

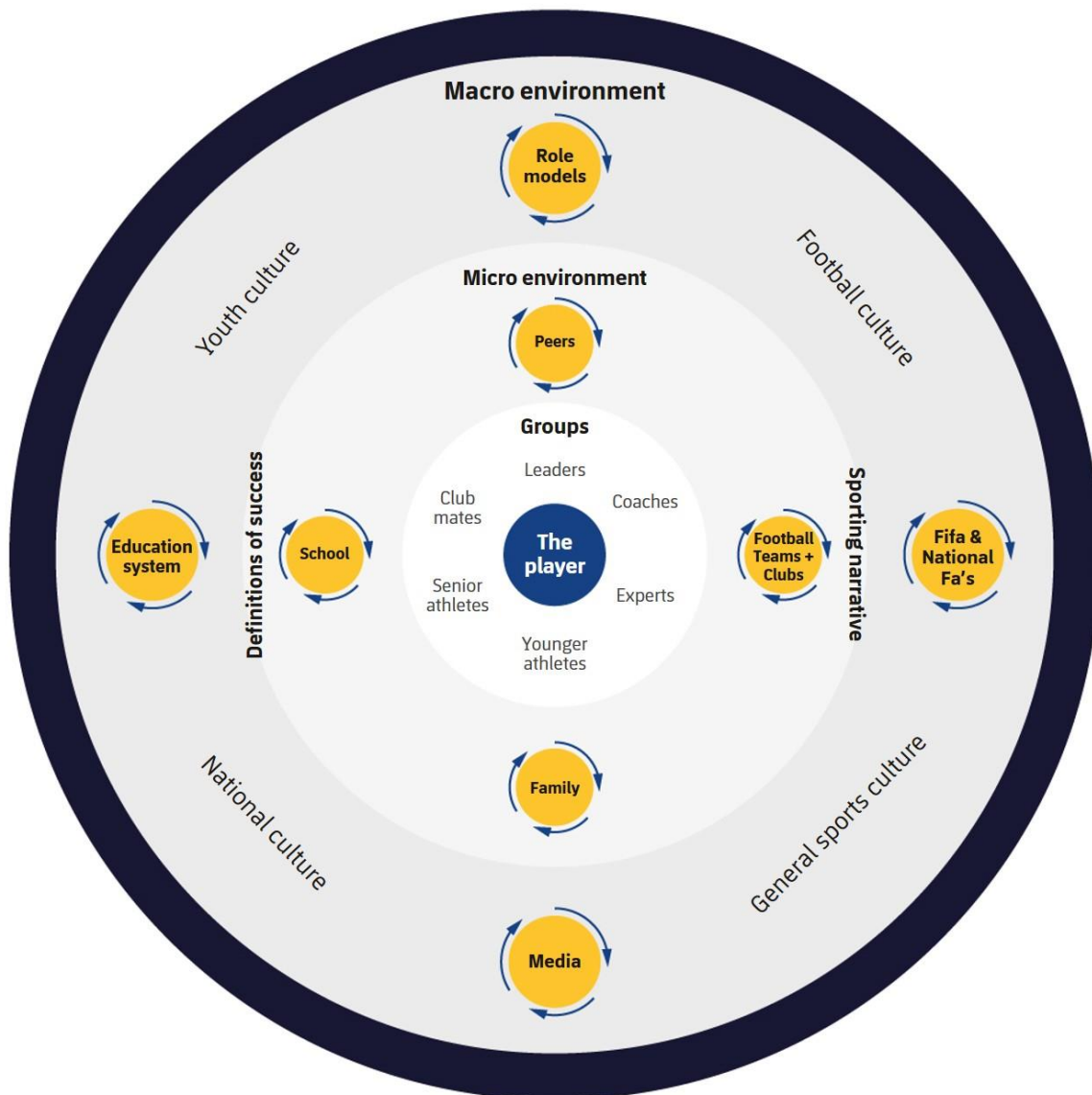
# Module 2. The Coach's Learning Why Does the Coach See What They See? Understanding How Their Behaviours Emerge and How to Get in Tune with the Team's Context

## Unit 2.1 Sociocultural Constraints in Sport

In this section, importance will be given to the concept of constraints and their effect on different time scales. Everything that happens in the world, at different levels, affects our behaviour and how we show ourselves. In this sense, the current context defines the sports panorama and influences our way of training, so it will be key to understanding our way of life. In this regard, Vaughan, Mallett, Davids, Potrac and López-Felip (2019) describe a **way of life** as “that manifestation of regular behaviour patterns that emerge from sociocultural and environmental constraints (normative behaviours and traditions of our communities and cultures)” (p. 5).



Figure 1: Ecological Context of the Football Player's Development



Source: Vaughan, J., Mallett, C., Davids, K., Potrac, P. and López-Felip, M. (2019). Ecological Context of the Football Player's Development Retrieved from <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02090/full>.

This means that what happens at the micro level, i.e. any event on a smaller scale, as in this case it can be the interaction between two players, is not just an aspect of that immediate environment, the coach's design of the training session, but it is given by a series of sociocultural and normative influences that also occur in the society in which this activity develops. This means, for instance, that the way football is conceived in Catalonia will determine, to a certain extent, the way in which the game will take place in the different clubs (with nuances between each one of them, due to their own socio-cultural constraints in each location or population), and this cannot be reproduced in



other environments that do not share this same perception of sports in general or football in particular (a country such as the United States or China, where the sports culture is totally different).

In the article by Vaughan et al. (2019), reference is made to three representative examples of how these ways of life are manifested in relation to the environments in which they take place. On the one hand, dance, picaresque and the enjoyment of the way of life in Brazil, can be related to the talent, daring, creativity and attractive dribbles that Brazilian players show.

On the other hand, the English players, who generally manifest a game based on the long and direct ball, hard tackles and a football that tries to avoid risks, is related to a traditional perception of rationality and hyper masculinity. In other words, a more conservative attitude is displayed both in society and in the game.

Finally, it also refers to the FC Barcelona game and the unique ecosystem in which it takes place: Catalonia. Also driven by the ideology and history of the club, the characteristics of an associative and creative game, where there is a great diversity of passing opportunities, could also be originated by a cooperative culture in which sharing spaces and communication stand out.

What was mentioned above can help us understand that the importance that the sociocultural context plays in the type of behaviour we show cannot be dismissed, nor in the perception of talent that each of us may have according to the context in which we find ourselves. That is to say, a stratospherically valued player in Brazil may not be appreciated in an environment such as that of English football.

For this reason, we find it interesting to analyse in more detail the previous scheme (figure 1), in which an example is given about the environment of a player and the way in which they develop in such environment (which constitutes a dynamic system based on micro and macro elements):

- a) **Microenvironment:** in their most immediate practice environment, the club model, the leaders in them, their coach, their teammates, surely represent important nuclei that will somehow condition the way in which the player develops in this sporting discipline. Nevertheless, it is also important to highlight the role their family, their school, their friends or the football environment in general can play in this microenvironment, being also elements that have a certain influence on how the player behaves.
- b) **Macroenvironment:** all the previous elements are included in a more global context that determines, on a higher time scale, the way in which the different microenvironments will develop, since this refers to more cultural aspects, whether related to the football culture, national culture, culture regarding sports in general or culture regarding how the youth may perceive (in this case, due to



being an educational football player who may also be influenced by the tastes and motivations that are normal at their age).

Understanding our behaviours through different time scales of constraints (which implies what is more macro and what is more micro) seems essential to delve into all those elements that interact so that the phenomena that we can observe in the sports environment emerge. If the values of a society and its perception lead to having a particular way of life, we cannot ignore that analysing football from a football perspective will not allow us to understand the whole and it will lead to a lack of information that can be decisive to help our coaches and athletes to be better at what they do.

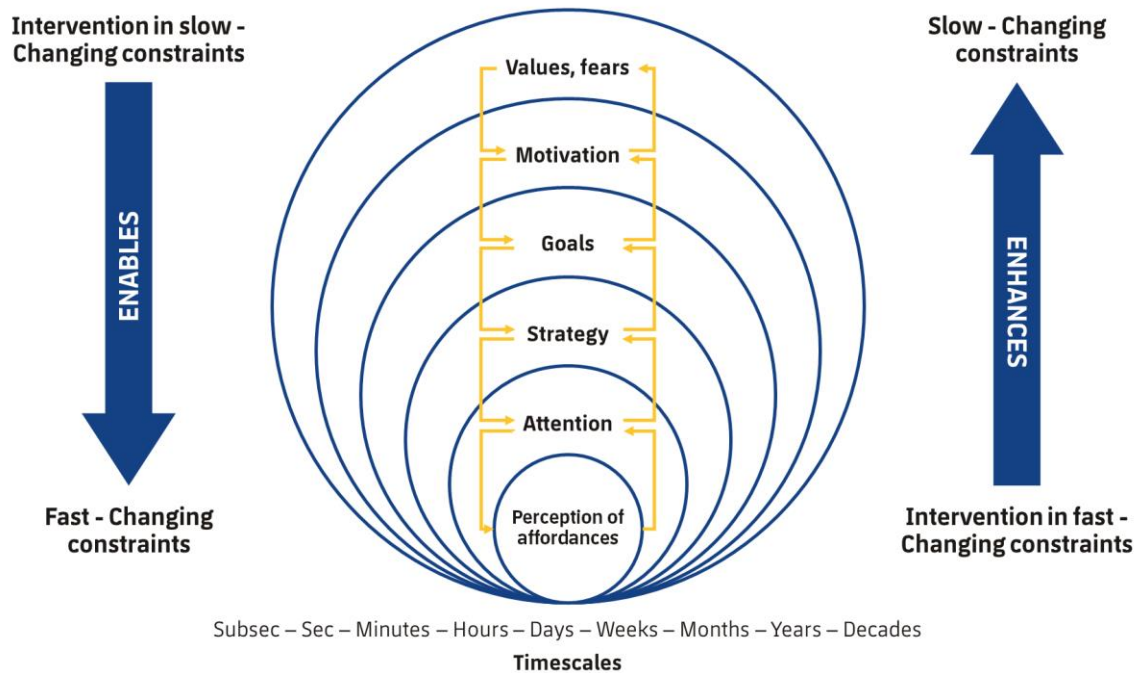
Balagué, Pol, Torrents, Ric, Hristovski (2019) express in a very graphic way how these constraints on different time scales feed each other back in a circular causality, and how the intervention in them causes change in the short or long term, in relation to the time scale we refer to. For instance, the values of a society act as constraints on a high time scale since they are aspects that need time to change (slow-change constraints) and these determine, in a cascade with the underlying time scale constraints, which motivations the society can have, the objectives that are set, the strategies that are pursued, and so on until reaching the direct interaction of the human being in question with the environment.

As Balagué, Pol, Torrents, Ric and Hristovski (2019) describe,

if a value such as sports participation is high and stable, the motivation to practice is increased and, consequently, the context for manipulating the training load properties and learning the possibilities of action also increase. Such an increase also favours the achievement of objectives related to performance that, due to circular causality, will also propagate inversely, increasing and stabilising motivation for sport and the value given to practice. (<https://sportsmedicine-open.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40798-019-0178-z>)



**Figure 2: Example of Nested Constraints Operating on Different Time Scales and Correlated through Circular Causality**



Source: adapted from Balagué et al. (2019).

Changes can happen in two directions. That is, the values of society about sports will have an impact on the athlete's attention capacity in their sports environment; and mastery and success in a sports discipline can change values regarding sport. For this reason, it is important to clarify that, although we refer to the importance of the macro context and the sociocultural constraints in mundane behaviours in any environment, small-scale changes can also generate changes the other way around. For instance, a coach with a different idea of the game than the environment they are part of (a team from a country other than theirs, for example), if successful, can cause cascading changes towards those elements that need more time to be modified. (such as the perception of the way of playing a sport).

Thus, it should be pointed out that the intervention in slow-change constraints (values, motivations, objectives) enables the cascade effect in fast-change constraints (strategies, attention and actions); and that the reverse process, the intervention on fast-change constraints (successfully), can increase the modification of those slower-change constraints.

## Contextual Analysis of Society and Its Impact on the Sports Practice

This section aims to encompass different contextual aspects that can offer us a deep perspective regarding the existing possibilities of action in the environments at hand (sports training and football practice), and how changes in this macro environment could originate many other changes in the microenvironments we are interested in.

Vaughan et al. (2019) briefly describe how capitalism has shaped the way of thinking the social context, as well as the organisational structures (including sports). The growing corporatism in our way of life is increasingly reflected in the training environment and, unfortunately, not only in the professional sections or adult ages, but they are models that are reproduced even in educational football.

In this way, different characteristics are inherited from these influences that have an impact on how our sport is perceived:

1. An extreme emphasis on individuality, competitiveness, hierarchy, and extrinsic incentives, at the expense of learning, creativity and innovation.
2. The need for immediate satisfaction that develops simplistic thinking rather than inspiring complex thinking.
3. Competition and self-interest dominate over cooperation, thus reinforcing social comparison, division into subgroups, insecurities, fear of failure, and the development of contexts that reproduce controlling behaviours of teachers and coaches in many educational settings.

This model (and others) of society is also the cause for which football has come to be used, given its worldwide recognition as a sport, for profit or even as a means to position as a leading country in terms of sports. Thus, we see that the United States invests millions of dollars so that *soccer* is developed and that they are also recognised worldwide through this sport (in this regard, you can read the following article: <https://www.lanacion.com.ar/economia/sin-titulo-nid2184521>). On the other hand, we can also see that China has promoted the football practice from young people at school, making this sport a compulsory subject to ensure the future of a good generation of football players (in this regard, you can read the following article: <https://www.abc.es/deportes/futbol/20150324/abci-futbol-asignatura-obligatoria-china-201503232025.html?ref=https:%2F%2Fwww.google.com%2F>).

In this sense, Kiely (2019), in a conference held at the INEFC (National Institute of Physical Education of Catalonia) in Barcelona, raised some reflections on how the concept of periodisation had evolved and how its origin invited people to be sceptical when it comes to believing the information we receive. In order to reinforce the critical perspective, he explained that knowledge is a double-edged sword and that the evolution of scientific research, as well as its validation, has brought us to a context in which we find:



1. A generalisation problem, due to the fact that rules are extrapolated from a simple conclusion, without understanding the circumstances or the context from which it was drawn.
2. A definition problem, given the lack of consistency in the consensus of what each thing means (what has been previously commented on specificity would be an example of how we use this concept without really knowing if its meaning is universally verified).
3. A problem of changing criteria, a fact that happens in our research, scientific or not, due to the need of wanting to validate what we believe in and reject what does not help to confirm what we believe in (biases).
4. A problem of appeal to authority, which happens by the association of knowledge to someone renowned when you want to give validity to some method. That is to say, the simple fact that someone prestigious says something makes it an irrefutable truth.

In order to delve into a more specific environment, in reference to sports training, we use the reflections of Sampaio (2019) to understand the role of coaches. In this regard, the author says that the coach has become a specialist in the football discipline, which has developed:

1. A vision towards maximum specificity and thus discarding variability in practice.
2. A perspective that only focuses on certain sources of information from the practice (to what they are used to), and shows resistance to the appearance of new elements, as well as the development of a difficulty in identifying new behaviours typical of the discipline.
3. A growing idea that the collective behaviour of the team is a hallmark of the coach and his success.
4. An obsession with the idea of specificity, representativeness and monitoring, which conditions the natural behaviour of the player and leaves aside the free practice of the player.

These aspects, which have previously been treated in a generic way, refer to the type of practice environments that develop in our society, where the game has been disappearing to give way to the sophistication of sports and the need to control and manipulate all the variables.

A well-known educational football coach responded in an interview that, in his opinion, "there are more and more trained and prepared coaches, but less talent is developing". (Unpublished, n/d). With this, he refers to the fact that the specialisation of this work as a coach made it gain prominence (both in training and in the game), but it also caused the player and their exploratory ability to be left aside. In conclusion, a need has developed for certainty and control of the elements that ensure immediate performance. However, this fuels the coach's ego more than the player's development.



All these aspects that have been considered in order to understand the athlete's environment help us to deduct that they have consequently received the following stimuli, constantly, in their sports and personal development, especially when we refer to the young player:

1. A professional approach over and above the pedagogical approach, in which the player is considered an empty bottle to be filled with new aspects to adapt to a game model proposed by the coach. This leads, on multiple occasions, to train in order to master all the necessary solutions for each game situation, and leaving aside the ludic and socio-affective component of the sports modality itself.
2. A behaviour by instruction above self-guided behaviour, originated by the thought of the previous point and represented by the amount of information external to the game that the player receives. In this way, the player sometimes has to pay attention to more aspects that come from the coach's *verbal feedback*, and not to the information that originates in the course of the game itself.
3. A process of natural selection in the formation of teams, in which certain standards are set that must be reached to be part of these, and those players who do not meet the requirements are left out. This causes stress in the player and the need to push themselves, but also a focus on what may not depend on them. This not only happens in the formation of teams, but the entire system invites (we will deal with it later) to this situation to happen, in which the gradual process that the human being needs to reach their potential is ignored, considering their individual profile and characteristics, and not the fulfilment of criteria that sometimes seem to be fixed.
4. A promotion of seriousness over fun, which, in many contexts, causes boredom or the need to leave sports at a certain stage. The training orientation towards improvement, solely and exclusively, of some aspects that have to be put into practice in the weekend game, and not towards the player's autonomy and enjoyment of the game environment, causes the educational football to seem to be intended only for those who see it as a potential job. The culture of *no pain no gain*, for example, reflects that, in today's society, the game itself is undervalued and does not help to improve.
5. A rejection of exploratory behaviour that has more negative consequences than it may seem at first, since the player from a young age receives preventive information that invites them not to take risks when playing. The player has to avoid mistakes, take precautions and ensure short-term effectiveness due to the need for immediate performance. This restricts their ability to find new possibilities of action in the *continuum* of the game and, what is more important, to exploit their creative and expressive capacity.



These last elements that have been listed may be those that are part of the environment closest to the player and in which we can have a greater impact from the roles at hand. Therefore, it is interesting that, without questioning whether capitalist society, political interests or the scientific evidence behind sports performance should be refuted, we focus our reflection and energy on understanding what structural aspects in our sports environments can optimise the role of the coach and their interaction with the player, in order to promote a practice environment that invites the development of their abilities. Besides, this last aspect will also be directly related to triggering the creative manifestation of the player.

Here the game and its essence play a fundamental role. In this regard, Peter Gray (2014) (in a TED talk titled *The Decline of Play*) explains that, by definition, the game promotes self-control and self-guidance. Besides, it is an essential element of the human being in order to develop and relate, at the same time that we show our best selves. However, society has conveyed the message that play is a child's thing and that it has no place once they have reached adulthood.

Nevertheless, playing is necessary for all of us, and when we refer to playing, we not only emphasise the ludic part and personal enjoyment, which is strictly necessary to optimise ourselves, but mainly the part that demands the best version of ourselves and that, consequently, will develop the demand and self-management to adapt and improve ourselves in the game environment.

To close this section, let us not forget that football is still a game that has been standardised on a large scale and that it is consequently called a sport. However, it is convenient that this does not mean the loss of the identity traits that the game promotes, and that in our training practices the component of feeling that we are playing must always be present.

## **Coach's Behaviour (Vision) and Their Ability to Coach**

Let us ask ourselves how most of the official and unofficial courses, as well as congresses, lectures and seminars, which aim to **train** the coach, are planned. If we take a look at the contents, these usually focus on the aspects of the game that we must know and master in order to understand this sport and, in almost all of them, there is a smaller space that talks about the player and their characteristics, which we assume that we have to adapt and consider when to prepare our game and training plan. Or, they show us examples of how coaches who are in reference teams plan and manage the process, without perhaps going into detail about the variables that make up their reality (context, team, objectives, intentions, etc.).



This aspect, which at first glance may seem obvious and unrevealing to us, can be a trigger for how we perceive training and the role that the coach plays in this context. If there is one thing the coach does, it is to be exposed to receiving more information about the sport and increasing their knowledge of it every day. Consequently, it should be considered that, what is proposed to be shared and discussed in these educational spaces has a great transfer on what the coach will focus on in their immediate environment (here we can refer to the training plan of the coach courses as an element of their macroenvironment).

In this section we want to question the parameters with which the coach's training is assessed, as well as the information about the environment that conditions them, in order to expose those elements that they probably lack because they do not consider all the skills they need to do well in the sports practice. In this sense, training, leading or managing a team is also learning and a sample of a person's ability (the coach) to be in tune with the environment that concerns us, which in this case it is the training. Or have we never wondered why we do what we do as coaches? What aspects have we been exposed to and how have these shaped our way of doing?

Take, for example, a situation that went viral on Twitter by an educational football coach at an under-12s game. As the context in which things happened is not entirely known, we will focus on what can be seen in the video: when his team scores the goal that seems to ensure victory in the final minutes of the game, the coach, apart from entering the field to celebrate, kicks the ball in the centre of the field (ready for the other team to serve) so that the resumption of the match is delayed and in order to reduce the chances for the opposing team to return and even score. This, logically, ends in the expulsion of the coach and the spread of this unsportsmanlike behaviour throughout all social networks.

Without going into judging the individual, the real question is whether the coach is responsible for his behaviour and whether we should focus our disappointment on this particular person. Of course, he is, the moment a person commits an offence, he or she becomes responsible for their actions and, therefore, it is not necessary to look the other way and try to find explanations for the reason why that has happened (at least, in these so obvious and explicit cases). Nevertheless, it would be convenient to review all the contextual elements previously discussed to understand why such despicable and mean behaviour emerges from a coach who, in theory, is dedicated to forming values through sport.

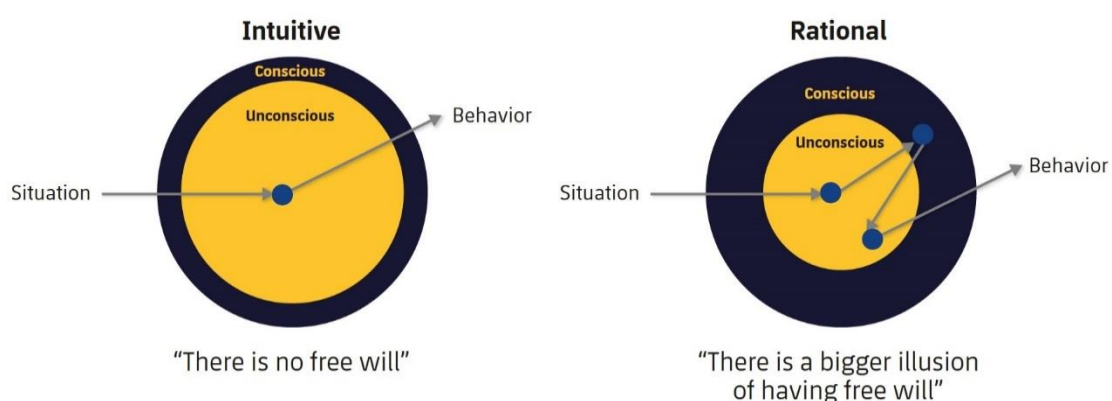
How does the sociocultural environment in which we operate affect our behaviour as sports professionals? In order to do this, it is necessary to do introspection and also understand how our brain works in these types of situations, which in this case we will try to expose through three questions that will give rise to some of the phenomena that explain the functioning of our mind:



- 1) **Do We Control Our Decisions?** Our brain is made up of the conscious and the subconscious, and 90% of decisions are determined by the latter (Kahneman, 2011); that is to say, most of what we do is not rationalised, but is triggered through our experience, our habits and, curiously, once the behaviour is performed, we attribute it to our conscious (Guerrero and Damunt, 2020). That is to say, we believe that we decide what we do when, in reality, most of the aspects are given by the conformation of our unconscious brain.
- 2) **Does Free Will Exist?** In the same way that we believe that everything we do is perfectly controlled by our conscious decisions, Verheijen (2019) explains ironically, we believe that we have free will when deciding what we decide. Nothing could be further from reality, since, in reality, what is produced from our subconscious (uncontrolled and intuitive) and what passes through our conscious brain (controlled and rational) is subject to the meaning we give to the stimuli that we receive in each situation.

By this we mean that there is no free will, when a person acts more on intuition (from which a stimulus-response reaction emerges, and consequently there is no apparent will), and when acting on rationality (where the stimulus goes through cognitive processes that have been generated from the construction of influences in our sociocultural framework [construct]). At most, quoting Verheijen, “a greater illusion that we really control our will, since doing what you do thinking does not mean that you had a choice to think differently” (2019).

**Figure 3: Simplifying Representation of How Behaviours Emerge When We Receive a Stimulus**



Source: adapted from Verheijen (2019).

- 3) **How Does Our Immediate Environment Influence the Decisions We Make?** What was mentioned above has a psychological and sociological explanation. In

Milgram's study to explain human cruelty, it was hypothesised that people who performed cruel acts (such as the massacre of Jews by the Nazis) did not respond to the malevolent nature of the human being, but were a consequence of feeling alienated from the fact itself and being more connected to the orders of a higher hierarchical entity. Thus, it was experimented with teachers who had to press a button that triggered an electric shock in students who responded poorly to the questions that were asked. For each question answered incorrectly, they had to increase the discharge volts without the teacher actually seeing the reaction of this student (who was acting as a test subject who did not really receive the shock) and having an authority figure that indicated that they should press the button when the answer was not what they were looking for. The number of people who were able to press the button was surprising, driven mainly by doing **their job**, and dissociating themselves from what violated human rights.

In the same way, in a Netflix documentary (called *The Push*), the illusionist tries to show that making an innocent person commit murder (pushing a person off a ledge), can be a much simpler task than it seems if one is able to manipulate the environment and thus influence the subconscious of the future culprit. In this way, through conditioning the previous events and behaviours, in the end, the push into the void becomes practically an emergent and necessary act. Without really knowing if this fact is closer to reality or to fiction, what we extract is the idea of how the process that is followed is based on manipulating human behaviour and how this manifests from a grid of constraints present in the environment.

Consequently, and returning to the emergent behaviour of the coach, we must understand that our actions come mainly from the unconscious and that these are determined by the way in which we have built our references and mental models. Now, we can surely rephrase the question of whether the coach who behaved in this way in the game is solely responsible for it or if, however, the way in which we have shaped the environment and the football context in which it operates can be made responsible. Can the club's values, the coordinator's guidelines, the proposed objectives, the types of acts that are encouraged on a daily basis, the type of competition promoted by the federation, be triggers for the behaviours observed on the field?

### **The Coach's Contextual Constraints**

The answer to the previous question is yes. As we have mentioned, all these factors - constraints - form our behaviour and colour the glasses through which we see reality, in this case, football.

Constraints are elements that determine the way in which the multiple components of a complex system self-organise, in order to produce reliable



macroscopic functions. It refers to the conditions, limitations or characteristics of the design that apply certain restrictions on the degrees of freedom of a system. (Balagué et al., 2019, <https://sportsmedicine-open.springeropen.com/articles/10.1186/s40798-019-0178-z>)

We are surrounded by constraints (and as we have seen before, at different scales) that somehow reduce our degrees of freedom and our possibilities of action, whether consciously or unconsciously. Nevertheless, the existence or application of constraints gives rise to the *affordances*, which are defined as the manifestation of our ability as humans to perceive the characteristics of the environment to find new possibilities for action.

In conclusion, what could be said is that our behaviour is subject to the conditions of the environment (constraints) and manifests within the framework of the possibilities of action that emerge from it (*affordances*). This, according to the topic at hand, refers to what opportunities the coach identifies to intervene in the contextual framework in which they find themselves. In the example we mentioned in the previous section, the unfortunate behaviour of the coach is surely related to many limitations that invite this type of attitude, as well as the type of competition (promotions and relegation), the coach's incentives (if he gets good results will lead a better team), the type of sports culture that exists (it is more important to win today than to learn tomorrow), as well as all those agents that promote this environment (representatives, parents, coaches of other clubs, etc.).

So, as with the players and the design of our training sessions, we coaches are also exposed to multiple constraints that come from the environment or, in this case, from the design made by institutions, such as clubs or federations, of everything involved in practising this sport. These (initial) limitations should entail an opportunity to explore new possibilities of action and develop the coach's creativity, which will be understood as their ability and skill to function effectively and efficiently in changing and variable environments. In this sense, depending on the orientation of the intentions and values that can promote the cores of the coach's macroenvironment, a more guided or exploratory behaviour can be generated (Damunt and Guerrero, 2020) by the coach and allow them to develop different skills.

To present two common cases, but treated in an extreme way, we will take as a reference an educational football environment that participates in the federative competition and a more educational or playful environment, such as a football school with internal competition. In the first case, having the results as a reference and considering that these results lead to reward or punishment, surely promotes seeing the game as the weekly goal and not as another practice. Also, probably, the coach will be able to facilitate a development related to these conditions due to the limitations to which they are subject in that context and, in this case, for example, we could predict that it would be done with a greater tactical knowledge of the game, a greater observation of what the opponent



does, an ability to understand when to risk and what moments to secure, etc., all of them skills that can be of great growth for the coach, but at the same time it is possible to question whether they are necessary in those environments.

However, in the second case, the fact that there is no external pressure or that the coach already has the training sessions done, that what is asked of them is to deliver player reports with increasing values, probably means that their focus of attention is not so much on the competition and that what has more value is the look at the player and how they behave, as well as the investment of time in trying and experimenting new ways of reaching the player through the task and new dynamics. Moreover, they may have less ability to understand what happens in a game or, for example, to become emotionally disconnected from the players and the team if they do not feel that their work is reflected when there is no competitive environment.

These nuances already depend on the alignment, consonance and coherence of the different scales of constraints. That is to say, for a constraint to have its maximum effect (for example, doing internal competition to focus more on the player's development without subjecting them to competitive pressure) it must be in turn aligned with the values or with the intrinsic motivation of the coach (who wants to be a coach because it fills them to see the growth of their players), and that is why it is not easy to generate an immediate change when systematic or countercultural changes are made.

From here the reader is invited to reflect on those constraints that shape and shape their usual way of doing things and to consider whether it further boosts their exploratory behaviour (search for new possibilities of action) or if instead there is a more guided behaviour (ensure short-term adaptation). Those who are in leadership positions and can influence different groups of coaches are invited to establish new constraints to direct the coaches' gaze to new sources of information.

To close, we want to present you with some questions. Have you ever wondered how we would conceive football in cases where the constraints at different scales were not the ones we are used to?

- What if in our social context football was not the main sport? Would we want to be coaches? Do the coaches of other sports have the same vision of their role as the coaches of our discipline?
- What would happen if the competition lasted 3 months and we changed teams? What if there were no promotions and relegations? Would we manage the team in the same way?
- What if coaching rotations are promoted during the season? How would we take that for 4 months we coached an under-14 and for the next 4 an under-10, with the aim of optimising players of different stages?



- What would happen if in each training session, as coaches, we were constrained by our coordinator to not be able to do a series of things or to have to do others (no task can be stopped, there is no material available, there is a limitation of talks, etc.)?

All these situations are very far from what we now conceive as football practice and probably far from the conditions in which we understand that we have to play our role as a coach. But they are real possibilities (it happens in other environments and cultures) and in these conditions there have also been triumphs, there have been defeats, and, more importantly, good coaches have been developed and players have been brought to the elite in the same way.

**What do we hope to open our eyes and understand the potential that remains to be exploited as coaches?**



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