

# The structure-agency debate



I have been involved in football for as long as I can remember, with the application of Structural Functionalism I am going to attempt to understand my involvement in football. The Structure theory, Structural Functionalism can be applied to my position as a footballer and explain how football has affected my position in contemporary society. The main assumption of Structural Functionalism is “ that society is an organized system of interrelated parts that attempts to maintain a state of equilibrium” (Williams & Kolkka 1998 p. 358). Williams & Kolkka (1998) applied this assumption of Structural Functionalism within their research of Wheelchair Basketball, they conceptualised the activity as its own social system which comprised of its members (including players, coaches physiotherapists, supporters etc.) and the relationship between them. This can be applied to my position within football particularly at club level. I was a player at Wakefield Ladies F. C. therefore through interaction with other players and other forms of members including the coaches, physiotherapists and supporters, this lead to the maintaining the clubs state of equilibrium and the system working as a whole (Malcolm 2008). This highlights my contribution in maintaining a successful working system however Structural Functionalism only offers a positive view of sporting systems and experiences therefore offers no insight into how specific barriers and constraints challenged my position in football. Bourdieu’s theory deals with constraints through defining how different forms of Capital can affect a person’s identity.

Another aspect of Structural Functionalism is that, sport is seen as a vital tool in successfully maintaining the state of equilibrium, it is said to instil desired values and attitudes (Williams and Kolkka 1998; Malcolm 2008).

Therefore a Structural Functionalist would argue that by playing football I learned the desired values and attitudes such as conformity to rules, respect and self-control which would contribute to maintaining a state of equilibrium. However, Structural Functionalism only takes into account the structure of society and not individual agency therefore provides no explanation in understanding how human beings make important decisions, such those which lead to me choosing to play football or how my current social world was created unlike Bourdieu's Habitus and Capital which explains how class habitus confined me to the choice of football (Malcolm 2008; Williams 1994; Best 2003). In 2008 the FA rolled out the RESPECT campaign across all levels of football, in response to a range of behavioural problems surrounding the game. The campaign was designed to protect players and referees and create an environment in which sport can be enjoyed but also have wider benefits to society. I played under the RESPECT campaign when it was first introduced and on reflection, I found it reinforced the desired values and attitudes which are required not only on the football pitch but also in wider society (RESPECT: Four Years On. 2012; Malcolm 2008). A Structural Functionalist would view the RESPECT campaign as a positive step to creating a state of equilibrium (Williams & Kolka 1998). It is evident that Structural Functionalism highlights how I have been a part of maintaining a successful societal system and also the positive effect in which sport has had on my life however it offers no reasoning as to why I became involved in football. .

The Agency theory, Symbolic Interactionism can be applied in attempt to gain an understanding of my involvement within football. George Herbert

Mead is said to be the founding Father of Symbolic Interactionism. Hewitt (2000 in Armstrong 2007) defines Symbolic Interactionism as a theory which helps human beings define and give meaning to experiences, allowing them to create an individual and unique identity. The main assumption of Symbolic Interactionism is that “ society is created and maintained by social interaction: we are all actors on a stage who generate meaning through what we do and who we do it with” (Craig & Beedie 2010 p. 61). This draws upon my decision to join a football club; it allowed social interaction to occur which consequently constructed my own social world. Malcolm (2008) furthers Craig and Beedie’s (2010) assumption by highlighting the focus upon the individual and the way in which they interpret and make sense of the world in which they live in. There are two widely researched areas within Symbolic Interactionism, Socialisation and Subcultures. Firstly, Socialisation focusses upon who becomes involved in sport and is developed through learning to read, understand and interpret symbols to aid individuals in becoming members of society (Best 2003). Cottingham (2012) states how interpreting symbols in the correct manner is a fundamental process, as it increases focus and wider understanding of an object, Gilbert (1994) furthers Cottingham’s (2012) statement by adding, “ that the constructs are grounded within the minds of those who experience the perceived symbolic actions” (p. 142). On reflection, throughout the years I have understood and interpreted symbols whilst playing football to aid my socialisation. For example when I first began to attend training sessions at Wakefield Ladies F. C, by interpreting and understanding the coaches I was able to demonstrate competence which led to being selected on a match day and also accepted by the rest of the team on a social level due to my ability to prescribe to the

<https://assignbuster.com/the-structure-agency-debate/>

groups norm. It could be argued that my behaviour at Wakefield F. C. Ladies was due to previous experiences; specific symbols became grounded in my mind throughout my development from junior level to the open age therefore this would have led to improving my process of socialisation throughout the years (Best 2003; Gilbert 1994).

This example can also be related to the second research area within the Agency debate, Subcultures. By prescribing to the groups norms in terms of beliefs and practices I was accepted and became part of a socially defined group, further creating myself a specific identity (Craig & Beedie 2010). I confirmed this identity through not only Symbolic Interactionism but also symbolic consumption as I have specific Wakefield F. C. Ladies clothing which I am required to wear for training, matches and other events, these items of clothing have a specific meaning of being a part of the team therefore is an effective tool in creating my identity (Armstrong 2007). It is clear that by applying Symbolic Interactionism to my own position within contemporary society I can begin to understand why events occurred and why I was accepted into the team.

However Symbolic Interactionism is often criticised for over emphasising individual agency and failing to take into account structural inequalities and constraints such as race, gender, class and ethnicity (Craig & Beedie 2010). On reflection, this weakness can be applied to my example as, playing for Wakefield F. C; the men's section of club was deemed superior and was seen in a much more favourable perspective to the Women's section. This was a constraint which we had to regularly deal with and included reduced funding compared to the men's section and poor training facilities. Therefore we had

<https://assignbuster.com/the-structure-agency-debate/>

a barrier to overcome whilst attempting to build a successful team. This weakness highlights how Agency theories do not take into account power systems as a Post-Dualist theory would. Bourdieu would argue that this barrier would not create a working system and would affect my interpretation of experiences, as any experiences related to this constraint are likely to be deemed negative (Best 2003). It could be argued that the Agency theory, Symbolic Interactionism helps explain my interpretation of my own social construct but still with some constraints.

A third theory which can be drawn upon is the post-dualist theory, Bourdieu's Habitus and Capital, which takes into account both structures in society and individual agency (Craig & Beedie 2010). Bourdieu's work was based upon empirical and theoretical investigations; his work was also in relation to sport, unlike Structural Functionalism and Symbolic Interactionism. They are theories that were not originally based around sport but were later applied and adapted to help offer a sociological explanation of sport. Bourdieu developed a social framework from his empirical and theoretical investigations which involved Habitus, Capital and Field; I will use Habitus and Capital in attempt to explain my involvement with football. Firstly, Capital can be defined as power and Habitus is defined by Elliott (2009) as a structuring feature with an infinite capacity for moulding individuals. Habitus is internalised as a second nature, " as individuals we acquire habits, either knowingly or unknowingly, from a structural context and we use these practices to live out our everyday lives" (Best 2003 p. 204). Bourdieu's work links class habitus and taste extremely closely; this can be applied to my position within society as it could be argued that both class habitus and taste

led to my choice of football. It is clear that the subconscious decision to develop an interest in football is due to my class habitus and the confinement of my families' working class background (Best 2003). The sport of football reflects class distinctions and represents the class I belong to; if I was born into an upper class family I may have developed an interest in other sports such as Rugby Union or Polo (Best 2003; Tomlinson 2004). Furthermore, my Father's taste and class habitus will have affected my subconscious decision, as he had already developed specific practices; including supporting and playing football therefore this would have influenced the practices I developed whilst growing up (Best 2003). Best (2003) argues that despite us developing different practices to make a distinction between ourselves and others, people who live within the same social field are likely to share the same habitus, therefore people who I were brought up around all had a specific interest in football which is another reason why I may have been inclined towards football. Finally, it can be argued that Bourdieu's class habitus can be applied best to explain my interest in football as it focusses upon where my interest originates from unlike the other Structural Functionalism and Symbolic Interaction.

Another aspect of Bourdieu's work which can be applied to my position within football is his work involving the body and the creation and reproduction of social differences that can be displayed by the body, one way it can be displayed is through accent (Craig & Beedie 2010). A strong Yorkshire accent is often related to the working class therefore this is a form of cultural capital in the embodied state (Laberge 1995). Social differences in terms of cultural capital can be identified when I play football for University

because part of my cultural capital is a Yorkshire accent therefore this is not the 'norm' within the University team, as the majority of players are from the Middlesbrough area (Craig and Beedie 2010; Laberge 1995). This differs from when I played football for Wakefield F. C. Ladies, as the majority of players were from the same area therefore shared the same accent. This highlights a difference in individual agency and also the importance of cultural capital. Bourdieu's work has been criticised over the years, Elliott (2009) argues that Bourdieu's work takes the economy for granted and does not take into account the role of economic issues upon social life, Elliott (2009) furthers his argument by accusing Bourdieu of elevating cultural capital over economic capital. This can clearly be seen as despite Bourdieu's work leading me to define how I came to develop an interest in football, however it has not taken into account the economic constraints which I faced such as cost of travel, kit and also subs after each match. It is evident that this is an economic force which was a barrier to me. In terms of my example economic capital is much more significant than Cultural Capital, economic capital was a barrier where as cultural capital just highlights a difference between team members.

In conclusion, it is evident that all three theories can be applied to my position within contemporary society however after taking into consideration their strengths and weaknesses along with application, I believe Bourdieu's post-dualist theory applies best as it takes into consideration the structures within society but also the agency of the individual (Craig & Beedie 2010). Bourdieu's Habitus and Capital allows an explanation of the origins of my interest in sport, Symbolic Interactionism and Structural Functionalism



cannot do this. They only offer significant explanations of what sport has offered me and how it has contributed to the identity in which I hold today. Therefore it is clear that Bourdieu's work is the most complex and offers a better understanding of my interest in sport and my position within contemporary society.