

# Actors, interactions, ties, and networks: The ‘doing’ of talent identification and development work in elite youth football academies.

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It's a whole new ball game: Thirty Years of the English Premier League

**Actors, interactions, ties, and networks: The 'doing' of talent identification and development work in elite youth football academies.**

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## **Abstract**

Identifying and developing young talent is a central issue in professional football. In England, for example, this is well illustrated by the introduction of the Premier League's Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP). This policy has transformed the ways in which young players are recruited, coached, supported and evaluated. To date, our scientific understanding of talent identification and development processes has been largely informed by (post)positivist studies addressing the physiological, psychological and biomechanical features of elite youth performance. In contrast, there has been scant consideration of the essential social, cultural and relational dimensions of these interconnected activities. In this paper, Crossley's (2010, 2011, 2018) relational theorising is presented as a heuristic device that could allow us to systematically recognise the interdependencies, ties, dialectics, and co-constituted interactions that comprise talent identification and development activities in professional football. Indeed, we argue that his thesis enables us to better understand both a) the configuration (e.g., academy managers, coaches, scouts, players, and parents) and meaning making of those that comprise these relational networks, and b) the enabling and constraining features of (inter)action for these interconnected actors. For us, such knowledge can ultimately support the generation of accounts of talent identification and development that better reflect their inherently social, interactive and practical complexity (Dinh *et al.*, 2014).

## Introduction

The process of identifying and developing young talent is a major issue in elite sport generally and professional football more specifically (Baker & Farrow, 2017; Hollings *et al.*, 2014; Carling *et al.*, 2009; Reilly *et al.*, 2000). Indeed, the early identification and subsequent development of gifted young players has led to a growing number of ‘centres of excellence’ or ‘youth academies’ in professional football around the globe (Reilly *et al.*, 2000; Unnithan *et al.*, 2012). In England, for example, the Premier League’s Elite Player Performance Plan (EPPP) has transformed the ways in which talented young players are identified, recruited, developed, and evaluated (Premier League, 2011). This initiative, like those adopted in other countries, involves the systematic amalgamation of high quality financial and managerial support, coaching and instruction, counselling and sport science support, training facilities and equipment, as well as access to appropriate types and levels of competition (Abbot & Collins, 2004; Cogley *et al.*, 2012; Sotiriadou, 2013).

The related issues of talent identification and development have also attracted increasing scholarly attention (e.g., Baker & Farrow, 2017; Hollings *et al.*, 2014; Williams & Reilly, 2000). Such work has been principally underpinned by theories and (post)positivist methodologies from the disciplines of psychology, physiology, and biomechanics (e.g. Cumming *et al.*, 2017; Mann & Van Ginneken, 2017; Wiseman *et al.*, 2014; McDermott *et al.*, 2015; Reeves *et al.*, 2018; Waldron & Worsfold, 2010; Unnithan *et al.*, 2012). Whilst such ‘knowledge for action’ (Jones & Wallace, 2005) inspired inquiry has undoubtedly helped to enhance our theoretical and practical understanding of these topics, there are limits to viewing talent identification and development in an exclusively rationalistic manner. Perhaps crucial here is the need to better recognize how these activities are inherently social practices; that is, they are generated in, and influenced by,

the social interaction that occurs between interconnected stakeholders (e.g., youth players, coaches, sport scientists, administrators, and parents/guardians, among many others) in particular organizational and sporting subcultures (Jones *et al.*, 2011; Potrac *et al.*, 2019). Indeed, given the findings of research highlighting the micropolitical challenges and structural vulnerabilities (e.g., Cushion & Jones, 2006; Gibson & Groom, 2018; O’Gorman *et al.*, 2020; Potrac *et al.*, 2013), of everyday life in youth football academies since the inception of the Premier League, it is important that our representations of talent identification and development should not remain unproblematically functional ones (Cassidy *et al.*, 2016; Christensen, 2009).

In this paper, then, we argue for a greater sociological scrutiny of talent identification and development policies and practices in elite youth football. In particular, we outline the ways in which we believe Crossley’s (2011) relational thesis may enable us to better understand a) the configurations (e.g., academy managers, coaches, scouts, players, and parents) and meaning making of those that comprise these relational networks, and b) the enabling and constraining features arising through iterative (inter)actions between these interconnected actors. Alongside supporting the production of novel insights regarding the identification and development of talented young football players, this framework can also help us overcome the limits of exploring social relationships from the perspective of a single actor (e.g., player, coach or parent) or one particular dyad (e.g., coach-athlete interactions and relationships) that has characterized much of the limited available literature (Potrac *et al.*, 2017). Ultimately, for us, the adoption of a relational perspective can stimulate the development of original and nuanced insights regarding the inter-related issues of identity, emotion, power and decision making, and strategic interaction and social exchange within professional youth football academies (Jones *et al.*, 2011; Potrac *et al.*, 2015).

## **Understanding Talent Identification and Development as a Relational Endeavour**

In recent years, scholars have adopted a relational stance to examine the networked worlds of grass-roots coaches (Potrac *et al.*, 2015), sporting directors (Parnell *et al.*, 2018), top-level head coaches (Hall *et al.*, 2021), professional youth football coaches (Cushion & Jones, 2006) and coach developers (Cushion *et al.*, 2019). Importantly, this embryonic line of inquiry has highlighted how sport organisations, such as professional football clubs, are complex ecosystems that comprise of a range of interconnected actors and roles in overlapping and emergent networks of relations (Parnell *et al.*, 2020). Here, it is also argued that workplace practices, identities and relations are deeply embedded in cultural and interactional processes (e.g., Parnell *et al.*, 2018; Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Turner, 2020) that have been increasingly influenced by neoliberal principles, values, and approaches to employment and the everyday doing of working (Cleland *et al.*, 2018; Parnell *et al.*, 2020; Turner, 2020). To date, however, a relational approach to the study of talent identification and development in elite youth football remains conspicuously absent from the literature base.

Relational sociology is based upon the fundamental premise that social actors are enmeshed in relations of interdependency with others (Crossley, 2011; Potrac *et al.*, 2015). Indeed, research adopting this approach seeks to conceptualise both individuals and the larger formations in which they participate (like collectives, institutions, social systems) as belonging to the same order of reality; a relational order (Powell & Depelteau, 2013). There exist many ‘versions’ of relational sociology that differ in terms of how they respectively conceptualise, investigate and explain social relations (see the work of Depelteau, Becker, Simmel, Latour, Granovetter and Emirbayer, among others) (Potrac *et al.*, 2015, Crossley, 2011, Powell & Depelteau, 2013). Despite the existence of various relational perspectives, theorists generally

agree that the essential endeavour of the relational enterprise is to overcome the dualisms of individual–society and agency–structure that have traditionally dominated the sociological landscape (Potrac *et al.*, 2015; Crossley, 2011).

For us, the relational theorising of Crossley (2011; 2014; 2018) offers a productive heuristic device for critically considering the networked experiences of those enacting talent identification and development activities. Integrating ideas from symbolic interactionism, dramaturgy, cultural production, and social network analysis, Crossley’s (2011, 2014, 2018) thesis seeks to overcome the limitations associated with individualism and holism by providing a greater understanding of the ways in which peoples’ thoughts, feelings, decisions and actions (i.e., agency) are made within circumstances not always of the actors choosing (i.e., structure). For us, his approach enables us to better highlight how those engaged in talent identification and development activities are not only orientated to other actions within the networks in which they are embedded, but that their reactions and responses to events are influenced by their impact on them within this particular network of social actors (Crossley, 2011; Potrac *et al.*, 2015; Powell & Depelteau, 2013). Below, we outline some specific examples of how Crossley’s (2011, 2014, 2018) thinking can help us advance our understanding of the social dimensions of talent identification and talent development in elite youth football.

### ***Relations, Interactions and Networks***

Crossley’s (2011, 2014, 2018) theorising conceives the social world as a network of interaction between human actors. Importantly, he argued that interactions between actors in the present are influenced by both their respective history of interaction and anticipation of further interaction in the future (Crossley, 2018). Here, Crossley described relations as ‘lived trajectories of iterated interaction’ (2011, p28), with social relationships formed if there is an expectation of

future interactions, or the closer movement of one actor to another via a sharing of information that would otherwise not happen (Crossley, 2011; Cleland *et al.*, 2018). This is an interesting lens through which to view the (often unpredictable) interaction dynamics within academy football. For example, parents, scouts, coaches and academy managers could influence and be simultaneously influenced by each other. Here, their shared interactions form an irreducible and dynamic whole; they are actors in relation (Crossley, 2011, 2014, 2018).

For Crossley (2011, 2014, 2018) such interactions and social relations take place within the context of networks, which themselves affect how relations are configured inside them. For example, a scout who experiences difficult interactions and relations with a recruitment manager may be subject to different dynamics, opportunities and pressures than those who do not. A weak relationship, or tie, has consequences elsewhere within the academy through the very nature of that scout's subsequent inter(action) with others (e.g., coaches, parents or players) that constitute this social network. Importantly, this approach to the study of interaction and relations allows us to look beyond dyads to the wider social configurations in which key actors are embedded and which shapes their possibilities for further interactions and relations (Crossley, 2011). Indeed, his use of networks thus illuminates both patterns of connection and non-connection between the various actors within the academy. This investigative lens can also be used to recognise and understand where ties and connections are strong, but also where a lack of connection indicates conflict or inequality (Crossley, 2011). Such patterns of connection between the actors and groups involved in talent identification and development have an important impact upon individual and group sense-making and the ways in which activities, events and decisions are experienced and responded to (Crossley, 2014).



Crossley's (2011) networked representation of social life could also be used to explore how players, coaches, scouts, academy managers, sport scientists, and parents influence, are influenced, and are shaped through their interactions with and between each other. In this case, there is perhaps much we could learn in terms of how their respective lives, thoughts, feelings, and actions are always interwoven with those of others, be it those in the past, present and, indeed, the hoped-for future (Crossley, 2011). Equally, Crossley's theorising could also help us better understand the youth academy setting, as an emergent social structure, which might exert an influence upon interactions, relations and conventions, that in turn, can generate both opportunities and constraints for further interaction (Crossley, 2011, 2014, 2018; Thomas *et al.*, 2018). For example, communal social spaces at the academy training venue can generate opportunities for interactions between parents, parents and coaches, or academy management and parents. Such spaces can aid actors in making greater sense of their own role, and those of others, through regular relations. Conversely, minimal opportunities for inter(action), through either the lack of physical space or via wider club policy on the management of parents during training or game-related activities has the potential to create weaker ties and relationships between those key actors.

In further recognition of the view of football as an interconnected system of relationships, structured within and between organisations (Parnell *et al.*, 2018), we also believe Crossley's work on small worlds and social worlds provides important investigatory tools. Indeed, whilst many actors may actively attempt to separate their distinct social worlds (e.g., work, family, leisure), others may seek to bring actors together, or utilise their participation in other networks to positively influence their interactions and relationships within the academy (Crossley, 2011). This is variously referred to in the social networks literature as bonding and bridging capital

(Putman, 2000), brokerage and closure (Burt, 2005) and also strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973, 1983). In the context of an elite youth football academy, some actors may find that they are subject to more and perhaps competing demands from others in the network, particularly if their position or centrality within the club network, or previous relationships with other actors, allows them to mediate between otherwise unconnected parts of the network (Crossley, 2011). For example, a frustrated academy coach may look to exploit a strong relationship with senior club staff (who may act as such powerful club ‘brokers’), which was developed as a result of their previous playing experience together. The coach can utilise such interaction with the broker to pressurize academy management into a change of recruitment policy or practice as a result of their own self-interest for the purpose of securing goods by means of exchange, which is built on a history of previous interaction (Crossley, 2010; Crossley, 2011). Other examples include a) a coach frequenting the same gym as the academy manager in order to build up mutually beneficial exchanges and a stronger tie, b) a part-time coach using their participation in other football networks (e.g., County FA) to positively benefit coach education events or wider management practices within the academy; or c) the parent employed within an educational setting who may utilise their knowledge of contemporary pedagogy to benefit interactions and exchanges with both their child and with key academy staff. In such examples, each actor strategically and purposefully bridges a number of worlds, and connects those worlds to one another (Crossley, 2011). This may subsequently have consequences to how those actors then experience interactions and relationships with others within the academy, and thus influences both the shape of the network, and the enactment of a range of talent identification and development policies and practice (Crossley, 2011).

***Strategic interaction, cooperation, trust, duty and empathy***

Interactions between social actors within an elite youth academy could be framed as being strategic in that individuals may regularly a) reflexively manage their relations, b) weigh one another up, c) project into the future, d) anticipate positive and negative possibilities, and e) orientate to those possibilities with a view to, f) seeking an advantage whilst attempting to g) resolve disadvantageous conflicts of interest (Crossley, 2011). This does not necessarily mean that actors within the academy treat *all* current or future interactions in such a strategic way and thus lack any empathetic or moral sentiments. Often, social conditions can channel strategic interactions towards cooperation, by acknowledging that, for example, it pays for the parent of an academy player to be ‘nice’ to the coach, as they are in a relationship with them, and would therefore expect to interact again in the future. Similarly, coaches may strategically manage nuanced relations with, and between more or less trusted collaborators, particularly if their strategic position permits an oversight to influencing support, capital, and resources that flow through the network (Hall *et al.*, 2021). For example, a coach at the foundation level phase (5-11) may seek to strategically manage their interactions with the lead coach for the youth development phase (12-16), if they wish to pursue a specific role with older players for the following season.

Crossley (2011) also argued that relations and networks also tend to inculcate non-strategic influences on behaviour through specific generation of *norms*, which can be orientated to in a strategic fashion, but which might also be orientated to by way of a socially derived sense of *duty*. The adherence to established norms can generate both *trust* and *empathy* between and for social actors. In the academy setting, this might be acknowledged through regular attendance, punctuality, appearance, visible actions of respect such as handshakes with other stakeholders, the expected enactment of retention and release practices, or the efficient use of Premier League

monitoring tools (e.g., PMA). Here, then, Crossley's (2011) theorising has much to offer in terms of understanding why, when, where, how, and towards whom specific actors in the academy decide to act in particular situations, the conditions and circumstances involved, where cooperation or conflict exists, and the extent to which the agreed rules and conventions influence social norms and a shared sense of duty and obligation (Crossley, 2011). Interestingly, through his application of Mead's symbolic interactionist thought, Crossley (2011) also considers how an individual can learn to read or gain a sense of the other which can be used to generate possibilities for strategic and moral relations between actors. How various stakeholders in the talent identification and development process use such knowledge certainly represents a rich line for future inquiry.

In drawing upon Goffman's dramaturgical theorising, Crossley also posits that individuals often strive to control the flow of information regarding themselves that circulates within the networks in which they are enmeshed (Crossley, 2011; Goffman, 1959). Although not necessarily a default position, coaches for example, are believed to regularly engage in strategic interactions by using language and behaviours that could be designed to either mislead or deceive as easily as to cooperate (Crossley, 2011; Nelson *et al.*, 2014; Potrac *et al.*, 2013). For example, a coach may be constrained to cooperate with the academy manager if the present conditions, via the norms and conventions of the academy, present the possibility of a threat to their coaching beliefs, the success of their team, or even their role (Crossley, 2011). This can cause issues with the identity and beliefs of the coach if their cooperation and impression management is undertaken with primary reference to their existing conditions of employment. In this case, engaging in insubordination, resistance, or defection become costly and less desirable (Crossley, 2011). Similarly, the same coach may feel enabled by the conditions provided by the

academy manager when sharing mutually cooperative judgements on the suitability of a trialist brought to the club environment by a scout or the head of recruitment. Here, the shared, as opposed to conflicting interests, between actors arguably negates the need for the coach to modify and strategically manage their behaviour. In this interaction, the coach can instead draw upon socially acquired forms of competence and trust during this encounter (Crossley, 2011).

Importantly, such theorising can be useful in illuminating not only the internalized sense of self felt by each actor; but also, how they feel when interacting with others, what may prevent them from doing so, and how they incorporate an understanding of others in relation to their own role. This has the potential to illuminate greater understanding regarding the emotions that accompany interactions and relationships in the academy, how these emotions are understood in connection to social relations with other contextual stakeholders, as well as when, how and why social actors may attempt to manage their emotional displays to those others that comprise the network of relations. Here, for example, dyadic interactions built upon episodes of joy, anger, excitement or pathos, which at times might be shared, and at other times hidden; may subsequently have consequences elsewhere within the network. This may, therefore, influence the very nature and timing of interactions experienced by other stakeholders when enacting their talent identification and development role, and the normalised, accepted practices adopted as a result of this (Crossley, 2011; Potrac *et al.*, 2017).

### ***Agency and Structure***

The wider culture and accepted practices related to the identification and development of talented players is difficult to analyse and understand from an individualistic point of view, because it is an inherently relational, intersubjective phenomenon (Crossley, 2014). Individualism, or agency, as a sociological approach, gives primacy to individual human beings

and their individual actions as the only legitimate analytic focus for the study of social life (Crossley, 2011). However, such an approach could ignore the culture which exists between actors in the academy and how this both emerges and connects them (Crossley, 2018). We therefore feel that it is perhaps more important to understand that the development or emergence of the culture and accepted practices found within the academy football environment is not about individuals qua individuals (e.g., academy manager); but rather as an emergent aspect of interaction and relations between individuals both inside and outside (e.g., Premier League policy makers) of the immediate academy environment (Crossley, 2014). The interactions and actions experienced between actors has the potential to change the system structurally, adding new properties, dynamics and possibilities as more actors are added to a social network (Crossley, 2018). This is an important consideration within the context of an ever-increasing staff base as a result of EPPP policy, as cultures within the academy arise within collectives, which can be transformed as well as reproduced through interaction.

Conversely, the holist position posits that we can only understand and explain the ‘parts’ of the social world by referencing how these individuals fit within the whole (structure), with the latter considered to be greater than the sum of its parts (Crossley, 2011). However, a key danger of this view is the tendency to hypostasise ‘the system’, attributing it with pre-requisites or a historical telos and the means and agency to achieve such ends (Vandenburghe, 2018). By claiming that events related to talent identification and development exist because they serve the system, is far too functional an explanation and excludes the flesh-and-blood human actors from their inventories of the parts of their systems (Crossley, 2018). As illustrated by O’Gorman *et al.*, (2020), Potrac *et al.*, (2013), Gibson and Groom (2018) and others, talent identification and development activities are ultimately enacted by people on the ground. Ignoring them may lead

to difficulties in attempting to understand aspects of the system (including Premier League policy such as EPPP), as it negates many of the changes, conflicts and negotiations that are endemic within them (Crossley, 2018). We feel that if interactions, relations and networks are important in better understanding talent identification and development from a more socio-cultural perspective; then it is vital to acknowledge and better represent the ways in which both actors *and* structures emerge from these more primordial elements (Crossley, 2018). Such theorising can also be applied to the academy environment. For instance, how a coach acts is shaped in various ways by the situations that they find themselves in, the presence of others involved (e.g., the academy manager), and the relations they may enjoy with those others (e.g., nature of previous interactions, or whether present interactions have been influenced by others such as parents). Indeed, within the football academy, we feel that actions and decisions related to individual actors (agency) are often made within circumstances not always of the actor's choosing (structure). An example of this may involve a coach wishing to move a player into a different age group within the academy (in line with previous discussions around the application of RAE), but feel unable to do so due to club policy or wider philosophical discourse on the use of such bio-banding practice. An approach to viewing the realities and nuances of talent identification and development activities within academies in this way, avoids a simple reduction of the academy's social world to a mere aggregate of individuals, or indeed around the causal powers of social structures. Moreover, it provides a useful framework for understanding how social networks are created, broken, and then recreated in line with how, why and when a range of actors interact within this network (Crossley, 2018; Dépelteau, 2018). Indeed, a greater use of relational conceptions may permit a study of such culture as one that arises between social actors (e.g., players, coaches, parents, scouts, policy makers), is generated through interaction, and

which diffuses outwards to other members of a population by means of social networks (Crossley, 2014).

### ***Exchange relations, resources & power in social networks***

Much of the aforementioned commentary relates closely to the symbolic, impressioned, cooperative and empathetic dimensions of interactions within social networks. However, relations experienced within the academy often involve an exchange of ‘goods’, with actors benefitting from contact with one another regularly enjoying a platform of incentivised future contact (Crossley, 2018). The academy involves a network of interactions, demarcated by its participants’ mutual involvement in specifiable sets of activities, which are considered as both communication and resource mobilisation networks (Crossley, 2011). In drawing upon the work of Simmel, Crossley (2011) noted that relationships are complex, multifaceted and involve forces of both attraction and repulsion. Indeed, exchange may draw us towards others, but also may encourage us to distance from them, or draw back into self-interest (Crossley, 2011). We contend that coaches, scouts, parents, sport scientists, and academy management staff often consciously and unconsciously pursue and exchange resources within the academy, sometimes deploying them in pursuit of other, further goods (Crossley, 2011). For instance, this may involve recruitment staff relying on the work of coaches when dealing with trialists. Here, the former rely upon the latter to extend and continue positive interactions with players and parents after initial recruitment. Indeed, the failure to do so by coaches, could generate issues for the scouts, or indeed the club in general, in terms of parental complaints and reputational damage. The coaches also rely upon the recruitment team to regularly identify suitable players to enhance the quality within each age phase. This is particularly important should any individual team begin to struggle in specific areas of the pitch, or if there was a perceived issue in coaches’ meeting



agreed development or performance outcomes set by academy management. Such social exchanges generate interdependence and thereby a power balance within such emerging relationships, should parties find the exchanges beneficial (Crossley, 2011, 2018). The power that may exist via these exchanges occurs between actors who are organised in and across the academy's distinct social worlds, with these social structures (e.g., coaching teams, sport science teams, groups of parents) both causing and constraining action at different points in the season, in an emergent and fluid manner (Cleland *et al.*, 2018, Crossley, 2011).

Each actor within the academy network depends upon others for certain goods or resources and is often therefore inclined to accede to the will of the other if they believe that not doing so might lead to the withdrawal of these goods (Crossley, 2018). For instance, parents of academy players may feel reluctant to challenge the decisions made by coaches or wider academy management staff if they feel that their child's chances of progression, or indeed, retention in the academy may be harmed. Moreover, a club's Head of Recruitment may often enjoy a central position within the wider club network, which affords them unfettered access to useful information when enacting policy across club worlds. These examples highlight that enabled relationships in one area (e.g., senior team) may empower the individual to gain the appropriate support in order to affect a change in culture, policy or practice in another (e.g., the academy).

Such notions on the exchange processes evident in relations, and the dependent power within them, are a fluid concept. The degree of asymmetry can vary considerably, with the strength of power dependent upon the value of the goods in question (i.e., quality of the player or reputation of the academy), or the ease in which they might be found elsewhere (other local academies). The aforementioned work of O'Gorman *et al.*, (2020) provides further examples

upon notions of power based upon an over-supply of coaches qualified to hold permanent academy roles, and the impact that this had on coaches subsequent compliance with administrative tasks that they generally disliked and considered not to be an essential part of being an academy coach. Arguably, such interactions within the academy are, then, strongly focused around exchange as a basis of power (Crossley, 2011). The nature of these enabling and constraining relationships impact on the thoughts, feelings, actions and emotions of others within that academy network (e.g., academy managers, coaches and scouts) as part of a fluid, connected football world. However, a full illustration and explanation of such exchanges, resources and power, based upon notions of influence and dependency through interactions and relations across the football academy network, is long overdue and is area of future research.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this paper was to make the case for examining talent identification and development as a relational activity. Here, we proposed Crossley's relational theorising as a productive analytic framework to study the network of social relations and interactions between actors within talent identification and development structures. For us, at least, his conceptual insights can help us to better represent and understand how such networked social relations help to form and reshape the academy's distinct social world than has been achieved to date (Hastie & Hay, 2012; Crossley, 2011). Indeed, Crossley's explicit use of interactions, relations and networks is critical to an enhanced understanding of the interdependencies, ties, dialectics, and co-constituted interactions that comprise talent identification and development activities in football since the inception of the Premier League generally, and the EPPP more specifically (Crossley, 2011; Crossley, 2018; Erikson, 2018). It also has the potential to shed light on the

very nature and rhythm of social practices and human interaction that comprise talent identification and development activities within football academies more generally. We believe that such nuanced insights can be productive for policymakers, managers, and coach educators alike.

We also hope that the relational arguments presented act as a stimulus for further inquiry into the embodied, interconnected, and interdependent experiences of stakeholders within the academy environment. As highlighted earlier, Crossley's thesis certainly has the potential to help us better understand both the configuration and meaning making of those that comprise these relational networks, as well as the enabling and constraining features of (inter)action for these interconnected actors with reference to notions of strategic interaction, cooperation, trust, exchanges and power. Of course, 'if we believe that interactions, relations and networks are important then we need methods that allow us to capture these relational structures' (Crossley, 2018, p.491). The very nature and speed in which ideas, innovations and other resources diffuse and circulate within a relatively small social world such as a football academy, all depend upon how it is 'wired up', with such networks always open to modification, change and addition, and are therefore always in process (Crossley, 2011). As such, we feel that it is crucial to obtain relational data, that is, data which bears upon 'relations' (including interactions and networks), which could be analysed relationally (Crossley, 2018). Here, we advocate combining extensive observation activities with relational interviews, which can be useful in understanding and accurately describing situations and behaviours, and in providing an understanding of why people think and act in the ways that they do (Cushion, 2014). There is also practical utility in the use of small world/participatory mapping exercises, which encourage each participant to visually map out their perception/view of their social network, and highlight their knowledge,

understanding and interpretation of their role in relation to others (Emmel, 2008). Finally, we advocate an increased focus on polyvocal studies to encourage stories and narratives that will help in providing a better understanding with regards to how multiple actors understand their own role within the academy, those of others, and the opportunities and constraints felt by them (Tracy, 2013; Crossley, 2011). Such data generation can be valuable in capturing the realities of the various interactions, relations, and ties experienced within the wider academy network, and go beyond any previous single actor, or dyadic accounts of this social world. For us, the utility of such knowledge for understanding inquiry can ultimately support the generation of accounts of talent identification and development that better reflect their emergent, interactive and practical complexity, and allow us to better recognize and critically engage with the realities, dilemmas and vulnerabilities of practice (Dinh *et al.*, 2014; Potrac *et al.*, 2013).

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**Comments/action following review:**

| Comment  | Reviewer | Action  |
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| There are some technical aspects that you presume that the reader may already know, for example category 1 status academy may not be on the radar of an average reader of soccer in society.   | 1        | Following some editing of the piece, the reference to category 1 status has now been lost, although the general essence of the importance of talent identification activities to contemporary football remains within the introduction.   |
| The structural element of the introduction is really interesting and is a framework that is very welcomed in the field of sport sociology and coaching. I note the references to relational sociologist Nick Crossley on page 4. However, I think a wider range of scholars and work might be interesting here from a relational perspective that would give a wider embrace of the literature, specifically | 1        | The final section of the introduction contains (hopefully) stronger signposting from recent sociological inquiry in football, to a need to think beyond single actors and dyads, and thus the interconnections and relationships of the whole football network. There is now a more detailed ‘review’ of relational scholars, which highlights both their overarching approach to the study of social life, whilst highlighting the attractiveness of Crossley’s work for us, specifically. |



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| Granovetter, Tarde, Becker, and Wellman.  |   |   |
| I think the final paragraph of the introduction could be stronger and more engagement with the fundamental principles of relational sociology.              | 1 | This has now been reworked, and we hope that we've sufficiently addressed the wider principles of relational sociology in a succinct manner, but in a way that still provides suitable signposting for the following sections of the paper.   |
| The literature review is impressive and takes the reader through key aspects of talent identification.  | 1 | We thank the reviewers for this positive comment. However, (as explained below) parts of the original submission read a little too much like a literature review. We also needed to address the relational theorising of Crossley much earlier in the piece. We feel that we've managed to mesh some of the wider arguments created within the original submission into the new introduction section of this paper. This has allowed us to make the same arguments, whilst losing a considerable number of words from the original iteration of this paper.   |
| Do bear in mind the rationale for the special issue. The piece meanders away from core aspects in part.   | 1 | A tighter focus at the start/the end has helped to keep the SI in mind. This has also (we feel) aided some of the practical examples given during the 'bulk' of this paper – notably the lengthier sections on Crossley's work specifically. In particular, we hope we've provided acknowledgement of EPPP (for example) as a <i>Premier League</i> policy, whilst discussing the increasing pressure that academy staff are under, and the neoliberalist policies and practice that the PL has arguably helped to create. This hopefully provides a better appreciation for the wider focus on the Premier League and its influence. |
| Relational sociology (given that this is a major component of the paper) really needs more of a central place in the piece. Indeed, it is not until page 13 | 1 | Due to some of the afore-mentioned editing, we now get into concepts of relational sociology much earlier. It is introduced around page 3, with Crossley's work then explored in great depth from   |

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| <p>that the concept is explored in great depth. However, the subsequent piece is eloquently written.</p>  |                   | <p>page 4/5. This then forms the bulk of this paper.</p>   |
| <p>Given its length, it does (in places) seem to lack clarity; I would consider reducing the content considerably.</p> <p>Having said that, overall the size of the paper needs to be reduced for clarity and impact, 9,500 words is too long and as a reader this drifts into a general literature review. 7,500-8,000 words should be sufficient to make theoretical points link to practice. Some points have been made before in the literature and do not need to be made again.</p>   | <p>1</p> <p>2</p> | <p>As above, a significant number of edits have been made. The original submission was over 9500 words, and this current iteration sits at 6689 (inclusive of titles, authors, abstract and bibliography). We feel that we've managed to retain many of the positive elements enjoyed by the reviewers in the first iteration, whilst providing a greater focus to the piece in general.</p>   |
| <p>More is needed here in how we can operationalize relational sociology in future research. That is, what methods could we use to test these assumptions? I think a critical reflection on Social Network Analysis might be of interest here.</p> <p>The paper lacks clear theoretical/practical conclusion for how thinking of TID is useful in practice. What would this new (or at least under emphasised) understanding bring? How? Try reading the conclusion as a standalone and see what it achieves. Try to make the conclusion more 'punchy'.</p> | <p>1</p> <p>2</p> | <p>The conclusion has now been revised, and is hopefully 'punchier' as a standalone piece. We begin by stressing the originality of our approach to this topic, and then devote some time to outlining the type of methods to data collection that would help to analyse this from a relational perspective. We then finish with a statement on the practical utility of such work to those working on the ground in academies in various roles.</p> |
| <p>Undertake an updated literature search to capture research</p>   | <p>2</p>          | <p>The number of edits made with regard to reducing content has somewhat inhibited</p>   |

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| <p>published by cited authors post 2018. What has been published in the last 2 years? There are examples of qualitative studies in sports coaching/management that talk about talent identification/recruitment/development from a coaching/management perspective.</p> |  | <p>this, although we make increased use of Hall et al (2021) as an example of work that utilises relational theorising to explain events in high performance sport. In addition to contemporary work from O’Gorman et al (2020), Turner et al (2020, Parnell et al (2020), we now also make reference to Potrac et al (2019) and Cushion et al (2019) as examples of such qualitative inquiry in sport coaching/management.</p> |
| <p>Some inconsistencies with formatting &amp; outside brackets and use of et al.</p>  |  | <p>We’ve had a sweep through, and believe that we’ve now checked this. Happy to take another look should any have slipped through.</p>  |