
This item was submitted to [Loughborough's Research Repository](#) by the author.
Items in Figshare are protected by copyright, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise indicated.

The game of (your) life: professional rugby careers

PLEASE CITE THE PUBLISHED VERSION

PUBLISHER

EGOS - European Group for Organizational Studies

VERSION

AM (Accepted Manuscript)

PUBLISHER STATEMENT

This work is made available according to the conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-ND 4.0) licence. Full details of this licence are available at: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

LICENCE

CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPOSITORY RECORD

Coupland, Christine. 2019. "The Game of (your) Life: Professional Rugby Careers". figshare. <https://hdl.handle.net/2134/17056>.

The game of (your) life: Professional rugby careers

Christine Coupland

C.Coupland@lboro.ac.uk

Presented at the EGOS Conference, Rotterdam, 2014, Career Stream

Published in the conference proceedings

Abstract

Taking the perspective that a professional sports person regards their sport-craft as work, it is timely to consider how this embodied, short, publically performance-measured, ultimately degenerative, career is given credibility by those who are engaged in it at an elite level. Drawing on Bourdieu the analysis of ethnographic empirical material from a study of a UK-based rugby league team playing at the Super League level (the highest level in the UK) illustrates how the natural order of things is crafted. Advancing understanding of an embodied-career resonates with contemporary understandings of short-term contracts which require the individual to be flexible and adaptable, be prepared for exit, and yet remain immersed and dedicated to the current sphere of employment. This kind of immersion requires alternatives to be, temporarily at least, silenced and in this context renders the accrual of bodily capital as fit, but only temporarily fit for purpose.

Keywords: Bourdieu, career, class, embodiment, masculinity, rugby league, sport

Introduction

Having a career as a professional sports person has a large degree of uncertainty about it (Roderick, 2006). However, there is one certainty to this career, that is, it will end rather

prematurely in comparison to other careers (in terms of life span) and will therefore require the individual to re-craft a new career and re-construct a version of their selves in order to move forward with their working lives. How an individual makes sense of their progress through life renders the understanding of careers important for revealing the working constitution of society (Hughes, 1937). It is argued that basic principles around work careers apply to professional sports' careers in that they are socially differentiating, differences in career performances lead to differing rewards, rewards are not necessarily material and the ultimate reward is prestige or a satisfactory sense of self (Goldschmidt, 1990: 109).

The theoretical background to the study draws on Bourdieu's theory of practice (Bourdieu, 1977; 1990). According to studies of social and career capital within work careers this is expected to accrue over experience. For the professional sports person this is by no means a predictable outcome and thus merits further consideration. Bourdieu's ideas enable an understanding of career as set within an intersection of 'societal history and individual biography' (Grandjean, 1981: 1057). Other scholars have studied empirical contexts utilising Bourdieu's principles. For example, Roderick (2006) highlighted the precarious nature of a professional sports career. Wainwright and Turner (2006) effectively illuminated an embodied dancing career. McGillivray et al., (2005) demonstrated how professional football provided a particular kind of habitus that limited alternative career decision practices beyond the profession. Finally, compromised careers of migrant workers have been studied following their movement across national boundaries (Ariss and Syed, 2011). Hence, individuals at work, who are embedded and embodied in social architectures, render the broader utility of Bourdieu more apparent (O'Mahoney, 2007).

In order to further demonstrate the utility of Bourdieu's specific concepts of habitus, capital and field, in an attempt to illustrate hidden logics within careers, empirical material from interviews with players who are performing at an elite level in a professional sports club,

herein referred to as *the Northern Knights* has been analysed. The empirical material which is drawn on in this paper is taken from a larger ethnographic study of the club. The analysis will be organised around Bourdieu's concepts adopting an evaluative approach to their potential contribution to better understand how careers are structured by context-specific resources but drawn upon and differentially reproduced by individuals.

Research into transitions from playing sport professionally tends to take place in sports departments of universities where, predominantly, resources are more evidently attracted towards enhancing performances of elite athletes. It seems that in material terms there is less institutional interest in understanding this complete immersion (in sport as work) and more in increasing it, which warrants its study from an alternative perspective. Some authors argue that transition from playing to not-playing sport at a high level is unlike retirement from work (Wyllemann et al, 2004). It is argued, contrarily, that the athletes' experience of transition to a non-playing career is similar but more acute and thus demonstrates a more intensified career-process, condensed into shorter periods, which allows little time for adjustment. The professional sports person retires from playing while relatively young, but still with a requirement, an expectation, to get another job in order to be financially secure. This means that they are under heightened pressures which are similar to those who are retiring from work (more so if there has been insufficient time to accrue a retirement pension of some kind). Furthermore, a successful professional sports person will already have experienced other transitions from amateur, youth and pre-professional to a more elite level which has required greater and increasing dedication to sports activities, resulting in less time to spend on other life activities. Research has indicated that a drive to excel at sport may engender a less developed understanding around life choices (Stronach and Adair, 2010) and in non-sport situations (McGillivray et al., 2005). Thus, it is proposed that immersion in the field of professional sports is so strong that it will be difficult to imagine or prepare for exit. Hence, it

is suggested that the exit from a professional playing career is more intense than retirement from work, with greater if different pressures to move on with a working sense of self.

In order to return to considering career as a broadly sociological concern, it may be timely to introduce new ways of thinking about career. By drawing on Bourdieu's ideas it is possible to illustrate how individuals' accounts of their paths, both future and past, in intersection with the institution(s) of work are a) presented as 'normal', b) shown to have value and c) are ultimately damaging to the (willing) individual. Bourdieu's theory of practice has been used as an exemplar (Chudzikowski and Mayrhofer, 2011) of an overarching theory that may provide an opportunity to unearth these logics. The context of the study is rugby league, which is a particularly hard, masculine, environment often located in working class areas of deprivation and former heavy industry. It is argued that this profession offers opportunities to temporarily transcend 'from their oppressive circumstances' (Waquant, 1995: 501) in an area where there are few alternatives for masculine employment.

The career accounts are bounded by what it is possible to say – how one is able to articulate beyond the current occupation. The intention of the paper is to demonstrate how the application of analysis to empirical material, which is set in a theoretical analytical framework comprising of Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital, can make, ordinarily invisible, career-relevant, logics visible.

Methods

The context

The context is a study of the '*Northern Knights*'. Previous studies of rugby have described it as a 'sport of violence' (Pringle, 2001: 425). At the time of the study *Northern Knights* were playing in the Super League, the top division for rugby league in the UK. In contrast to

professional football teams, rugby players have a fairly recent history of playing at semi-professional level. The fissure between rugby league and rugby union in the UK came about where (predominantly Northern) players were given ‘boot money’ as they missed paid work in order to play. This caused a break away from the traditional amateur status of the game and two different sets of rules of play emerged. Although both rugby union and rugby league are professional sports now, the demarcation lines still exist today roughly along a north/south divide (with exceptions). This has implications for the size of any club’s income, taken from attendance at the game, known as the ‘gate’, and the potential of being a self-funded organization, (arguably there is more disposable income in the south). There is a class issue here too which emanates from the historical context that sees rugby league being played initially in heavy industrial working class areas, e.g. coal mining areas or the docklands.

In contrast to football, income generated through rugby is much lower and is subject to wage-capping which means that players’ salaries and the business potential of the sport are reduced. Thus, this is a professional sport which is constrained financially and is supported through the altruism of local benefactors and the loyalty of the fans. Club contracts for first team players are typically for three yearsⁱ, and these may be extended for one year at a time. The contract can be ended by the club at any time based on performance issues on or off the pitchⁱⁱ. Playing careers are short, although first team members as young as 16 are not unusual. At the level of Super League it would be rare to find a player still playing regularly beyond his mid-thirties.

The empirical material

The empirical material is drawn from a larger ethnographic study of the club. The study took place over 14 months, from the beginning of April 2011 to the end of May 2012. The

material for this paper is taken from observations of and interactions with the players from the first teamⁱⁱⁱ.

This squad typically consists of around 23 contracted players, although during any season there will be unexpected departures and some arrivals as replacements. Data collection took place in various forms throughout this period. I would spend on average one day a week at the club, taking temporary residence in the football manager's office (where other trainers and players spent some time each day) and attended some matches and off-field events during the playing season. In addition to formal interviews with members of the club, (47 members were interviewed) much of the time was spent 'hanging around' (van Maanen, 2011) observing and noting the mundane, ritualistic and unusual occurrences of the organization. Training sessions were held by the football staff for the players each morning between 9.00am and 11.00am most days, followed by lunch and other training activities. I, as researcher and author, attended some of these and took up a position on the side lines at some of the on-the-pitch training sessions waiting for individual meetings or interviews. By deliberately arriving 'early' I could legitimately be seen to be doing 'nothing' while observing and listening to the coach /football staff /player interactions on the field of play. Thus, material for analysis has been collected from; formal, semi-structured, interviews with a range of members of the organization, overheard conversations and training interactions and author-interpretations of events and exchanges.

It should be noted that the researcher is female who entered a masculine world with no desire or ability to fit in. That said, in this close knit community anyone would be regarded and treated as a stranger, it is an environment which is under intense scrutiny from outside by fans, the media and other sporting bodies. As a female who has selected to enter and study a male world I claim an epistemic reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) and

acknowledge that the research has been conducted from my gendered enactments which occur across the whole data set.

Analysis

Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital are relevant as theoretical schema in terms of explaining broader relationships between the embodied self and the organized individual (Wacquant, 1995; Wainwright and Turner, 2006). The concepts are linked where practice is the result of various habitual schemas and dispositions combined with resources (capital) being activated by social conditions (field) which they in turn reproduce and modify (Crossley, 2001). There is much debate around to what extent 'habitus' reproduces social order on the one hand and how it may be a useful concept for opening up possibilities for theorizing change as an alternative view (McLeod, 2005). According to Bourdieu behaviour is not determined by this system, but it provides a practical sense that inclines us towards one way of being rather than another.

A detailed study of the career talk of members of one professional sports organization enabled some analysis of the capacity of elite rugby players to consider their career pathways – the development of future capital (McGillivray et al., 2005). The analytical process began with a search for how career decisions were constructed in the interviews. All of the players provided some explanation for entry to professional rugby league. A selection of extracts from the data is discussed in the first section of analysis entitled, *habitus*. One critique of relying on spoken data to demonstrate habitus is that what is taken for granted may not be spoken about. This is a reasonable charge; however, my ethnographic immersion in the field has enabled an awareness of what was accepted as 'normal' and that knowledge has informed the analytical perspective. The second focus of analysis was to explore how the players talked about the end of their playing careers and what might bring this about. Injury talk featured in

this section of the analysis which is discussed in the section, *the field: rules of the game*. A sub-section of this is called *post-sport careers*, which led from a search of the data for instances of talk about how they were preparing, or planning to prepare, for a post-playing career. The final phase in the analytical process included an examination of the data for what matters, objects of value, to the players, in Bourdieu's terms, various sources of capital. Several forms were talked about; they are discussed and illustrated with extracts in a section entitled *capital*. Thus, the analysis is illustrated with extracts which are organised according to Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field and capital.

Habitus

According to Bourdieu (1998: 784) there is a two way relationship between habitus and field, where the field as a structured space tends 'to structure the habitus while the habitus tends to structure the perception of the field'. It is both the topic for investigation and the subject of empirical elaboration in this section of the analysis. Other studies of sports professionals have found that accounts of their beginnings in the sport feature; family influences, early beginnings and sport as the natural order of things (McGillivray et al., 2005; Price, 2007; Stronach and Adair, 2010; Wacquant, 1995). This is demonstrated in the extracts below taken from the rugby players' stories:

Player6 Yeah, my, my dad played for L, he won the Challenge Cup in seventy seven, and ever since a kid I've always played, started rugby at three because my brother, all the brothers played so, like trained with his team and always, that's all I've ever done.

PlayerH It's in my blood

In keeping with Wacquant's (1995) study of boxing 'it's a kind of possession' the habitus is thus constructed in the accounts as the natural order of things, beyond strategic intent, through claims like 'always wanted to be', or family influence being described as important. Other studies of working class men have recalled choices of jobs made in this way (e.g. Willis, 1977). However, as this profession is one that is, within the local community at least, regarded as heroic and akin to local celebrity status, the claim to it being natural provides an account of elitist belonging in the light of a paucity of job opportunity in the immediate post-industrial environment. Furthermore, in the example of this below, being 'good' at it is what the account is structured to reveal. I argue that this is a claim to it being 'naturally' the player's profession, prior to any training or intervention and thus part of the 'natural' order of things.

PlayerH Yeah, it was, I lived, I think I was living on LH at the time and I was at my mate's house having tea and he was going to training and he said one night oh do you want to come? Because I was just going to go home, and I said oh yeah, I'll come and then turns out I was, I was quite good.

Habitus operates here as an organising principle to demonstrate how a professional rugby player's world is assembled according to its own relevant logics. The intention is to illuminate these logics of social action that enable us to explore and, to some extent, explain the workings of this particular occupation. The body-damaging career may be regarded by some as ill-advised due to its temporary nature with potential for long-term ill-effects. However, there is no claim to demonstrate that this is in any way a stigmatised profession, or dirty work, instead the participants have accrued embodied capital in order to transgress from one field to another, more preferable, one. The ultimate bodily sacrifice that is required is taken as a disciplined route to better performance and is not questioned. This is not to suggest

that this version of the natural order of things was not re-negotiated by some people at some point (or is radically different from other work contexts – further research would be required to show that) but what it does for the participants in the study, at the time of the study, is to provide a normative framework to ‘explain’ their choice of this career which is unlikely to be questioned as either not true or not sensible.

The field – rules of the game, talk of injury

According to Bourdieu (1977) a social field is a patterned set of practices within a broader social space. Other scholars have discussed how in professional work settings such as London City Banks, shared dispositions may be reflected in bodily techniques – producing an appropriate professional body (Riach and Cutcher, 2014). For professional rugby, which is an intensely physical game, the player enters a ‘body centred universe’ (Wacquant, 1995: 66) which requires field-appropriate capital to be deployed according to rules of the field. Thus, in order to demonstrate the most valuable capital – embodied – I consider in this section how players respond to questions around injury - the ever constant threat to the carefully crafted, performing, body.

Player1 If you think about injuries then the chances of getting injury is going to happen, probably more, so you just don't think about that stuff. I never think of anything negative really.

PlayerA No, never, that, that's something, that's, you know, that's never entered my head, because I think for one if you do start to think like that I think there's a lot more chance of it happening to you.

In the above extracts there seems to be an almost superstitious treatment of the notion that injuries may occur to them. Yet the possibility of injury is well understood as demonstrated in the following extract where the player talks about the impact of injury on another player's career.

PlayerB I know a winger back home, he just did his ankle in the game, and was in surgery, he was up and coming, played for New Zealand. But yeah, they just couldn't ever get the ankle right, after four or five surgeries, just kept trying to cut back but the bone was just dying, so he just had to retire and he was flying, massive.

So, it is not simply that they naïvely do not expect to be injured at some point, rather the habitus seems to disincline talk about it. There is an awareness of the hazards of their occupation, but a practical disregard of them. It can be argued that the world of the elite professional rugby player constitutes a self-contained web of cultural meaning that refracts information and judgement according to its own sense of logic (Wacquant, 1995).

Rugby league is an example of a contact sport in which the male athletes typically accept the notion that real men endure pain and injury (Roderick et al., 2000). This demonstrates the concept of the body as a form of gendered capital. Furthermore, it is useful to understand how the practices of the social world shape the deployment of the worked-upon body. Social relationships create habitus which is expressed in everyday contexts. However, beliefs which order our behaviour are not simply states of mind but states of body, where the body is a living memory pad operating through practical metaphors (Bourdieu, 1990).

Ultimately, remaining as an active player for the club depends upon performance; concerns with injury would affect this and may mean being no longer picked to play, as seen in the next extract.

PlayerG I think it's the nature of the beast with it, you've got to, you can't really think about injury, if you're second guessing yourself on the field and you worry about getting injured, well, you know, let the team down at some stage and if you do that -well you're not going to be around the club for very long because, they'll get rid of you.

However, despite all best efforts, the body will succumb to injury, wear and tear and an ageing process that renders the player unable to compete with younger, faster, stronger, bodies. The rugby players are willing to sacrifice their carefully crafted and honed physical well-being to a body-damaging performance on the pitch without question. It is not simply lack of an awareness of these very real possibilities that the players are providing in these extracts, instead they demonstrate the ordinary functioning of the rugby players' field as a space of material exchanges aimed at reproducing specific forms of capital. We can see in the extracts the different methods that they employ to screen out awareness of potential for injury through their craft.

Post sport careers

In an environment where it is well understood that the playing career is short and likely to be curtailed through injury, how do the players talk about preparing for a life beyond the game? In keeping with McGillivray et al., (2005: 64) in their study of Scottish footballers, talk of training to be a personal trainer retains the utility of physical capital and maximises the 'physical literacy' developed during the sports career. This view is demonstrated in the extracts below.

PlayerJ I wanted to be a PE teacher which is still something I'd probably like to fall back on when I finish playing.

Player6 I wouldn't mind going into coaching really but I'm not sure, I haven't really thought about that, route yet but I've had, my old, school teacher phoned me up and he's asked me to do a course at university to work with naughty kids at school.

However, in the following extract the player alludes to a transitional strategy by talking about having to reduce the level of club he will be playing for as he gets older, signalling a need to stay connected with the sport for as long as possible.

Player4 it might be a case of I need to maybe drop down a level to Northern Ford (a lower level in the league) or it might be a case of right, you know, move on, retire and see where I go from here.

In keeping with other studies of sports' professionals (McGillivray et al., 2005; Price, 2007) the rugby players also seem to have side-lined academic potential in favour of immersion in a dream of professional sport careers, referred to below in their retrospective accounting.

PlayerI I probably would have, if I knew back then I would have put my head down at school and worked a bit harder and tried to get some skills to sort of get a real job I guess, but like, my favourite, my best skill was rugby league so I put all my effort into that.....if I did it again I'd definitely work harder at school.

In professional sports the future labour market is identified at an early age. Football clubs, for example, promote a set of dispositions towards football participation which devalues formal educational attainment in favour of the game (McGillivray et al., 2005: 106). In a similar way education is likely to be sacrificed based on the prospects of making it as a professional rugby

player (even though it is well documented that playing careers are short and salaries are capped). Furthermore, it is commonly understood that successful ex-players go on to other careers which contrast starkly with the playing success that they have enjoyed. The participants demonstrate their understanding of this in the extract below.

Player3 I've heard of in the past very successful professional rugby league players having amazing careers and then, you know, not saying it's a bad thing but end up being like a taxi driver.

That said, possibly pre-empted through involvement with the research and the research interview specifically, there are moments of clarity, or dawning realisation, that there are material consequences to this current total immersion in sport to the exclusion of giving some consideration for future careers. Even if it is through considering someone else's situation as in the following extract.

Player6 I think if you ask most rugby players of my age now, twenty five, who've probably got five, six years left, seven years at most, I bet if you ask half of them at twenty five year old, they won't know what they, what they want to do after, because I've, it's only just really dawned on me now because like (ex-player) and he's thirty two and he did his A Levels but he didn't really, he didn't finish them because he started playing first team rugby.

When asked to consider what they might do having retired from the game most of the players provided quite vague descriptions of what they may do. They featured idealised, non-detailed, accounts of what might be possible. This simply may reflect an inability to consider future selves beyond playing rugby – but that is precisely what Bourdieu alludes to in a

dispositional habitus. In keeping with a recent study of indigenous Australian boxers, the authors argued that the athletes' life world was dominated by the field, without realistic alternatives while within the confines of their habitus. 'Boxing recruits, grooms and exploits young men, athletically, educationally and financially at the risk of being discarded once physical assets have eroded without adequate preparation to enter alternative occupations' (Stronach and Adair, 2010: 67).

Thus it is apparent that, within the field of professional sports there are few resources which are either prevalent or encouraged to be focussed on in too much detail for a life beyond playing. It could be that it is not in the Club's interest to be preparing the players for exit, but there is no claim that they are not willing participants in their current complete immersion in the field. The argument here is that the habitus of this work environment provides a template to *not* plan for a career beyond playing. Normative expectations and assumptions appear to be around focused commitment to the club and to their playing career, planning for exit suggests reduced commitment to the current focus.

Capital – social, cultural and embodied

Bourdieu discusses many forms of capital that are accrued over a career. Studies of sporting careers focus, perhaps understandably, mostly on physical capital (Wacquant, 1995). Although this does not suggest that it is a mindless engagement with sport – intelligence, craft and psychological strength are required for the more skilled rugby players. That said, physical capital is converted into economic capital through sport or training for sport, or other physical endeavours, termed bodily capital. This involves other members of the organization as they are engaged in crafting this bodily capital into optimum playing capital through instigating training on their willing participants. Thus, they may be regarded as entrepreneurs in bodily capital. It is possible to produce value in terms of income and recognition on the

pitch for the benefit of the individual, the club and the industry more broadly. In the extracts below the players allude to this playing capital as economic capital or 'silverware' which supports the argument that they are actively engaged in the rules of play in this field.

PlayerL Best case scenario would probably be still playing here, I'd love to be here in five years' time and I'd love to be in the top, like in the top four teams in super league and I'd love to have won some sort of silverware, and from a personal point of view I'd love to have some sort of silverware.

The notion of bodily capital employed to benefit an embodied career fits with Bourdieu's concept of a habitus which illuminates a circular process whereby practices incorporated into the body are regenerated through embodied work (Crossley 2001). In sport there is a focus on embodied competence (Wacquant, 1995). 'Silverware' demonstrates how valuable bodies lead to increasing improved performance, which is performance-measured by an acknowledged reward system that is jointly acquired. Thus, sports people utilize bodily capital to reach top league positions with their team, which are dependent on increasing body mastery. This understanding is demonstrated through the participants' extracts below where they align their future plans with body performances:

Player5 In five years I'd love to be back home, probably retired but all depends on the body, I'd love to keep playing, this is pretty much all I know.

Some of the players were from Samoa, Australia or New Zealand and they occasionally refer to their eventual return 'home' as in the last of the above extracts. The routes for these international players to UK teams were diverse. Frequently, a move to the UK included an increased salary (they were not subject to salary capping in the same way as the UK players were). There has been a trend in rugby league to employ coaches from Australia or New

Zealand who utilise their knowledge of the skills of overseas players to add talent to the team. It would be part of a downward career trajectory for these overseas players as they attempt to extend their earning potential from their work. It is suggested that the impact of the diversity of 'sedimented' experiences of the players will have consequences for the evolving habitus. This is demonstrated as the national identity of the player is evoked in the next extract.

Player2 I think the Australians have a better understanding of what it takes to bring a club together and the sacrifices that you need to make and I definitely think our attitude is more of a, a killer attitude and a hunger to succeed and win and, win at all costs, I find the English quite frustrating at times that not everyone but I think it's inbred in them that they can be negative and they're, they're not, they're not, I would say not as disciplined.

And the final extract demonstrates a realisation, a coming full-circle, to repeat generational patterns of employment following the brief sojourn into professional rugby. This is a demonstrable understanding of his brief escape from a working class habitus – and his inevitable return.

PlayerH My family's trade's like a plasterer and my Dad was a plasterer and my Granddad was a plasterer and when I wasn't full-time that's what I was doing, but I always hated it because I wanted to be a professional rugby player so I always felt that was holding me back from doing, like being professional rugby player, so I took a year out from that, you know, and just went without the money and, it improved me, do you know? I went and did my own training in the day because I wasn't full-time and then the year after I finally signed full-time, so, I'd probably end up being a plasterer but hating it, like my Dad does.

The above extract is illustrative of a player's perception that there are few alternative opportunities for meaningful employment which are local to the club in the study. It is quite understandable that a professional sports career is regarded as an opportunity to craft something special in terms of employment, albeit a potentially body damaging, temporally reduced, career. That said, and although there are well-known examples of drinking, gambling, relationship problems and, at the extreme, suicide attempts by some professional rugby players after they finish playing professionally; it would be too simplistic, and it is not my intention, to portray rugby league players too much as victims. It may be that an, albeit happy, escape to an alternative rugby-playing field does not provide a habitus or capitals for what to do next.

Discussion

As a vehicle to study and better understand embodied careers and thus develop theory this paper renders more visible some of the organising principles of careers in a particular context. Illustrated through extracts from individuals' accounts of their careers as elite professional rugby players their work is a) presented as 'normal' for them, b) shown to have specific value and c) is ultimately damaging to the (willing) individual.

While engaging with Bourdieu's (1977) theory of practice and applying it to a specific work context, the concept of habitus has been drawn upon as a guide in order to explore and explain the logics of those who are deeply immersed in a particular, embodied, occupation. There have been criticisms of Bourdieu's concepts as vague and simply replicative of social structures (e.g. Jenkins, 1991), however, as a resource for social inquiry they offer potential to illuminate the varieties of logics of social action which may be operating in a social context. In a physically-taxing, embodied, occupation it is important to understand that the sedimented products of past social activities are carried within an associated embodied

approach to work, thus the body operates as a target and receptacle of asymmetric power relations (Wacquant, 1995). However, within the habitus of the study, control and ultimately damage of bodies by others is not resisted or subverted or even cynically disregarded, as may be the case in other work occupations. Rather, the centrality of power to the establishment of habitus as the unquestioned natural order of things illustrates how rules and norms operate. Therefore, analysis of the empirical material enables some focus on how the players' habitus is fabricated, deployed and articulated to an outsider, which constructs current career concerns and future prospects from within this environment.

Bourdieu's version of habitus has evolved into a dispositional theory of action where social agents are regarded as skilful in constructing their social reality through categories of perception, appreciation and action (Wacquant, 2011). That said, these categories may be resilient and shared but they are neither universal nor unchanging. As embodied sediments of individual and collective history they operate more like forms of schemata which ultimately enable conformity of practice across time in a manner that formal rules and explicit norms are unable to do (Bourdieu, 1990). It is proposed that, having entered the world of rugby the participant is subject to intense physical and emotional engagement in routines and practices that require full immersion in a field of logics specific to the rugby players' world. This immersion requires a crafting of new abilities to attain the valued capital in that field to the exclusion of preparing for alternative occupations.

Furthermore, habitus indicates that dispositions vary by social location; participants with different life experiences will have gained different ways of thinking and acting before entering the world of the rugby playing occupation. These primary dispositions will vary in terms of their 'fit' with the new rules of this field. Examples of this can be seen in the extracts from 'visitors' (i.e. from Australia, New Zealand or Samoa) who talk about UK players as 'frustratingly less-disciplined'. The disparate activities of the players, their attitudes to the

coaches and the re-making of their selves according to the demands of their occupation is not the central focus of the paper, but it is hinted at in the extracts and suggests that habitus is malleable, but not controllable, through organized practices of inculcation, which are layered onto previous experience. This has relevance for the study of other work contexts in that the accumulation of capital required to enable a successful and inevitable exit from this world after a period of time is curtailed, if not prevented, by the pedagogical work required to meet the exacting demands of the work – which appear to include a requirement to *not* think beyond playing.

Bourdieu has discussed many forms of capital which are accrued over a career. Studies of sporting careers focus, mostly, on physical capital (Wacquant, 1995). Traces of physical capital are converted into economic capital and thus enable the rugby clubs to run as business organizations and pay salaries to the players. In the players' extracts they show an awareness of the importance of understanding a need for the conversion of their physical embodied labour into economic gain for the club and for the individuals– illustrated through an articulated desire for silverware (trophies and other markers of esteem and excellence in the sport). However, most importantly for the study of an embodied occupation, capital accrual focuses upon the body being crafted for purpose. In keeping with McGillivray et al.'s, (2005) study of Scottish footballers, talk of training to be a coach, personal trainer, sports teacher or gym instructor retains the usefulness of physical capital and enables them to continue with a perceived value of 'physical literacy' (in contrast to other forms of literacy) developed during the sports career.

As professional rugby is an intensely physical game, how the players respond to questions around injury illustrate some of the rules of the game which operate in this occupational field. The extracts demonstrate that it is not simply that the players do not expect to be injured at some point; rather that it seems as if the habitus disinclines talk about it. There is an evident

awareness of the hazards of their occupation, as shown when they talk about other players' injuries, but they have a practical disregard of them. This is mirrored in Wacquant's study of professional boxers who also treated talk around potential for injury with some superstition and analysed the boxers' talk of risk as *illusio* and *collusio* – an illusion created as the ordinary functioning of the boxers' field and collusion as a collective illusion that serious injury does happen but to others. In a similar way, the world of the elite professional rugby player constitutes a system of cultural meanings that refracts information and makes judgement according to its own sense of logic (Wacquant, 1995) that has material consequences which will impact on the players' future careers.

Within the remit of the paper there is no intention to challenge traditional and more recent post-modernist views of power in the work place, but in a study of career talk, how individuals talk about choices made over their time at work is regarded as a glimpse of the agent/institution interface. What is visible here is the active engagement of the individual in reproducing the embodied control of the employing organisation on its employees. Power relations within an employing, capitalist, organization appear to be alive and well in this context but not simply through command and control mechanisms, rather through the cultural norms which habitus establishes. This could be called a *dispositional* form of power where in this context it is understood that the disciplined body is more likely to be performing well, or at least better than other players who could be selected to play, and planning for exit is regarded as some form of evidence of lack of loyalty or commitment. That said, following these cultural rules is no longer part of a process of conscious reflection and negotiation, habitus is the outcome of past occurrences of this, which has resulted in an 'embodied history, internalized as second nature and so forgotten as history' (Bourdieu, 1990: 56). Nevertheless, while a study of habitus clarifies how reflection and negotiation become eradicated over time, this is a dispositional theory and so those who enter a workplace come

with their own sedimented histories of what work is or should be. One striking example in the study is that of the Australian, New Zealand and Samoan players who had joined the club during the time of the study. They all came from a much more established (in professional terms at least) system of highly paid sports careers. In their talk of their careers and those of their UK colleagues they were critical of the UK players' lack of discipline and commitment to the expected work and training ethic, thus illustrating differing logics in a field of play. It can be assumed that, over time and given increasing use of overseas players, the habitus will adjust to take on these varying views of what is appropriate. Yet, the currently un-contested terrain regarding an acceptance of body damaging performances leading to ultimate defeat in terms of career progression and being dropped by the clubs who no longer regard them as useful or valuable, remains firmly in place.

With regard to extrapolating the relevance of the study of career-talk in the sport-as-work domain in order to understand career logics in other occupations, it is argued that these embodied careers are indicative of some current and possible future career-concerns in other contexts of work. First, in a broad sense, increased attention is being given to the role of judgements around age and ageing (as visible in embodied performances and assumed through stereotypically understood proxies for cognitive ability) in the work environment (e.g. see Riach and Cutcher, 2014). We are all subject, to greater or lesser degrees, to a value-judgement based upon our embodied, occupationally relevant, performance according to the mores of our own fields of play. More explicitly though, other embodied work such as dancing and, possibly, acting, where increasing age signals a deterioration in the required bodily capital that would oblige the participants to seek lower grades of work until the body 'just crumbles to bits' (Wainwright and Turner, 2006: 237) demonstrate clear parallels with the study. Future studies could investigate how ex-professionals in embodied occupations talk about future careers and how they prepare themselves for no longer being able to perform at

their current level. It can be the concern of future research, perhaps, that they too may aspire to teach, coach or train in order to utilise their accumulated physical literacy capital.

Concluding comments

It is clear that the study of professional rugby players' talk of their career progression beyond their elite position enables an understanding of how the context of their career-talk shapes its nature. Bourdieu's contribution is to provide a more nuanced appreciation of structure and agency within intersecting, produced, social relationships of masculinity and class. The picture that is evoked is of an individual acting 'intentionally without intention' (Bourdieu, 1990: 12). The contribution to understanding working class masculinity is through the illustration of a valued masculinist distinction of embodied prowess as real men endure pain in order to labour.

With regard to uncovering ordinarily invisible logics which operate in work contexts, and specifically sport contexts, the paper contributes in two important ways. First, the material and political consequences of the elite sports career are not ordinarily considered, by the organizations that profit from their endeavour (professional sports clubs, media organizations, sponsoring organizations), academic institutions and ultimately the individual participants. It is taken as a presumed 'good' that athletes are crafted to perform better within a habitus that disinclines preparation for the end of their performance.

The study also demonstrates a shared but negotiated system of meaning around another form of literacy – that of physical literacy. From an academic perspective which places academic literacy as the only (or at least, the best) form of literacy, sociological understanding should be open to other forms of value which operate in other people's lives. Finally, the study draws attention to the embodied career, a strong argument for future research to re-consider

the neglect of the working body and the bodily incorporation of social location and the mores of that field.

References

- Ariss AA and Syed J (2011) Capital Mobilization of Skilled Migrants: A Relational Perspective. *British Journal of Management* 22(2): 286–304
- Bourdieu P (1977) *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Bourdieu P (1990) *The logic of practice* (trans. Nice) Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu P (1998) *Practical reason: On the theory of action*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu P and Wacquant L (1992) *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chudzikowski K and Mayrhofer W (2011) In search of the blue flower? Grand social theories and career research: The case of Bourdieu's theory of practice. *Human Relations* 64(1): 19-36.
- Crossley N (2001) *The social body: Habit, identity and desire*. London: Sage.
- Goldschmidt W (1990) *The Human career: The self in the symbolic world*. Cambridge MA: Blackwell.
- Grandjean BD (1981) History and career in a bureaucratic labor market. *The American Journal of Sociology* 86(5): 1057-1092.
- Hughes, E. (1937) Institutional office and the person. *American Journal of Sociology*, 3, 404-413.
- Jenkins R (1991) *Pierre Bourdieu*. London: Routledge.
- McGillivray D, Fearn R and McIntosh A (2005) Caught up in and by the beautiful game. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 29(1): 102-123.

- McLeod J (2005) Feminists re-reading Bourdieu: Old debates and new questions about gender habitus and gender change. *Theory and Research in Education* 3(1): 11-30.
- O'Mahoney J (2007) Constructing habitus: The negotiation of moral encounters at Telekom. *Work, Employment and Society* 21(3): 479-496.
- Price N (2007) *Game of two halves: Preparing young elite rugby players for a future beyond the game*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Wollongong: University of Wollongong.
- Pringle R (2001) Competing discourses: Narratives of a fragmented self, manliness and rugby union. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 36(4): 425-439.
- Riach K and Cutcher L (2014) Built to last: Ageing, class and the masculine body in a UK hedge fund. *Work, Employment and Society*, 00: 1-17 (accessed 13 August 2014).
- Roderick M, Waddington I and Parker G (2000) Playing hurt: Managing injuries in English Professional Football. *International Review of the Sociology of Sport* 35(2): 165-80.
- Roderick, M (2006) A very precarious profession: Uncertainty in the working lives of professional footballers. *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(2): 245-265.
- Stronach M and Adair D (2010) Lords of the square ring: Future capital and career transition issues for elite indigenous Australian boxers. *Cosmopolitan Civil Societies Journal* 2(2): 46-70.
- Van Maanen J (2011) *Tales of the field: On writing ethnography* 2nd edition. London: University of Chicago Press.
- Wacquant L (1995) Pugs at work: Bodily capital and bodily labour among professional boxers. *Body and Society* 1(1): 65-93.
- Wacquant L (2011) Habitus as topic and tool: Reflections on becoming a prize fighter. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8: 81-92.
- Wainwright S and Turner B (2006) Just crumbling to bits? An exploration of the body, ageing, injury and career in classical ballet dancers. *Sociology* 40(2): 237-255.

Willis, P (1977) *Learning to labour: How working class kids get working class jobs*. London: Hutchinson.

Wylleman P Alfermann D and Lavallee D (2004). Career transitions in sport: European perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 5: 7-20.

i)ⁱ Longest tenure 4 years- Longest contract 3 years, typically extended for one year at a time.

ii) The contract can be ended by the club at any time based on performance issues on or off the pitch. The player can be compelled to stay for the remainder of the season but once it is public knowledge that they have been offered a contract elsewhere typically they will be allowed to leave immediately. There is a period towards the end of each season when new players are sought but much of this activity is kept from public view.

iii) The extracts used in this article were taken from verbatim transcriptions of interviews. Specifically, 23 players were interviewed from a first team squad of 23, three of these were group interviews, each of the interviews typically lasting approximately 1 hour.