport Workload Imbalance (Role Conflict)

Role conflict was found to be a major psychological burden on elite academy footballers. Their narratives indicated they struggled with prioritizing different role demands. Each participant talked at length about how they struggled to effectively balance their prescribed school and football commitments concurrently. Remaining up to date and fully engaged with their studies whilst also fulfilling several physically demanding training and competition requirements each week proved physically taxing and emotionally draining. Consequently, several athletes prioritized their football careers and explained that this decision made them increasingly disengaged and reluctant to complete prescribed school workloads, stating lack of time and motivation as key drivers in this attitudinal shift:

“It is so difficult completing all the homework I am getting set around my exams when I have to focus more than ever on my football.” (P3)

“I have always found school hard and quite tiring because when you have training and then you get in late at night and you have still got your homework to do and you are just thinking I am not doing it as I just want to go to bed.” (P4)

“My usual school day is super busy and it is a challenge to fit everything I need to do for school and football in.” (P5)

As a consequence of role conflicts, RS intensified from the age of 14 onward. This specifically coincided with heavier schoolwork demands and national examination preparations. It also was at this stage of their football careers that training and competition commitments significantly increased. For all, achieving professional football status now was the main priority, with education starting to take lesser importance:

“I do not have any time to do homework really and when I do it is mostly done in the back seat of the car on the way home from training.” (P2)

“I find it hard staying on track with schoolwork as training now four times each week leaves not much spare time at all to get it done.” (P3)

Disintegration of Social Life and Social Exclusion (Role Ambiguity)

It was noticeable how participants' social lives diminished as they tried to reach elite footballer status. RS arising from role demands of sports commitments, friendship, and collegial relationships at school were evident from the narratives. The lack of school and sport integration at a system level resulted in less positive social support from teachers and peers. In light of this, participants openly discussed the challenges and setbacks faced in maintaining healthy and compatible social relationships in all aspects of their lives. This especially was the case in school settings, with participants explaining the challenges they encountered in trying to socially integrate with fellow peers and teachers. Teachers and school personnel expected to maximize these elite junior athletes' status for school promotion and attainments. However, this often was not communicated clearly to the aspiring athletes, resulting in role ambiguity and later leading this group to be excluded from

some school activities. Consequently, these athletes' narratives spoke of feeling isolated and marginalized at specific periods during their time at school. It also was clear how they encountered some difficulty in making new friends and forming or fitting into social networks. They worked especially hard to forge effective relationships with specific teachers and to gain acceptance, social belonging, and connection to the wider school community. The following quotes further emphasize the meaning of such experiences:

"Well, it is hard to take when I hear about school friends going out to parties and I am realizing what I am missing out on because I have an important match or training session instead." (P1)

"I have decided not to play for the school team so I don't really come across the PE (physical education) teacher that much like my mates do and do not really know him that well and miss out on the banter they have." (P2)

"I do tend to fall out with other kids at school who think I have an attitude but this is untrue but it still makes me think I do not actually really fit in." (P4)

"I do get a bit upset sometimes with all the football demands and not knowing if all the sacrifices I make with my friends are going to be worth it." (P6)

Discussion

A large research body exists that describes how elite youth athletes must simultaneously manage and cope with multiple competing role demands throughout this career stage (Hayman et al., 2019; Van Rens et al., 2016). It also is well established how such inherent training and competition regimes may lead to negative physical and psychological fatigue in youth athletes (Noon et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2020). To our knowledge, this is the first study to explain male youth academy footballers' RS experiences. Specifically, RS in the form of overload, conflict, and ambiguity (Fenzel, 1989) arose during their time of four to five years in the Youth Development Stage (Under-12 to Under-16) of a professional English football academy when they were required to concurrently undertake multiple sport, educational, and

social role demands.

Our findings are the first to suggest that current youth development strategies may result in significant RS in male academy football players. Van Rens et al., (2016) revealed how elite junior athletes in tennis, and gymnastics struggled to successfully balance such high athletic commitment with education, school life demands, and social development. More recently, Van Rens and colleagues (2018) showed that higher levels of RS result in reduced life satisfaction in elite junior AFL footballers. Our UK-based study found the existence of chronic RS during all stages of the participants' football academy careers. During the late adolescence point of their career, however, participants reported an increase in the severity and regularity of RS, and that it also became excessive and unmanageable. Three key outcomes were identified from the significant RS youth academy footballers faced during this time and in this specific context: a constant state of physical and mental fatigue and tiredness (role overload), challenging school workloads (role conflict), and feelings of disintegration from social life and social exclusion resulting in feelings of social isolation from peers and their school environment (role ambiguity).

The RS encountered by the UK-based academy football participants appears to be at a slightly greater intensity than that reported previously in golfers (Hayman et al., 2019), acrobatic gymnasts (Hayman et al., 2020), and Australian Rules footballers (Van Rens et al., 2018). This might be attributed to the lack of EPPP integration with the school system, along with the participants' demanding training and competition schedules (Noon et al., 2015; The Premier League, 2011). Rongen et al., (2018) argued that EPPP does not provide an adequate holistic development of players. Thomsen and Nørgaard (2020) revealed how many junior professional football academies in Scandinavia recruit players (and their parents) by highlighting the importance and balance of a dual career as a branding strategy, when in fact sport is prioritized.

Jones (2018) similarly suggested that the system, which is supposed to ensure the coordinated and comprehensive management of the physical (e.g., hormonal and maturational stressors); performance-relat-

ed (e.g., deselection and humiliation if that happens); psychological (e.g., management of competitive anxiety, psychological impact of injury, competitive sport anxiety, loss of sport identity); and social (e.g., lifestyle, friendships, significant professional relationships) aspects of academy players, is flawed. Currently, only category one and two academies are required to employ a full-time Welfare and Safeguarding position. Category three and four clubs normally rely on their Head of Education (usually part-time) to manage the academy players' well-being, often with conflict of interest as they also are members of the academy's senior management team. Consequently, academy players in these youth squads are more at risk of encountering RS because the fragmented and poorly coordinated club welfare systems are less likely able to manage the seamless coordination of school and club roles, especially at times of high role demands (e.g., national examination periods).

Informed by Ericsson's 10,000-hour rule of expertise (Ericsson, 2013), the EPPP was developed on the premise that academy football players had to achieve more than 8,500 hours of practice time over the life course of their development pathway, an approach we now know is based on outdated and anecdotal evidence (MacNamara et al., 2016). Noon and colleagues (2015) identified that because of this policy, inadequate recovery from physical stress was high among youth academy football players (e.g., non-functional overreaching). Poor management of fatigue associated with high training and competition loads could explain the significantly higher RS reported by participants in this study. Psychological pressure also could have added to the reported level of RS, owing to constant performance anxiety putting undue pressure on these players, especially those deselected from the squad (Champ et al., 2018).

Practical Implications

The logic of combining school and high-performance sport commitments often is conflicting, with players accordingly feeling trapped in this dilemma (Stambulova et al., 2020). Thus, applying RST to better understand player experiences of combining school and sports commitments can provide high-performance management and support teams, coaches, and policymakers with practical implications on

how to best manage RS in youth sport and safeguard elite youth academy football players' physical (e.g., reduced injury rates), psychological (e.g., reduced likelihood of dropout, identity foreclosure), and social (e.g., friendships, peer relationships) development. For example, study findings highlight the importance for all youth academy footballers to be provided with a full-time Welfare and Safeguarding officer who is independent of the club management team. As per Jones's (2018) findings, the role of the Professional Footballers' Association could be integrated into the EPPP system, but the costs associated with widespread dissemination are prohibitive. It appears that improving systems integration would significantly ease RS experienced by aspiring academy football players. This would bridge an important gap by mitigating club and school role demands, providing social support from the club and reducing role conflict in the process.

Academy youth players also could be taught appropriate self-regulatory skills by their clubs and schools, including effective time management, dealing with adversity, developing effective coping strategies, and strategic planning. Self-regulatory skills are comprised of meta-cognitive functions such as the ability to reflect, plan, monitor, and evaluate a goal-directed process, as well as aspects of motivation and self-efficacy (Zimmerman, 2006; Jonker et al., 2010). Athletes with higher meta-cognitive skill levels are said to extrapolate more learning and make more efficient use of training and competition (Toering et al., 2009). Jones (2018) identified that Heads of Education and Welfare and Safeguarding officers still see resilience and coping with role demands as abilities academy players either have or do not have, rather than them being teachable, therefore expecting players to resolve role demand issues by themselves. This illustrates the importance that elite athletes should be taught to self-regulate, a skill potentially related to their ability to simultaneously combine sport, education, and social role demands.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This study was not without limitations. Whilst the recall period was relatively short, we relied on retrospective recollections to explore participants' experiences, which can be liable to forgetfulness and

bias. Validation of participants' accounts with those of coaches, parents, peers, and teachers would have further strengthened the robustness of study findings. This study also has a limited generalisability of findings, as the number of participants was both small and homogenous.

The study findings contribute to the evolving RS literature and act as a firm foundation to build future research. For example, longitudinal research employing semi-structured interviews, self-report diaries, and the Role Strain Questionnaire for Junior Athletes (Van Rens et al., 2016) would enable day-to-day experiences of academy youth footballers, across multiple age ranges and fulfilling dual careers, to be monitored over time. Such studies may help identify any key differences between those who ultimately are successful or unsuccessful in making the transition from talented youth academy prospect to professional status. Future research exploring potential physical and mental consequences of being enrolled in a youth football academy and how this might be moderated by the levels of RS experienced by the players also is required.

Conclusion

This study builds on previous research of Van Rens et al., (2016), where the concept of RS was applied to the elite adolescent sport context. It further explores the components of RS (e.g., overload, conflict, ambiguity) in the context of elite UK academy footballers' experiences. The study provides important insights and knowledge on how RS was experienced as these elite athletes juggled multiple life spheres during their childhood and teenage years. We found RS manifested itself in the physical, mental, and social functioning of the players. Each participant encountered regular and severe RS at all stages of their youth academy football careers. This intensified further as they entered their late teenage years, when national educational demands increased. Three main contributory factors to RS incidence during this time were: chronic physical and mental fatigue (role overload), school-sport workload imbalance (role conflict), and disintegration of social life and social exclusion (role ambiguity). Proposed practical implications are intended to help guide and better support academy footballers' well-being during crucial devel-

opmental periods in their youth sport careers.

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