Wearing their chains willingly: Athlete burnout and the case of adolescent Gaelic footballers in Ireland

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Abstract
The aim of this article is to challenge the widespread acceptance of player burnout as an athlete’s personal inability to deal with the situational demands of sporting competition. Adapting Coakley’s earlier assertion that burnout is ‘a social problem rooted in the social organization of high performance sport itself’, the interactions between Gaelic athletes and the social world in which they exist are unpacked within an Irish context. Linking findings to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony, ‘dominant power relations’ within the competitive sport setting are identified and critically analysed. It is argued that Gaelic players are exploited within a competitive culture in which they feel entrapped, because their actions are informed by the cultural norms of the Gaelic Athletic Association, the sport’s National Governing Body, and dependent upon relationships with coaches and others in positions of authority in the federation. As such, Gaelic footballers are not voluntary agents, somehow acting independently of the constraints of the complex structures in which they compete. Instead, and aware of the often very intricate interdependencies that exist within the sport, it is argued that player burnout in Gaelic football is best explained through the deployment of a Coakley’s ‘vocabulary of empowerment’.

Keywords
Gaelic games, Gramsci, player burnout, power relationships

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Introduction

Much has been written about the social, political and historical role of the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) in Ireland since it was formed on 1 November 1884 (Cronin, 1998). Its primary purpose was, and remains, both the promotion of indigenous Irish sports and pastimes and to serve as an adjunct to a broader cultural and political movement aimed at establishing sovereignty for the Irish people.

The focus of this paper is, however, not on the political or cultural agency of the GAA but on its structures, principally the manner in which it manages its most talented young players. For some, theirs is a story of agency and suffering and of attempting to reconcile a sense of innate obligation to the GAA, borne of its unique meaning within the cultural and sporting lives of the Irish, with the realities of an overexposure to competition and preparation that in some cases has led to athlete burnout. This is further complicated because the GAA remains a largely amateur organization – meaning in practice that its players do not receive payment for their efforts, even if there is now an acknowledgement by the sport’s governing body that many of those managing representative sides, referred to as ‘county’ teams, do receive unregulated payment (GAA, 2012). The GAA’s increased commercial potential, alongside a broader shift in the ethos of the organization towards the direction of semi-professionalism, has exercised pressure upon its most prodigious, talented adolescent Gaelic footballers (the GAA’s foremost sport), to make themselves available to a multitude of teams and thus potentially placing their overall wellbeing in jeopardy (Hughes, 2008). This is because very talented players can, should they wish, simultaneously represent many different Gaelic football teams, including those emerging from schools and colleges, clubs and county sides.

Beginning in 2009, the largest ever investigation into player burnout within any sport, undertaken by the authors of this article, surveyed 524 elite level Gaelic football players and revealed a significant minority (9.7%) presenting with elevated levels of burnout. This figure is comparable with measures of burnout demonstrated amongst athletes partaking in professional sports (Cresswell and Eklund, 2003; Raedeke, 1997). This led to a subsequent qualitative focus on the exact nature and context of player burnout in Gaelic football, the results of which are presented in this article for the first time.

This issue of player burnout has relevancy for a broader readership because it reveals the ill-effects of poorly conceived provision for talented young sports people, the fissures between a largely powerless body of skilled athletic performers and those considerably more powerful actors exercising their roles as team managers and officials, and what happens when the governing body of the sport in question fails to respond adequately to a rapidly changing environment concerning how it manages its affairs. By viewing these through the prism of Gramscian analysis, the ultimate aim of this work is to identify and analyse critically ‘dominant power relations’ within the sport of Gaelic football, which we argue reveals the experiences of talented young players in a poor, perhaps potentially worrying, light. This will serve to produce ‘knowledge that would expose and explain injustice and unequal relations of power’ (McDonald, 2002: 108) and to explore how the management of elite athletes serves to contribute to the burnout experience.
The application of Gramscian theory

The analytical framework of the neo-Marxist Antonio Gramsci is used here to capture the power dynamics that exist between some Gaelic football coaches and some adolescent Gaelic footballers within the GAA. Specifically, it will apply three dominant themes from Gramsci’s writings: (a) the strategies available to dominant groups in society to exercise and retain authority; (b) the extent to which these strategies are variously deployed and, specifically, fluctuate between acts of coercion and consent; and (c) the effectiveness of attempts on the part of those subject to subordination to challenge this apparent subjugation (Gramsci, 1982). The latter point is significant, especially in terms of the connection between Gramsci’s ideas and Coakley’s (1992) previous conception of athlete burnout.

Coakley (1992) recognizes, perhaps tellingly so, that a contributing factor to the onset of adolescent athlete burnout was the early decision-making of adult relations, specifically parents/guardians. It is clear that in some cases, according to Coakley (1992), the influence of parents in permitting and encouraging the elevated involvement of their children in competitive sport perhaps gave rise to unintended consequences. The fact that the decision-making processes undertaken by parents, on behalf of their children, unintentionally contributed to the increasing powerlessness some of these young people now experience is an important refinement of Gramscian analysis within this setting and noteworthy in the context of the ensuing analysis.

Gramsci argued that any dominant grouping in society has two options by which to gain the compliance of subordinated groups: the use of direct physical force, or coercive assimilation; and consent (Gramsci, 1971). Coercion is exercised ‘physically’ through, for example, the work of state institutions, whilst consent is put into effect ‘intellectually’ through the institutions of civil society (Rupert, 1995: 27). This gives rise to the concept of hegemony, defined as ‘a power relation in which the balance between the use of force and coercion on the one hand, and voluntary compliance with the exercise of power on the other, is shifted so that power relations function largely in terms of the latter mode’ (Hargreaves, 1986: 7). Hargreaves’ (1986) emphasis on the word ‘largely’ here should not be overlooked. Within any dominant–subordinate relationship the latter may well, over time, offer ready compliance; but the use (on occasion, arguably, abuse) of an otherwise dominant position can result in occasional, if sometimes unintended, acts of coercion.

For Gramsci, ‘the power of collective rituals sustained the political power of elite segments of society: its historic blocs’, with social rituals providing the stages ‘where socialized performative identities can be carried out to sustain solidarity and secure social reproduction by providing individuals with various emotional gratifications, such as attachments to others, recognition and a sense of empowerment’ (Langman, 2003: 226). Power is thus created and retained with the promotion of some identities to the marginalization of others, with those identities realized in cultural consumption serving to sustain hegemonic social relations (Langman, 2003: 245).

According to Chung (2003: 101), ‘the notion of hegemony argues that the subordinated actively agree to the continuation of their subordinated status’ through the acceptance of dominant thoughts and values (socialization), ultimately realizing and
materializing the ideology of the dominant class through their daily lives. Under the auspices of the ruling class, conflict therefore becomes conservative and reduced to a desire for marginally better conditions (Gramsci, 1982). Hegemonic rule is maintained through consent, with domination cloaked so that any ‘effective counter-strategies may be shunted to realms where they are neutralized’ (Langman, 2003: 226). In essence, therefore, conflict is merely ‘consensus in disguise’, serving only to strengthen the position of the bourgeois hegemony (Femia, 1981: 35). The control of the bourgeois is such that ruling class interests are rendered ‘normal and natural’ whilst critique is deemed ‘pathological, bizarre and immature’ (Langman, 2003: 226).

Simply by participating in the processes of capitalist labour, rather than acting against them, individuals continually re-create ‘the contradictory reality which oppresses them’ (Ransome, 1992: 116). In their failure to oppose the contradictions of their own reality, they effectively accept their conditions as legitimate. In essence, the belief that individuals can affect government policy becomes nothing but a façade because ‘not all men have in society the function of intellectuals’ (Gramsci, 1971: 9–10). Rather, the majority of men are educated and conditioned to accept bourgeois politics willingly (Femia, 1981: 28). In other words, the proletariat ‘wear their chains willingly’ (Femia, 1981: 31) having been blinded to the degree of their own servitude (Femia, 1981: 31).

Wider theoretical framework

The nature of such hegemonic relationships has been brought to the fore in other published literature dealing with burnout in sport (Coakley, 1992), athlete injury, pain and risk taking (Nixon, 1994, 1996; Roderick et al., 2000), and the relationship dynamics between athletes, managers and sports personnel (Waddington and Roderick, 2002). It should be noted, however, that in his seminal work on player burnout, Coakley (1992) does report that burnout is in fact the result of two factors that become influential during mid- to late-adolescence: possessing a uni-dimensional identity, as well as lacking control over the conditions of their sporting participation. The manner in which the former issue emerges within the sport of Gaelic football also forms part of the analysis offered in this article, even if it is not our primary focus. This recognizes that, from a very early age, the cultural significance of participation – and, increasingly, success – within Gaelic football fosters a culture of focused, it might be said professional, preparation and training that leaves little room for engagement in other, non-sporting, commitments. It results in a very tightly defined correlation between participation in competitive Gaelic football by elite young players and how they self-identify as individuals in their own right and are known to, and understood by, others.

Indeed, Coakley also qualifies the other established antecedent to player burnout highlighted here, afforded considerably greater prominence throughout the remainder of this article, which is the question of how young athletes become party to the formation of their own powerlessness. He observed how the young athletes he spoke with often made the decision to become seriously involved in their sport before they reached an age of informed consent (Coakley, 1992). In other words, they were not sufficiently mature or independent to be able to consider the full implications of the level of commitment they were acceding to at such an early age. In the absence of this sensibility
to the implications, the adults around them made many of the important decisions on an athlete’s behalf, whilst subsequently citing the athlete’s initial decision to be involved as a justification for exerting control over this course of action in later life. Stated simply, the adults (parents and coaches, for the most part) controlled the athlete to ensure she/he achieved the goal set without full knowledge of what was involved in the goal achievement process.

In a broader sense, findings from professional football have exposed the nature by which managers engage with and question injured athletes (Roderick et al., 2000). Similar relationship dynamics have been shown to negate the seeking of help for pain and injury in college athletics (Nixon, 1994, 1996). Indeed, even professional doctors and physiotherapists in the sporting environment have been shown to reflect upon their professional ‘opinion’ under the influence of team managers (Malcolm, 2006; Waddington, 2000). Aspects of this literature base, including that concerning the management of medical confidentiality and the associated ethical problems and issues, have been used in attempts to shape practitioner–patient relationships as they relate to professional sport (Waddington and Roderick, 2002). In an impressive body of work on the sociology of pain and injury in sport, Roderick (2006) highlighted how the focus of those researching and writing about the sociology of sport very often centralize ‘the body’ and therefore their writings lack any direct connection to the lived experiences of the athlete themselves. The organizational interactions between players and administrators, whilst sharing common interest and objectives, therefore, ‘are, nonetheless, involved in an authority relationship concerning the administration of their sport’ (Dabscheck, 2004: 3).

The historical and contemporary standing of the GAA: gaining and obtaining power

The GAA secured its perceived position of privilege in Irish society through its role as a counter-hegemonic force against British colonialism in the late nineteenth century. This ability to lead was deemed a prerequisite for hegemonic activity (Gramsci, 1971) and served to bind all corners of Ireland to a common ideology, catapulting and securing the GAA’s position of importance in Irish cultural and sporting circles.

The GAA’s success also rests upon its use of existing institutions within civil society, namely the Catholic church and its parish (community) units, which – in line with Gramscian thinking – serves to strengthen the position of a dominant group (Rupert, 1995: 27). From its very inception the GAA successfully established an essentially community-based organization which, as indicated, has thus far resisted the lure of full professionalization (Bairner, 2009: 222). The GAA’s importance in Irish society is observed by its existing programmes of play that span from Under 8s through to senior (adult) level, both for males and females. These amateur clubs are directly mapped onto established parish boundaries in Ireland, small geographical expanses, typically rural in form, which generate a profound (almost ineffable) sense of loyalty amongst their memberships (Hughes, 2008). As a resultant the GAA, the Church, Catholic schools and the family unit formed the nexus of Irish society, serving as an ideological apparatus to reinforce further and reinstate a distinctively Irish nationalist way of life.
Despite the undoubted romantic appeal of amateurism for the GAA, from the early 1990s onwards the organization began to accept that it could not continue to operate in splendid isolation, relying solely on the goodwill of its membership to ensure its survival, let alone future posterity. Indeed, the redevelopment of Croke Park, the GAA’s foremost stadium, located in central Dublin, into one of the leading sports arenas in Europe, was an appropriate metaphor for the transformation of the organization itself. It began employing significant numbers of full-time staff, many in professional coaching roles, and adopted an approach to its work that belied an increasingly irrelevant image as one of the last bastions of sporting amateurism. By the early years of the new millennium the GAA was rather more, ‘…a rich and sophisticated sporting business and administration’ (Hassan, 2003: 17).

Pressure came to bear on team managers and coaches to provide a better sporting ‘product’. Inevitably this meant that market forces began to exercise an influence on the field of elite-level Gaelic football. Sponsorship and television contracts grew significantly as commercial entities recognized the lucrative yet largely untapped potential of the GAA. Together with a more professional approach, the desire for programmes of play at amateur elite level, that is inter-county competitions across Ireland, increased rapidly (www.gaa.ie, accessed 23 May 2015). Unlike other sports, such as association football or rugby union, where elite players are removed from the club setting to progress upwards through an established competitive pyramid, Gaelic football players are expected to fulfil the requirements of club and county competitive seasons simultaneously. However, amid these transformations, the players, the very individuals upon whom this entire GAA business model was predicated, were seemingly overlooked. Periodically the popular media in Ireland would refer to the extraordinary commitment of Gaelic footballers, typically contrasting their selfless altruism with the highly paid world of professional sport; but little really changed.

Viewed in a broader sense sport, as an ideology, serves of course to reproduce and strengthen the concept of alienated labour, depicted by ‘work, continuous effort, struggle, the cult of transcending one’s own limitations, the cult of suffering, the cult of self-denial, self-sacrifice etc.’ (Brohm, 2007: 34). It is by drawing upon some of these concepts that the GAA has been able to spawn and sustain its own unique ideology, offered under the cloak of amateurism, and in turn create an environment in which players participate in, and offer commitment to, a concept in which they otherwise appear subject to variable levels of exploitation.

According to Gramscian thought, the under-class are controlled or dominated not by an ideology as such, but by the institutions and practices which derive from the ideology (Ransome, 1992: 118). Given the nature by which the GAA has achieved its power (outlined above), Gaelic football players are indeed controlled by the institutions and practices currently in place within the GAA. This is not to suggest that somehow the players are mere ‘dupes’ in this power dynamic, somehow blissfully unaware of their own power. Furthermore, this assertion is not intended to underplay the role others, including parents and similar trusted seniors, have played in the decision-making processes that have contributed to the very conditions with which some talented players now find themselves struggling to cope (Coakley, 1992). Nevertheless, despite being conscious of their own partial agency these players have, until comparatively recently, had no established forum
through which they could express their frustration at being drawn in many different
directions, in an effort to serve a range of coaches and teams, to the players’ undoubted
detriment. As one interviewee succinctly stated:

‘The whole system is set up that a player, in many cases, is afraid to complain because if a
player complains about the amount of training that they’re doing, it can go against them.’
(Interviewee O, ex-county player and leading physiotherapist involved with Gaelic games)

To suggest that players have any sizeable influence within the GAA would be inac-
curate, as indeed would any analysis which suggested that the GAA is somehow unaware
of the plight of many of its most talented players. To state the views of a well-regarded
sports psychologist and coach within Gaelic football, who expressed a wish to preserve
his anonymity, ‘As long as the grounds are right and there is more people coming through
the gate and the game is run, they [the GAA] don’t care’. Whether or not this is a valid
criticism of the association remains open to debate; but what cannot be denied is the fact
that popular discourse on the issue of burnout in the GAA is on the rise.

**Burnout in sport: a need to investigate the social context**

Athlete burnout has been conceptualized as ‘a psychological syndrome of emotional
exhaustion, depersonalization and reduced personal accomplishment’ (Maslach and
Jackson, 1984: 134). The use of the term in the sporting realm became almost inevitable,
referring to those exceptionally talented, high performing athletes who departed from
sports programmes in a state of distress (Coakley, 1992: 272). Since the mid-1980s the
term has been used in sporting situations to describe a situation in which athletes are
perceived to be suffering the ill-effects of anxiety and overexposure to certain sporting
rituals, and is most prevalent in those settings where numerous interdependencies relat-
ing to sporting demands are evident (Raedeke, 1997; Schmidt and Stein, 1991; Silva,
1990; Smith, 1986). Most significant has been the ready acceptance of the term ‘burnout’
by those working with talented athletes as describing a personal inability to deal with the
situational demands of their sport – interpreted by some commentators as a form of per-
sonal failure (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984; MacBride, 1983: 3; Smith, 1986). Individualistic approaches therefore provided, and continue to offer, something of a
‘safety blanket’ against possible shortcomings at an organizational or NGB level con-
cerning the provision of their games. Equally, such an approach fails to take properly into
consideration the role played by trusted advisors to such athletes, including coaches and
especially parents, in the decision-making processes that created the ‘conditions of fail-
ure’ in the first instance.

Situational factors have also been identified as possible contributors to burnout
(Feigley, 1984; Leiter, 1996; Maslach and Goldberg, 1998; Schmidt and Stein, 1991;
Silva, 1990; Smith, 1986); however few interventions have investigated the role of sports
organizations as possible contributors to athlete burnout. As a response to what he per-
ceived to be a clear oversight in the investigation of this phenomenon, Coakley (1992:
272) attempted to reframe the condition ‘as a social problem rooted in the social organi-
zation of high performance sport itself’. In so doing he endeavoured to address the social
imperative of burnout, which other researchers had acknowledged yet rarely developed in full (Maslach, 1976, 1977; Smith, 1986). It should also be recognized that, according to Coakley (1992), another contributing factor to the existence of burnout amongst adolescent athletes is the creation of a ‘uni-dimensional’ identity, in which their existence as individuals in their own right have become conflated with that of competitive athletes to such an extent that their standing in light of their sporting involvement exercises overwhelming dominance.

Thus Coakley’s (1992) model conceptualized burnout as a social problem whereby the organization of sports constrains identity development for athletes during adolescence, preventing them from having full control over all aspects of their lives. Stress experienced was linked to issues of control: specifically, a failure on the part of athletes to ‘grow in ways unrelated to their involvement in sport’ (Coakley, 1992: 273). Whereas researchers such as Smith (1986), Silva (1990), and Schmidt and Stein (1991) described burnout through a ‘vocabulary of stress’, Coakley (1992: 273) argued that burnout was best described by deploying a ‘vocabulary of empowerment’ in which the process of disempowerment experienced by some athletes proved distressing.

Coakley (1992: 273) claimed that sports programmes are organized for the purpose of ‘producing performance outcomes rather than opportunities for overall social development’. In so doing, Coakley proposed a radical reframing of athlete burnout, one that sought to scrutinize the role of the NGB much more closely and thus challenge their widely perceived role as impartial arbitrators. Coakley (1992: 275) removed the individualistic nature of the condition as part of his thesis that burnout development lay outside the control of the powerless athlete.

From Coakley’s (1992) seminal research in the field it emerged that the status and reward derived from being an athlete resulted in participation to the point where sport became the most important thing in an athlete’s life. Such dynamics played a significant role in athletes being accomplices to the creation of conditions that exacerbated their own powerlessness. By not removing themselves from this situation, Coakley (1992) suggested that the athletes were complicit in their own exploitation, even if they felt psychologically, even physically, incapable of doing so. The solution to the burnout problem for Coakley (1992: 283) was, rather, to ‘empower athletes and eliminate dependency’. Thus it would appear that whilst individual athletes may, albeit in a less than uniform manner, derive some benefits from their involvement in elite competitive sport, not least their sense of identity, the prevalence of conditions that allow for a damaging one-dimensional sense of self (through sport) is in fact an antecedent to burnout. While key influencers, including parents, are accessories to this fact, the responsibility for unpacking the underlying conditions that have created this context in the first place rests with the sport’s governing body.

**Research design and methodology**

To understand the ‘what, how and why’ of burnout within the culture of Gaelic football, individual interviews ($N = 30$) were undertaken and some ($N = 4$) of these interviews were conducted with players who displayed antecedents to, or actual evidence of, athlete burnout. This latter status was confirmed following the earlier completion of Maslach’s
Burnout Inventory survey by the entire research sample (Maslach and Goldberg, 1998). Interviewees also included current or former Gaelic football players \((N = 15)\), many of whom occupied a range of positions within the GAA. Specifically a number of ex-players who were now involved in team management at various levels \((N = 7)\) or administratively within the organization \((N = 4)\) were included. Other interviewees included academics with first-hand experience of the GAA, specializing in sports psychology \((N = 2)\), sports physiology \((N = 3)\) or physiotherapy \((N = 2)\) roles. Two ex-players interviewed were high profile sports commentators; and interviews with an association football administrator, a rugby union coach and several rugby union players \((N = 4)\) provided a contextual comparison between sports on this issue.

Interviews lasted between about 16 and about 61 minutes: they were recorded (audio) and transcribed verbatim. Standard constant comparative techniques were used to analyse the interview data. Each individual transcript was open coded allowing for the richness and detail of the data to be retained. Data were framed in categories and expressed in the language of the respondents (Gomm, 2004: 178). Pilot interviews \((N = 3)\) were conducted prior to the start of the main study.

A set of core questions and additional ‘context specific’ questions were devised for each interviewee. Core interview questions were a prerequisite for all interviews, allowing for a degree of comparability amongst respondents, whilst ‘context specific’ questions allowed individual interviewees to provide feedback relevant to the position they held or their status within the GAA (or other sporting organization) (Shaw and Amis, 2001). The number and nature of questions that were posed related closely to predetermined themes that emerged from an extensive review of the relevant extant literature (Cresswell and Eklund, 2003; Gould et al., 1997). Interviewees involved with the GAA proved a valuable resource in both interpreting the narratives and offering an appreciation of the sporting culture associated with that organization (Amis, 2005).

From the emergent themes it became apparent that many of the proposed attributing factors to burnout development were linked to the structure of the GAA and the nature of relationships within it. As a resultant, an analysis of the relationships within this subculture, their effect on the players and the reasoning behind their acceptance will be explored throughout the remainder of this article, according to Gramsci’s theory of hegemony.

Finally, it should be noted that both authors are current members of the GAA having previously played, but now retired from playing, Gaelic football in Ireland for many years. Both represented their respective counties at senior level and thus competed at the pinnacle of the sport. Neither experienced a premature withdrawal from the sport on account of burnout or injury and enjoyed largely injury-free sporting careers.

**Findings**

The onset of player burnout is made more likely in light of existing power relations within the GAA. Such relations have resulted in players ‘being abused by the system’, according to one leading physiologist and Gaelic football manager (Interviewee S), a view wholly endorsed by Interviewee P,
‘The GAA are not supporting the player on the ground. He is just being abused. It’s actually with underage players, its child abuse and we’re getting away with it… All the burnout and everything else is coming from players just being abused.’

As Interviewee R, a leading sports psychologist with first-hand experience of working within the organization stated,

‘It’s (burnout) not the individual, it is the structure, it’s the system…and the system is contributing to, in my opinion, almost a susceptibility to developing burnout…one of the things that is in your control or the systems control is how it is structured. So then change that.’

The GAA, in common with most national governing bodies of sport, has an established modus operandi and, in keeping with its traditional and conservative image, is comparatively slow at reacting to the needs of its principal actors. Typically, it sanctions activities relating to the playing of games and both explicitly and implicitly sets boundaries within which players execute their ‘obligations’. In short, agents within the GAA are those players, members, managers and coaches who, in the view of some, have little or no control over the environment in which they find themselves.

Amateurism in the GAA: existing contradictions

Interviewee M, an ex-player and GAA sports commentator, emphasized the success of the GAA in establishing a set of beliefs that are internalized and moulded into a replica of established norms by members.

‘I think that people appreciate that our amateurism is the jewel in the crown of our society…the whole basis of the GAA is our amateur ethos and our volunteer ethos. There’s no room for any other competing ethos in it. It’s either that or it’s something else and the GAA is destroyed forever.’

In the face of modernization, the GAA is constantly seeking to negotiate the interface between national commitments and those more commonly associated and grounded in commercialization and profit making (Watson, 2002). This conflict of ideologies constitutes a subtext for many of the issues unfolding within the GAA in relation to player burnout. The GAA is fully aware of the changing context of Gaelic games in modern Ireland, acknowledging how the increased prominence of managers and management teams ‘create[s] a clear conflict for the GAA in the context of its core values of amateurism and volunteerism’ (GAA, 2012: 5) stating how ‘there is no other issue facing the Association that brings into such sharp focus the disparity between what we preach and what we practice’ (GAA, 2012: 5).

It is claimed that the desire for a more professional output has resulted in a ‘training epidemic’, which has escalated out of control, as confirmed by a leading Coaching Officer within the GAA,

‘It is a serious problem…particularly around the talented 17/18 year olds up to 21 playing for so many teams and so much expectation…Our most promising stars playing for six or eight or even ten managers (and teams) and that lifestyle is not acceptable.’ (Interviewee J)
Whilst the GAA is now being pressurized to address this ‘training epidemic’ it retains the capacity to persuade its membership of the apparent normality of this situation. Thus, under these terms, the GAA is an example of what Soy (2007: 916) refers to as ‘hegemony at work’, with GAA administrators viewed as ‘experts in legitimation’, and in mediating the ideological and political unity of the existing hegemonic structure (Merrington, 1968: 154). Of course, in doing so the GAA does not act as a homogenous entity in this regard. Rather, various comparatively ‘local’ interactions between players and managers, parents, administrators, school teachers and community figures are used to negotiate a performance pathway in which players are expected to make themselves available to all teams for which they are deemed eligible to play, at the behest of team managers and others, with little regard, it seems, for their resultant sense of isolation or lack of power to influence change.

GAA administrators are in fact well aware of being ‘open to the charge of benefiting from, and being complicit in, a double standard’ (GAA, 2012: 2). Amateurism is currently commodified as a desirable concept which serves to maintain power amongst administrators, whilst players accept the conditions under which they are asked to participate, irrespective of the potential these conditions have to undermine the players’ well-being.

“You would have got to the stage where you were doing it on automatic pilot – playing and training, playing and training, for about three or four different teams. It was hard going but you just done [sic] it because you didn’t want to offend anyone. You wanted to just keep doing it and to the detriment of yourself really… and you were playing through injuries and rushing back from injuries… because you are trying to serve everyone.’(Interviewee D, ex-county player and GAA All-Star)

The Gaelic Players Association (GPA): counter-hegemonic activities within the GAA

Under the auspices of the ruling class, conflict becomes conservative and reduced to a desire for marginally higher wages. Within the comparatively amateur world of Gaelic games this translates to slightly better playing conditions for otherwise isolated groups of elite players. The Gaelic Players Association (GPA) is an example of a body engaged in a degree of counter-hegemonic activity, a product of a coordinated response to players’ apparent subjugation within the current GAA structures.

Whilst indicating concern for all players at club and county level, the majority of the GPA’s endeavours has been focused on the welfare of the GAA’s elite, inter-county representatives. This has led to scepticism as to their motives, as Interviewee M (an ex-county player) makes clear:

“They’re [the GPA] saying, no, we’re not for professionalism but they’re having to reach for an increasingly odd agenda to explain their raison d’être, to explain their continued existence. I mean what does the GPA do? They give out awards…they give out cars to a few of the top guys…What is their raison d’être?…The GPA is a classic parasite.’

Although formed as a counter-hegemonic association opposing the dominant hold of the GAA, Gramsci’s predictions that such activity would merely constitute a form of ‘trade-unionism’ appear valid with regard to the GPA (Gramsci, 1971). At the GAA’s
Annual Congress of 2011 the President of the Association, Mr Liam O’Neill, announced formal recognition of the GPA ‘as the official representative body for inter county players within our Association’ (GAA Discussion Paper, 2012: 5). Nevertheless, the manner in which the GPA now interacts with the GAA remains reliant upon the whim of the GAA itself, with the GAA controlling the terms of engagement and ultimately the funding of the GPA and, by extension, the fate of its players. Prior to negotiations between leading officials of the GAA and the GPA, each mobilized their specific resources and latent power – which, in the case of the GAA, included exercising considerable public scepticism with regard to the exact intentions of the GPA and what it could mean for the solidarity of the association should the emergent body gain full recognition within the organization. The outcome of the negotiations was and remains favourable to the GAA, who – to deploy Gramscian analysis – simply retained more power, better resources and the overwhelming sympathy of its constituency (Isaac, 1992). In essence, therefore, such conflict initiated by the GPA was what Femia (1981: 35) termed ‘consensus in disguise’, serving merely to strengthen the position of the bourgeois hegemony.

Gramsci proposed that an overhaul of the contradictions within a hegemonic environment could be achieved only by revolutionary practice, by an external ‘intellectual revolutionary vanguard’ serving to enlighten the working class, thus nurturing an alternative ideology (Ransome, 1992: 121). Gramsci also proposed that for counter-hegemony to be successful the new and emergent group would have to lead. Ironically, the GPA, whilst it resists the GAA’s hegemonic status, now relies upon the GAA’s capitalistic system for the successful impact and spread of its resistance. Indeed the GPA’s programmes for player welfare are now funded centrally through the GAA itself (GAA Congress Report, 2011). This serves only to ‘inexorably compromise with the ideology of the system’ (Chung, 2003: 99) and leads one to question the overall capacity of the GPA to resist meaningfully the wishes of the GAA.

Devoid of any proper representation, young talented Gaelic footballers are in danger of leaving the sport as a result of the burden of unrealistic demands from ambitious managers and coaches convinced that anything less than total commitment to their training schedules was tantamount to apathy on the part of the player. As Interviewee P (ex-player, manager and now sports commentator) remarked ‘they [managers] are the most powerful people at the minute – because they are getting away with it. They are under pressure and the pressure does carry down to the players but if people at the top call the shots, there is no problem.’

On the face of it, there are few, if any, discernible channels through which players can adequately repress their perceived overexposure to Gaelic sports.

‘There’s not enough people that would stand up and say things, a lot of people cry behind the scenes but don’t go to the manager and tell him. You’re always made to pay for things like that.’ (Interviewee B, a County player who experienced burnout).

As another ex-county player who experienced burnout confirmed ‘There is no real outlet where players feel that they can go or whom they can talk to’ (Interviewee C).

As such, whilst players know they are not completely powerless and that other players represent legitimate allies, left to their own devices en masse they remain powerless in
the face of their intellectual, moral and sporting subordination. In such an environment athletes are ‘entirely subordinated to an over-arching apparatus’ (Day, 2004: 725) which status itself appears powerless in addressing the imbalances inherent within the current GAA structures.

**Preserving power**

Power relations between players and key authority figures (including parents) remain critical to any understanding of why players appear, to use Coakley’s own words, complicit in their own exploitation. Players seek to abide by the wishes of their mentors because they interpret this as the only satisfactory solution to what otherwise appears to them to be an intractable personal problem. The need to please the coach is ‘an acceptance of the authoritarian role, and almost being submissive to it’ (Kellett, 2002: 71). Players are unable positively to affect policies introduced by the GAA other than through the GPA – which itself is now dependent upon the GAA for its very existence and future prosperity. Desirable, prestigious and powerful roles are retained by those already in positions of dominance, who often assume that subordinates are unable to carry out such duties or, more commonly, simply have no interest in doing so (Femia, 1981). Gaelic football players, as represented by the GPA, are therefore deprived of the ability to question adequately their subjugation, and hold only trade union level power, thus remaining powerless in their dealings with others in positions of authority. In turn this renders those at the extreme end of this process vulnerable to the onset of burnout. In essence players become educated and conditioned to accept the prevailing political conditions, thus materializing what Femia termed the ‘dominant ideology’ (1981: 28).

**Socialization and identity as ideological apparatus**

The GAA gains what Ransome refers to as ‘intellectual consent’ through the institutions of civil society (1992: 150). School and community sport therefore function ‘to symbolize or encode preferred views of the social order and thus legitimize power relations’ (Hargreaves, 2007: 45). Gaelic players internalize social norms and become committed to them, thus internalizing the ‘social rules’ of behaviour. This happens primarily because individuals strive for acceptance and status from other people (Horne et al., 1999). In short, socialization acts as a process leading to the transmission of culture and self-sacrifice (Horne et al., 1999: 131).

Wintle (1996: 5) defined identity as ‘...the ascribed or recognised characteristics which a person or group is agreed to possess’. This identity provides the social and psychological infrastructure in which consensus is secured (Simon and Oakes, 2006: 116), evidence of which occurs throughout the GAA. The fear of losing the personal meaning, positive effect and self-esteem that is sourced from the team is foremost in the minds of some sportsmen/women (Krane et al., 2002). Power, in this regard, is realized by identity processes that link individuals to others with similar and shared values. This shared identity acts to recruit human agency and provides the infrastructure for consensus, thereby fostering group loyalty (Simon and Oakes, 2006: 116); and this group loyalty is built amongst Gaelic players and their communities. In this specific field of study, it is the
presence of a strong athletic identity amongst young men susceptible to player burnout that serves to constrain athletes who may otherwise feel obliged to over-commit (Coakley, 1992). Stated simply, players’ identities are so closely aligned to their sporting pursuits that they are associated, at least in the minds of many, with very little else. The creation of this uni-dimensional identity is especially problematic in the GAA because provided it remains an amateur organization the players do not have the consolation of knowing that their athletic endeavours will ever be adequately financially compensated.

Linked to identity formation and culture is the concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Loïc, 1992), which, according to Bourdieu, refers to ‘systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them’ (Bourdieu, 1977: 23). Over time people embody much of the culture and social contexts in which it is practised (Light, 2001) – in this instance, through participation in Gaelic games. Habitus thus relates to an imprinted, generated schema that acts as a motivating or propelling force in social behaviour (Horne et al., 1999: 105). Players, through processes of socialization, adopt an unquestioning approach to their Gaelic games activities. Consequently they ‘morally feel that they want to play more and they feel they let people down if they don’t play’ (Leading Sports physiotherapist, Interviewee O). Indeed, as one county player of some note highlighted, players ‘realise that it is the national game and it is a part of who we are and what we do and what we have always done’ (Interviewee D).

Thus an eclectic mix of social and identity factors serves to constrain Gaelic athletes within unfavourable settings. Gramscian analysis suggests that actors, in this case elite level Gaelic football players, will rarely be able to locate accurately their discontent, let alone remedy it (Femia, 1981: 41). Again, this is materialized through a degree of non-questioning on the part of players and, in some cases, a quiet acceptance that their engagement in elite Gaelic football remains fundamental to who they are and what they have become. Thus the belief that players can affect GAA administration is but a façade because they have been conditioned to what Femia refers to as ‘accepting bourgeois ideology willingly’ (Femia, 1981). The current power relations within the GAA result in the wishes of its elite players becoming subservient to the intellectual and moral desires of the ‘few’ who ‘won’t allow the change because they’ll have the power to vote… [but] I think that change has to come’ (Interviewee P ex-county player, ex-All-star and GAA manager).

Consenting behaviour

There is an acceptance on the part of the players that their engagement in the sport, under these terms, is positive regardless of whether in reality this is the case: another parallel to Gramscian thought (Ransome, 1992: 118). This ironic acceptance of their own subordination confirms the nature of their subservient relationship with the GAA. Players comply amid an understanding that if they do not do so they will suffer deprivation or some form of sanction, such as being removed from the team. Managers are themselves subject
to a form of subordination because their relationship is, to all intents and purposes, that of employer/employee with their respective county board, the administrative setting in which decisions on GAA policies and procedures take place at a regional level across Ireland. Interviewee S, an academic and manager within Gaelic games, called for radical and systematic change, referring to the pressure on managers to succeed as ‘enormous’, resulting in a ‘clouding of their vision, that they have to justify their existence’. The current structure has resulted in a surge of what one ex-county player (Interviewee C) referred to as ‘ego driven coaches…who are doing it for their own good and not for the good of the players.’

In a similar fashion, players who wish to succeed at national level must accept their own subordination at the hands of highly pressurized managers and administrators who, in the words of some professionals, ‘don’t know the game’ (Interviewee E, a leading Sports Psychologist). As Interviewee D, an ex-player and now GAA administrator, stated, ‘managers are always going to have their say and they are going to find ways of nearly blackmailing players to play for them…That’s the way managers operate and if I was a manager, I would be doing the same.’

As such, relations between managers and players within the GAA currently reflect ‘the long-standing residual tradition of a coach’s authority to create a set of political relationships in which the athlete is rendered substantially less powerful than his or her supervisors’ (Horne et al., 1999: 242). If players do not comply with demands from managers, they are deprived of the opportunity to play at inter-county level and may suffer a loss of self-esteem and status. Interviewee C, a player who suffered burnout from the game, highlights this point:

‘I don’t think from I was about 21, did I ever enjoy one training session. … When you look back at it now maybe from 22/23, you were going to training dreading it [training]…So from you were 22/23 you were going to quit, you were going to quit, which is so crazy for somebody so young.’

This is largely due to their personal identity being grounded in their sporting culture (Brewer et al., 1993; Coakley, 1992). Coercive authority retains its power because the threat of ex-communication or social exclusion to the dissenting minority may be just as debilitating as physical punishment (Ransome, 1992: 143). This is certainly the case for dissenting managers or players within the GAA. Players ultimately feel their powerlessness, their solitude, their desperate condition; however they become what Gramsci referred to as ‘brigands not revolutionaries’ (Gramsci, 1971: 317) and thus, like other subordinates in political spheres, ‘wear their chains willingly’ to succeed at their national game (Gramsci, 1971: 318).

The GAA has skilfully guided its members to place significant emphasis on their club and community involvement. Players therefore feel indebted to their parish for safeguarding their personal development and helping them develop. This, as Chung (2003: 100) predicted, leads to them adjusting ‘….to re-exhibit dominant ideological practices and beliefs, and, in consequence, repay their obligation’. Feelings of obligation result in compliance amongst players to fulfil multiple roles within a given season, as well as balance other areas of their lives. As Interviewee I, an ex-player acknowledged,
‘...the GAA player has to keep his job, he has to balance his family commitments...and in addition to that he has all the pressure of a club which is very big for people because it’s where they start and their loyalty to their own little club is huge and immense and puts added pressure on people.’

The success of the GAA in promoting the importance of club activity (widely regarded as the primary source of Gaelic games activity) within the lives of players therefore fuels the mental and physical exertion expected of them by others within their immediate community and serves to maintain existing power relations.

Finally, conformity can be secured from the players by seeking pragmatic acceptance of their plight to ensure the fulfilment of self-goals in the absence of any feasible alternatives. The desire to appear loyal ensures consensus, with any degree of resistance disguised to ensure goal achievement (Chung, 2003: 100). Seeking acceptance from external sources therefore maintains the subordination of athletes. The dominant culture – that is, the GAA hierarchy – conveys prestige and fame on to athletes who have proven their athletic ability and reaffirmed or verified the GAA’s ideology. This is particularly evident amongst young Gaelic football players who, in ever-greater numbers it seems, strive for such prestige.

Conclusion

An analysis of war confirmed to Gramsci that ‘an army’s effectiveness rests upon the ability of the ufficiali (lieutenants) to facilitate communication between the generals (the mind) and the soldiers (the body)’ (Urbinati, 1998: 378). Similarly, an analysis of the unique social context surrounding Gaelic football reveals that the effectiveness of the GAA depends on the ability of its officials to facilitate ideological transmission between managers and players, especially at its elite level. Indeed, the nature of relationships within Gaelic games, resulting in the disempowerment of athletes, has been revealed as a significant contributor to burnout development and susceptibility, and this mirrored the reported outcome of a study of elite rugby players (Cresswell and Eklund, 2003, 2006a). Indeed, as Gustafsson et al. noted,

‘Excessive levels of motivation to succeed, rapid increases in performance at an early age, a perceived need to please others, and feelings of pressure and entrapment with restricted control were important contributing factors in the development of burnout. An important origin of the athletes’ strong motivation was their strong athletic identity.’ (Gustafsson et al., 2007: 411)

Thus it was substantiated that burnout in Gaelic football is best described by deploying a ‘vocabulary of empowerment’ (Coakley, 1992: 273).

Gaelic players are evidently not wholly voluntary agents acting independently of the constraints of the structure in which they play, despite not being contractually bound to any team or club in the way professional athletes would be. Rather, power relations leave athletes vulnerable to burnout because managers and administrators largely operate according to their own agendas. Player exploitation is further exaggerated within the GAA by the internalization, arguably the pacification, of the GPA within its established structures and a lack of player representation within prestigious, desirable and powerful roles.
Current power relations within the GAA are therefore reflective of Gramsci’s depiction of a classic hegemonic environment. To date those in positions of power within the GAA have failed to assess the needs of its elite players, some of whom are under considerable pressure to make themselves available to a host of different representative teams. Similarly, those in positions of power within the GPA have failed to incentivize adequately players to become, as Urbinati describes it, sufficiently ‘…conscious of their subjectivity as “transcendental selves” as equals’ (1998: 381). Failings on behalf of both parties have subsequently served to fuel the ongoing powerlessness of athletes and, in turn, their susceptibility to burnout. Players experience their continued subjugation as a result of a failure to understand how to change it; and, equally, administrators know the current situation remains far from ideal but they too fail to understand how to usher in effective and meaningful change. As such, burnout within Gaelic football continues and remains best understood as ‘an individual stress experience embedded in a context of complex social relations’ (Maslach and Goldberg, 1998: 64). The tragedy continues, however, that so long as this failure to respond to the pressures placed upon the GAA’s very best Gaelic footballers continues, such demands will persuade some (too often the most talented) that the entire experience is one they would feel better off without.

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References


