

‘One hell of a player’

The social construction of the early career of Lionel Messi Towards a sociological analysis

Abstract

This article reviews key circumstances and events in the early development of soccer player Lionel Messi; influences and choices which shaped his stellar career. Our approach is inspired by the sociological contribution of the symbolic interactionist Everett Hughes, who advocated a set of sequences or steps in occupational development. These insights about key ‘turning points’ we combine with the work of French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger on the development of creative artists. We argue that this interconnected analysis can be used to explore the construction of Messi’s early sporting life: his childhood in the city of Rosario and his very early departure to FC Barcelona, including the role of this father, and of the character required for Messi to become an elite talent. Finally, we also comment on Messi’s uncertain status as a national sporting hero for Argentina.

Key words: Lionel Messi - soccer - Argentina – early career – turning points

Introduction

Lionel Andres Messi Cuccittini (or, as he is better known, Lionel Messi) is one of the first truly iconic global soccer players of the twenty-first century. Thus far, Messi has spent his entire professional career at one club, FC Barcelona of Catalonia, where he has been involved in winning more than 30 senior trophies and five Ballon d’Or awards for the world’s best soccer player, up to 2018. At 1.7m tall and weighing around 72 kilos, Messi is small for a professional soccer player. In a highly physical contact sport, his low centre of gravity, quick feet and remarkable balance and strength enable him to escape the

attention of most defenders. He is widely praised, too (in a sport not especially noted for it) for his sportsmanship.

In fact, his general demeanor on and off the field suggests Messi is somewhat at odds with wider conceptions of the late-modern game and of his own Argentinian roots, especially in relation to the historic role in Argentinian football, developed in the 1920s and 1930s, against the more methodical and disciplined British style taught in private schools and athletic clubs. These playing styles are symbolized by the cunning and skillful, working class urchin or *pibe*, such as the recent example of Diego Maradona

¹. In Argentina, Maradona has been broadly considered in popular opinion and by the traditional sports press to be *the* national hero²: as the man who saved the honour of his country with his sporting performances³; as a redemptive figure of triumph out of poor, working-class origins⁴; and as a touchstone for ‘rebellion’ and glorious controversy off the field.

Instead, Lionel Messi’s life away from soccer remains uneventful, very reserved and private. *On* the field it might be argued that Messi has rather more in common with the authentic sporting heroes of an earlier ‘Corinthian’ age of sport, than he does with the flawed personalities and hyper-marketed global superstars of the late-modern period. As ex-Dutch international and ex-FC Barcelona player and figurehead Johan Cruyff once put it: ‘For the world of football, Messi is a treasure because he is a role model for children around the world’⁵. Today, hundreds of thousands of adults and children from all over the world wear replica shirts carrying his name. Likewise, his actions on the field of play have been staple fare for global TV screens for more than a decade now, and they are scrutinized and dissected by both conventional and new social media⁶. Messi is **then** one of the most recognized public figures on the planet.

Messi's career has attracted much journalistic comment and no little insight⁷. However, very little has been written in the sociology of sport regarding his path into professional soccer. Here, our plan is not to discuss the career journey of Lionel Messi as if it were some kind of simple linear sequence. Nor do we want to promote an interpretation of Messi as a rather mystical, mythologised figure in the contemporary game. Instead, our approach recognizes the early manifestations of Messi's ability in his childhood, but also argues that the development of his talent might best be understood, sociologically, especially in the context of Everett Hughes's idea of turning points⁸. That is, key moments that mark significant life transitions. Our main objective in this article is to combine insights from Hughes' work with those taken from the writings of the French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger⁹ on the success of the creative artist. Taking this approach will aid a broader understanding, we would argue, of the development of exceptional sporting talent.

A social interactionist approach to exploring Messi's early career using Hughes and Menger

Everett Hughes¹⁰, one of the most prominent disseminators of the lessons of the so-called Chicago School of sociology¹¹, has highlighted the fact that the 'joining up' of a man's life through events, large and small, constitutes his unique social career in the life course. During their life journey, every human being is faced with critical turning points, that is, transitions that lead from one status to another in connection with individual (and collective) decisions made, as well as key encounters and fundamental institutions which help shape that journey. This idea includes the changing contexts of time and place as it applies to work, family, recreation and other social spheres. The potential of this approach has been applied to study different environments, but also to the dilemmas and

contradictions of status involved within social institutions. Using this insight, for example, Hughes's former PhD student, Howard Becker¹² famously studied the social careers of jazz musicians and the moral paths of marihuana smokers in order to portray such diversity and transitions. As Chapoulie states¹³, Hughes always advised his students to resort to fieldwork to approach any object of study.

We appreciate the promising insights and applicability of Hughes' approach to sporting careers and we combine it here with the four variables identified by the French sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger¹⁴ for explaining the success of the creative artist. These are: (1) the talent s/he possesses; (2) the 'team' that surrounds the artist; (3) the material conditions offered to shape their career; and (4) the evaluation that is sequentially made of his/her work. Used together, we believe these approaches have much to offer for analyzing Messi. Menger has pointed out that advancement on the career ladder in the cultural/artist sector is limited because top positions are filled up mainly through external recruiting. Here, normative vacancy chains operate ineffectively, as he puts in relation to elite musicians:

'Individual career opportunities and their main elements –responsibilities, challenges, training, influence, earnings- develop through mobility within a stratified set of organizations ranked on a hierarchy of prestige, (musical) excellence, caliber (of musicianships), working conditions, and operating budgets',¹⁵.

We contend that this kind of conception can also be richly useful to understand, sociologically, the construction of the careers of soccer players. The 'making' of soccer players, as the anthropologist Damo¹⁶ has stressed in a comparative, in-depth case study from Brazil and France, involves a number of resources, such as: the recruitment and selection of candidates for professional clubs; the impact of disciplinary and training

technologies; the role of agent networks and specialists in different fields; and the differential application of legal norms. Within these social processes, outlined by an approach based on the sociology of Hughes and Menger, prospective soccer players can learn the tools of the trade and develop dispositions that can be read as a specific *habitus* for professional sporting environments¹⁷.

These are sites which are, indeed, full of complex interactions between the will of the candidates and the responses of their formative clubs¹⁸. For elite South American players today, a key turning point - that is to say in Hughes' terms, a significant change of status - is framed by the possibility of migrating to Europe. This has recently become a trend, not only for highly skilled and very talented players, but also for less accomplished players who may seek out opportunities in inferior leagues and sometimes under highly precarious conditions¹⁹.

In December 2017 it was estimated that around 2,300 Argentinian soccer players were playing 'professionally' in different parts of the world²⁰. Following the conceptualization offered by Hughes and the combination with Menger's perspective, we contend that each of these individuals has engaged in a unique journey characterized by some (dis)order, sequences of events and unexpected circumstances, in which skills, the environment, the encounters and the institutions they faced have contrived to produce decisive turning points.

Paths for recent elite Argentinians have placed Lionel Messi at FC Barcelona, Angel Di Maria at Benfica (then at Real Madrid, Manchester United and Paris Saint-Germain), Sergio Agüero at Atlético Madrid (and then Manchester City), and, more recently, Paulo Dybala at Juventus. Many other Argentinian exports are playing in Mexico, Brazil, Chile, or else in emerging soccer markets, such as the Major Soccer League (USA) and in China. Still others, less familiar perhaps to the world's soccer media, have ended up in the eastern

soccer outposts of Europe and in India, Malaysia, Qatar, Indonesia, or even regional leagues across every continent.

Below, we want to combine the sociological insights on social career development from Everett Hughes with the four variables proposed by Pierre-Michel Menger²¹ to predict artistic success, in order to interrogate the world of a soccer ‘artist’. Our specific question is: what were the contexts, circumstances and choices that propelled the young Lionel Messi into the Fútbol Club Barcelona and later global stardom? But before entering into such a sociological analysis, let us first review some of the traditional interpretations of iconic South American players in order to place the appearance of Lionel Messi into a broader history that has gradually shaped different transitions of status and representations.

‘Iconic’ soccer players in South America: the constant quest of national hero

Iconic post-war South American soccer players have often been characterized by their transgressions, both inside and outside the field of play; footballers who have challenged their constraining contexts with their charisma, their decisions, and their symbolic weight, in order to mark both soccer and society. This is particularly so in the two countries that what would become the soccer super-powers of the continent, Brazil and Argentina. According to the Brazilian public intellectual Gilberto Freyre, it was only through football that *negros* (blacks) could achieve an elevated status in society²². In Brazil, discourses were invented, for example, to deify the exotic and mercurial teenager *King* Pelé, when he and his country became, for the first time, champions of the world, in Sweden in 1958²³. Iconic players from the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s have all been widely associated with joy in the popular imagination in Brazil²⁴.

Argentina has also gone in search of players to define the national character, but after its chastening World Cup experience in Sweden in 1958, a form of masculinity was valued in domestic soccer, one which was more physical and disciplined, which could match the toughness apparently needed to challenge the Europeans, different to the creative style of players of earlier decades such as Martino, Loustean, Moreno and even Di Stéfano²⁵. This direction resulted in the adoption of more modern tactics and training (*lo moderno*) being embraced in the 1960s and a new pivot, ‘number 5’ became a symbol of *Argentinidad* (Argentineness) in the shape of an imposing midfield player from Boca Juniors, Antonio Ubaldo Rattín²⁶. Two seriously violent Inter-Continental Club Championship fixtures involving Argentinian and British soccer clubs in 1967 and 1968, respectively, rather solidified this view of Argentinian football in northern Europe²⁷.

Meanwhile, by the 1970s, the national coach of Argentina, César Luis Menotti, started to profess, again, a radical change in the ‘philosophy’ about *fútbol*, which was in line with older journalists who maintained an affinity for skilful players who still relied on the trickery and artistry exemplified by the *fútbol criollo* style of the 1930s²⁸. Menotti’s national team won their home World Cup in 1978, playing in an athletic, attacking style best expressed by players such as the dashing Mario Kempes and the super-industrious Osvaldo Ardiles. But it was the emergence of the extravagantly talented Maradona to lead his country to a second World Cup win in 1986, which became the perfect late expression of the lyrics of the composition *El Pibe de Oro* (The Golden Boy), a tango actually written during the 1930s. According to the anthropologist Eduardo Archetti²⁹, soccer has constituted in Argentina a common site for ecstatic expressions of the collective imaginary, and a space for constructing satisfying, transgressive emblems of national pride, especially among working men. Maradona – a *pibe* par excellence – would be lauded for this remarkable skill and resilience, but also disparaged in many places

(especially outside Argentina) for his on-field deceptions. Scandals finally brought him somehow down from part of his international pedestal.

The distinctive playing and personal style of Maradona and his unquenchable will-to-win (sometimes, it seemed, at all costs) emerged from a history of talented Argentinian working-class players, men who were characterized by their strength, dribbling ability and their native soccer intelligence³⁰. Many of these footballers forged their skills in the so-called *potreros*; the precarious and ‘lawless’ playing fields, where younger kids had to demonstrate their talent (first variable of Menger’s approach) and courage against older boys in the neighborhood³¹ in order to gain status. This could mean for some of them, a ‘first turning’ point, as recruiters of local clubs often observed (forth variable of Menger) the potential of amateur players. As a child, the precocious Maradona even expressed his three dreams in an early TV interview in his *potrero*: to play in the Argentine First Division (like the boy in *El Pibe de Oro*); to play for the national squad; and to become a world champion with Argentina. Already recognized as one of the world’s best players, ten years later, Maradona faced, arguably, his most important challenge in 1986. Just four years after the Falklands (or *Malvinas*) ignominious war defeat, Argentina drew England in the quarters-finals of the World Cup finals in Mexico. In the eyes of the Argentine public it was *the* game for the nation to emerge victorious and for Maradona to demonstrate his global pre-eminence and patriotic leadership³². Maradona scored two very different, but equally memorable, match-winning goals, the first illicitly via the so-called ‘Hand of God’, the second after a powerful twisting waltz from half-way through the entire England midfield and defense³³. It produced, according to the journalist Victor Hugo Morales, the happiest popular moment in the history of his country³⁴. The conquest of that World Cup helped Argentines to challenge the stigma that their players play dirty, or that the 1978 success was “fixed” by the military junta³⁵.

In South American contexts, then, soccer players and soccer matches have been demonstrated to fire popular collective emotions and it seems in Argentina that emerging figures must confirm their leadership during major tournaments, in order to change from the status, under Hughes's terms, of an 'ordinary' international player, to be accepted as truly authentic national icon³⁶. Pretenders, for example, to the 'number 10' jersey in Argentina³⁷ such as the *Burrito* Ortega, Pablo Aimar and Javier Saviola have been suggested by journalists as potential successors to *el Pelusa*. But the weight of the symbolic burden has been simply too great³⁸. The vacancy remained closed until Lionel Messi appeared.

The narrative paths of Lionel Messi and Diego Maradona present some similarities, but also significant differences. Whereas Maradona has inhabited the role of 'rags to riches' talented miscreant and rebel in the face of perceived injustice³⁹ and has revealed a highly controversial, occasionally volcanic, personality, this is quite different to the conservative and becalmed spirit of Messi. Moreover, although both players have deployed somewhat similar skills, Messi lacks Maradona's all-or-nothing psyche and does not exactly represent the marginalized proletarian story framed for the older hero⁴⁰. In addition, and crucially, Maradona played his formative professional years in Argentina, for Argentinos Juniors and Boca Juniors (1976-1982), before moving to Europe. Lionel Messi was formed as a professional player almost completely at FC Barcelona, thus constituting a complex hybrid: part Argentine heritage, part Spanish finishing school⁴¹. Maradona marks, then, Argentinian defiance and resistance to the world's many challenges; Messi, it seems, simply surfs by or over them.

An undeniable consequence of soccer's contemporary globalization has been that promising talents from Argentina (and from South America in general) have tended to migrate earlier to the old continent. Just as Norbert Elias⁴² stressed the emergence of

Amadeus Mozart as a genius who marked a new musical style, the idea of this transition between epochs could be useful for our understanding of the story of Messi, as it illustrates well the new mechanisms of the global market, in which the best products of South America culture are finally ‘manufactured’⁴³ in Europe. In this vein, we propose to turn to a sociological approach marking out the key ‘turning points’ to understand the conditions under which Lionel Messi made his initial steps in Argentina, but was then profoundly shaped as a soccer professional on another continent, in Barcelona, Spain.

A note on fieldwork and sources

Fieldwork, following Hughes preferred method of research⁴⁴, was conducted for this paper mainly during December 2014 in Rosario, within the circuits that Messi experienced during his childhood and early adolescence, especially his local neighborhood and his early soccer clubs. Interviews were conducted with key actors who helped shape some of these steps e.g.: his first coach; the manager of the youth academy of Newell’s Old Boys; and the doctor who provided Messi’s hormonal treatment. One coach at the Messi Foundation and two local journalists, Sergio Levinsky and Hernan Ames, were also interviewed.

In the absence of his first coach at Grandoli, who had passed away recently, the long-serving doorman of this club was also consulted. Selected Messi biographies were useful as background⁴⁵, including the official life story authorized by his family, *Messi*⁴⁶. The latter was also interviewed in Rio de Janeiro, just a few days before the 2014 World Cup final. Additionally, one informal interview was conducted in Rosario with a soccer agent, a former footballer who has attachments to local players, some of whom were colleagues of Messi at Newell’s.

Television documentaries of Messi's life were also reviewed to add information about this period. These included *Messi, la Historia Argentina* produced by the Argentinean cable channel *TN Deportes*⁴⁷. Likewise, a special edition of *Informe Robinson* on Spanish TV⁴⁸, and the special edition no. 22 of *Idolos por el Mundo*⁴⁹ were particular rich in insight and ideas. All these diverse sources can offer some explorative context for scoping the early sporting path of Messi.

Lionel Messi: his city, his family and his talent

Lionel Messi was born on the 24th of June of 1987 in Rosario. This city is home to two of the most famous and traditional clubs in Argentina, Newell's Old Boys and Rosario Central. Outside the urban area of Buenos Aires, these are the only clubs that have won national titles and enjoyed some international success. Many prestigious soccer players have been produced by Newell's: Jorge Valdano, *Tata* Martino, Gabriel Batistuta and Maxi Rodríguez, among others. The list also includes the enigmatic player and later maverick soccer coach, Marcelo Bielsa. Local rivals, Rosario Central, have also produced important figures: World Cup-winning coach César Luis Menotti and, more recently, players Ezequiel Lavezzi and Angel Di Maria. The soccer networks in Rosario and the surrounding area rely for recruits on several smaller clubs and regional leagues. Local soccer legends such as *Trinche* Carlovich emerged, for example, from Central Cordoba, the third club of the city. Amateur clubs, such as Renato Cesarini (also visited for this fieldwork) have produced their own famous soccer players, including Javier Mascherano. One can, indeed, 'breathe' soccer and its history in Rosario⁵⁰.

Messi was born in a lower middle-class neighborhood to the south of the city. His father, Jorge, was an employee at a major industrial factory, Acindar, and his mother, Celia, was a homemaker. Lionel has two older brothers, Rodrigo and Matias, both of whom had ambitions to become professional players. It was with his brothers and his cousins,

Maximiliano and Emanuel Biancucchi (the latter became a soccer professional), that young Lionel played in his neighborhood streets. In short, Messi was not poor, but he was socialized into a family, neighborhood and city where soccer is a central part of the mainstream masculine culture. All our sources confirm that the diminutive player showed outstanding technical abilities in these early street games, performances that impressed his intimate circle.

It was his grandmother, another Celia, who took the little kid to the *Fútbol Club Grandoli*, just a few blocks away from his home⁵¹. His brother Matias was already training there, while Rodrigo also used to play at that same ground. The first sociological elements we can use to understand his framing dispositions can be found both in his own will and determination *and* the strong support Messi received from his family. But this is not enough to clarify turning points in the terms proposed by Hughes. After all, many kids in Rosario have good families and routinely show soccer skills, but only a tiny few continue towards a career in professional soccer.

The Messi brilliance in the formative tests and the first turning points

Lionel was taken to Grandoli when he was five years-old by his grandmother. This moment can be considered his first official assessment in the game. As Menger stresses⁵², the artist (who we translate here into the prospective soccer player) needs to attract the attention of potential recruiters, ‘experts’ who observe and evaluate the potential in relative rounds and comparisons with other candidates. Following Hughes’ model, these were settings that led to a significant step, from Messi’s intimate, neighborhood circle into the wider domain of an amateur club. Documentary sources suggest that one afternoon, while Salvador Aparicio (the coach for Grandoli) was training his seven-year-old boys, he needed one more player to complete a game. He saw the tiny five-year-old watching in the stand. Aparicio hesitated, but Messi’s grandmother insisted that he be

selected to play. Lionel was given his chance and he impressed from his first moves, displaying balance, dribbling skills and a single-mindedness deemed highly uncommon at that young age, especially when playing with older boys. He was afterwards invited to join the club on a regular basis.

The culture of this team - the second variable proposed by Menger - represented something of a sacred space for the young Messi. He now trained every Monday, Wednesday and Friday, always accompanied by his grandmother and also by his father during the Saturday games against other clubs⁵³. His cousin, Emanuel was the team's goalkeeper. According to Archetti, it was precisely on these precarious fields that the Argentinean *cracks* of previous decades used to learn to develop their skills and survivalist instincts⁵⁴. The young Messi won almost every match at Grandoli and he became a champion for the first time in this early epoch.

After his first season, Jorge, his father, joined Lionel, as the coach of this team. This influence, as Norbert Elias⁵⁵ has described in the role of the father of Amadeus Mozart, may have been crucial for underpinning and reinforcing these formative steps in Messi's own 'artistic' development. But the skills of this boy did not pass unnoticed by other observers. Jorge Griffa, an eminent representative of the training centre of Newell's Old Boy -a recruiter under Menger's terms- and later one of the most respected youth coaches in Argentina, soon talked with Jorge. Once again, applying the interactionist sociological insights of Hughes, this encounter was crucial in the development of a career path, as the coach invited the father to allow the precocious seven-year-old to join the training centre.

When Messi arrived at Newell's Old Boys, he played for one year in the 'baby-football' class (*baby fútbol*), a small pitch, five-a-side, format. In Hughes' perspective, this union between the prospect and the institution shaped the next period of his occupational journey. His first coach there, Ernesto Vecchio, revealed in an interview conducted in

Rosario, that he had worked, right from the beginning, not on skills but on Messi's tactical awareness:

'He came with all the necessary technical skills. However, I frequently changed his position in the field. I used to place him in the defending zone, so he could organize the team from behind. In other occasions, I placed him as the striker and asked him to wait to receive the ball from his colleagues.'

This period at Newell's constitutes a crucial turning point, for Messi. His status had now climbed from a local amateur club to the formative echelons of an important, nationally known historical professional soccer club. Messi now started to play in the regional leagues of Rosario, representing Newell's Old Boys with a group of skilled team-mates, some of whom would, themselves, go on to become professional players. Vecchio remembers the importance of Messi for both his individual talent and his commitment to the collective:

'Those kids were all talented, but we had Lionel Messi. He always made the difference. On the one hand, he had this extraordinary capacity to dribble, score and assist. On the other, he was very important to the group and attached to his colleagues.'

This latter aspect is further illustrated in our interview with Néstor Rozín, who was responsible for the training centre, including the house where young prospective players from other cities lived: 'Lionel used to stay in this house during several weekends, instead of going to the comfort of his home. He really liked to spend time with his team mates.' This former youth manager of Newell's Old Boys also provides a basis for comparing the importance of the support networks -the second variable proposed by Menger's approach- and background of young players, who had somewhat similar skills:

'We had one extraordinary prospect, similar to Lionel, but one year older. His name was Billy Rodas. But, contrary to Messi who benefited from a stable family

environment, Billy came from a very turbulent context, and this had inevitably affected him. It was hard for him to respect discipline, whilst for Lionel, discipline was a natural attribute. Messi used to arrive earlier to the trainings and he always wanted to stay afterwards practicing.’

The global name of Newell’s and the achievements and prestige of this particular group of players – they were called the ‘Machine of 87’ (*Máquina del 87*) (all members were born in 1987), brought international invitations. By now the 10-year-old Messi and his colleagues were travelling to the Cantolao Academy, in Peru, where he led this team to win an international tournament. All things now seemed possible; his ‘name’ and his status⁵⁶ were gaining ground in his home city. Lionel Messi had many of the elements to evolve, via Newell’s player production system, to eventually become a professional soccer player. But there are few entirely linear stories in life, and this one is no exception.

The ‘great discomfort’ and the decision to move to Barcelona

Lionel Messi had the skills and the determination to succeed as a professional soccer player, but it turned out he needed medical treatment to grow as a normal kid. This constitutes part of the circumstances or events, according to the approach of Hughes⁵⁷, that eventually drove him away from Rosario, to Europe. According to Rozín, his coaches in Newell’s Old Boys identified that Lionel lacked body capital; he was much shorter in height than the average kids of his age. He was advised to visit an endocrinologist, Dr. Diego Schwarztein, a man who had already worked with young players from the club. Interviewed in Rosario for this paper, Doctor Schwarztein, explained:

‘In January 1997, I received a call from Newell’s. They were going to send me a kid of nine-years-old. They told me that this boy was one hell of a player, but he was not growing normally. A few days afterwards, Lionel appeared with his mother. From the first visit, the boy was worried about whether he could become a professional.’

In order to carry out the treatment, it was decided that Messi required an injection of a dose of hormones on a daily basis. This involved an investment of almost one thousand dollars per month. The cost was covered during the first two years of treatment: 50 % by social security; 25% by the mutual insurance; and the remaining 25% by the Acindar foundation⁵⁸. However, this funding was unsustainable in the longer term and, according to our interview data, several additional factors need to be considered here. An overarching concern was the economic crisis shadowing the country and the steel industry, in particular, where Jorge Messi worked. The refunding of costs from the Acindar foundation also sometimes took several weeks to appear and the Messi family could no longer afford to carry this financial burden.

Messi's parents called for assistance from Newell's Old Boys. The training centre tried to offer support, but the conditions offered (the third variable defined by Menger) became just too unreliable for the well-being and full development of the prospect. It is worth recalling, too, that these were turbulent times at Newell's, under the club president Eduardo López, a man who had been in charge since 1994 but who had also been routinely accused of a lack of transparency⁵⁹. In this fractious and unsettling environment, the tensions, uncertainties and the disappointments involved started to convince the Messi family that it may have to look elsewhere to give their son the maximum prospect for sporting success.

This period constitutes a difficult moment to clarify; blame avoidance has since become paramount. Messi's later extraordinary success, the distances involved, and the early departure of Messi from Newell's have, together, produced defensive responses and later rationalisations. Each side, naturally, has its own version of events. Newell's coaches stress, for example, that they did their utmost to support the young player, a position the family later challenged. There is an additional element that may have soured the

relationship around this time because Rodrigo, the eldest of Messi's brothers, was released by the Newell's club⁶⁰.

Whatever the precise conditions, Jorge now took Lionel to Buenos Aires in 1999, for an assessment by River Plate, one of the giant soccer clubs of Argentina. His performance impressed local observers⁶¹, but not so much that the representatives of the club were willing to risk signing the boy, so inviting conflict with Newell's. This event can be read by combining Hughes and Menger's approaches as a key 'missed' turning point that could have changed the Messi story entirely. What might have happened to the career of Messi had he been recruited by River Plate? The potential identification with one of the biggest soccer crowds in Argentina may have built him as a popular, national, hero right from the beginning. River Plate missed out because the club's officials decided that this kid was just another 'interesting' candidate among several who appeared at that time at the training ground. According to the journalists Sergio Levinsky and Hernan Ames, in Argentina there is an unwritten code between soccer clubs to respect the prospects of rival training centres. River Plate officials were also unsure that Messi could survive in the professional game in Argentina. Dr. Schwarztein speculated later on what might have happened if Messi had remained in the country:

'Lionel had the talent to reach the very top of the league of Argentina that was for sure, either with Newell's, or River. He would have even been called to the mayor national team. However, he would have probably suffered from the violence of our football, both inside and outside the field. Kids [here] are exposed most of the time to hard, and sometimes unbearable, conditions.'

Nevertheless, the name of Lionel was already a synonym for talented prospects in Rosario, as soccer agents now appeared on the scene when they learnt that the Messi family was not happy with Newell's support. In this part of the story, sociological research is confronted by a nebula, for agents through their connections did intervene to

facilitate the possibility of an assessment of Messi at FC Barcelona. But, according to our interviewees, such agents acted as if they were only giving ‘one hand’. Legal conflicts persist and intellectual honesty leads us to acknowledge that quoting names here is likely to be injudicious. Whatever the real intentions and the misunderstandings between the groups involved, the best sociological interpretation possible is that a ‘team’ of people, according to the second variable of Menger’s model, now acted to open new doors.

The route for Argentinians into Spanish soccer is a familiar one, of course – but hardly for prospects this young. Exceptionally, Messi’s family was offered the possibility of a trial in Barcelona in September 2000. Lionel, 13-years-old and never yet out of South America, travelled with his father and two agents to Europe. On the day of arrival, he was observed in a technical exercise by the head of the *Barça* training center, Joaquim Rifé⁶². Messi trained for ten days until coaching chief Carles Rexach saw the player demonstrate his unique skills in a number of comparative settings - the fourth variable for Menger – often alongside elite *Barça* boys who were two, or even three, years his senior. Rexach and his coaches agreed that *Barça* should pay for growth hormone treatment and that the 13-years-old should be signed – ideally, as soon as humanly possible.

The ‘uncertainty highway’ and turning points into the top soccer circuits

Top European soccer clubs have recently faced serious criticism in importing very young soccer players - ‘trafficking’ and ‘slave trade’ are terms that have been bandied about in this respect – and FIFA has often struggled to keep up with such developments⁶³. In 2000, no European soccer club typically brought into its playing circuits from outside its regional hinterland a child of 13 years of age, never mind one recruited directly from South America. That is why the Messi family had to wait in Rosario for almost six months for the final call. Meanwhile, the Catalan club officials reflected hard on making a decision to sign Messi: but the coaches were more decisive. They insisted that this

scrawny, underdeveloped Rosario teenager could even become the ‘new Maradona’, and that it was wiser to risk forming him from now rather than being faced with the uncertainty (and cost) of buying up his talent in the future⁶⁴.

To smooth negotiations, FC Barcelona hired Messi’s father, Jorge, offering him a job in a small company related to the club. This allowed for the migration to Spain of the entire Messi family, including his elder brothers and little sister, though the decision relied essentially on the outcome in soccer for a 13-year-old boy. This commitment demonstrated by the family migration is perhaps another important ‘turning point’ in the early career path of Lionel Messi, in terms of the Everett Hughes model.

The infrastructure of FC Barcelona was a very different world to that of Rosario. The conditions offered Messi and his family - the third variable for Menger - included an apartment, a salary for Jorge, a financial bonus in relation to Messi signing with FC Barcelona, the continuation of the expensive medical treatment and a very different environment for training. The player later acknowledged the importance of these optimal conditions to journalist Victor Hugo Morales (*Idolos por el Mundo*, 2014): ‘I was used to playing in grounds with almost no grass in Argentina, some of them full of small pebbles. Here [in Barcelona] all training grounds are made of synthetic grass. It was easier for me to conduct the ball when I arrived here.’

But a number of contingencies put his possible career at FC Barcelona at immediate risk. Firstly, Messi’s sister suffered from **some** depression in Spain and his mother and brothers decided to re-settle her back in Rosario. Lionel took the tough, but key decision for his career to remain in Barcelona with his father, so this young boy was forced to cope with the absence of the rest of the family. Secondly, the new training centre manager at FC Barcelona became reluctant to pay the bonus previously offered. In this turbulent context, the unofficial - but very real - interest of Real Madrid came to the attention of Jorge Messi.

Two options, and therefore very different directions in the career, were now possible: renegotiate with Barça, or else break with the Catalan club for a chance at its greatest rival. A completely different journey was somehow available for Lionel Messi. But agents got involved and demanded a commission for the potential move, thus accelerating not only a new agreement with FC Barcelona but also clarity that from this point on Jorge Messi would be the sole agent for his son⁶⁵.

Lionel now suffered injuries and his physical condition deteriorated. The FC Barcelona medical staff insisted that he should have his meals at the club so they could control his diet, and the club doctor Josep Borrel halted the hormonal treatment, with some success.

From season 2001/2002 Messi could start playing officially for the youth teams of FC Barcelona, despite continued opposition to his transfer from Newell's Old Boys because of his young age. FIFA finally intervened and ruled that no kid of 13 years of age should be prevented from playing soccer, no matter his journey. These were crucial decisions and disputes between institutions, in terms of Everett Hughes' interactionist model, for the social construction of Messi's future career. In what followed, the young Lionel played in a range of youth teams at FC Barcelona, his skills always prominent. Coach Tito Vilanova's intervention, again proved a key 'encounter'⁶⁶, because Vilanova encouraged the Argentinian boy to evolve in his favorite position on the field - as a classical, creative number 10 - and not as a more marginal right-winger. Vilanova would also later be a crucial supporter of Messi in the former's role as head coach of the FC Barcelona first team.

The media, a key vehicle for promoting emerging soccer talent, now began to notice the name of Messi. The prestigious Argentinian magazine, *El Gráfico* published a note about Messi in August 2003; *Mundo Deportivo*, an important newspaper in Barcelona devoted one cover in November to the new *crack*. By season 2003/2004, Messi had provoked the

interest of first team club coach, Frank Rijkaard, and in November 2003 he made his first team debut in a friendly match in Portugal, against Oporto. The positive assessment, **under Menger's model**,⁶⁷ by Barça of his performance in the first team was decisive for Messi's transition into the professional elite circuit and the change of status.⁶⁸

At 16-years-old, Lionel was already involved with the professional squad of FC Barcelona, and making connections with international stars such as Ronaldinho, Deco, and Samuel Eto'o. Spain was soon eyeing his international potential. However, Jorge Messi was needed to call the attention of the national coaches of Argentina. He sent videos to the U20s manager and visited the staff of national coach Marcelo Bielsa⁶⁹. A contest of circumstances, people and institutions, **in our combination of Hughes and Menger approaches**⁷⁰, were now in play within a wide horizon of possibilities; several outcomes were still possible.

To understand this sequence, we must again take into account the intense will and character of Lionel Messi; he desperately wanted to represent Argentina. In 2003 Messi was still able to play for Argentina in the U17s World Cup finals, or for the U20s, but he did not receive the call. To see off the interest of Spain, a friendly U20s match against Paraguay was organized in June 2004. Messi came off the bench and scored. He then played for the Argentina U20s side in the South American championship in 2005, in Colombia. As already stated, one of the key factors in an artist's success is the 'team' surrounding and supporting his talent. It was after the South-American U20 championship that Messi started to work on a daily basis with a personal trainer in Barcelona, Juan Brau, a man who helped prevent injuries and strengthen Messi's core fitness. In 2005 Messi travelled to the Netherlands with the Argentinean national U20s side which won the FIFA Youth Cup – Messi was the tournament's top scorer and its outstanding player. **His performance confirmed 'officially' a turning point in the change of status at Barcelona**

and on the international stage as *the* emerging professional soccer player of his generation. The rest, as they say, is history, but we must stop here to discuss the initial career.

Discussion: a professional career to study

We have tried in this article to analyze the social construction of the early career of Lionel Messi, using insights from both Everett Hughes and Pierre-Michel Menger as our guide. The first obvious variable to take into account here is the undeniable initial talent endowment of the player - as sociologist Pierre-Michel Menger explains, this is a key condition for success in any world of artists. But it does not stand alone. The skills of Messi were rooted in a country, Argentina, and a city, Rosario, where soccer is an essential component of social life – though some critics have recently suggested that the conditions for producing top soccer talent in Argentina have recently been damaged.⁷¹

The support and belief of his family was fundamental for Messi's success, from when he joined a local amateur club, Grandoli, as a 5-year-old. But the first relevant turning point towards the professional circuit came with his transition into the prestigious training centre of Newell's Old Boy. It was precisely within the Newell's Old Boys set up that coaches first identified his growth problem and insisted Messi visit a doctor, a course that would eventually lead to appropriate – but costly - medical treatment. The high cost of the treatment and the resultant tensions between his family and the Newell's club precipitated the quest for a different opportunity. Clearly, the most significant 'turning point' in the career path of Lionel Messi soon followed, with the decision taken to move to Barcelona at the age of just 13 years.

The three other variables required to explain the success of the 'artist' proposed by Menger were met in this new environment: a working team surrounding and sustaining

the talent, where his father was a key figure; secondly, supportive material conditions; and, thirdly, positive evaluations of his early work as a player. Messi's unusual character and determination added to these variables and helped him prevail in the subsequent assessments of his performance in the youth teams of FC Barcelona and in the difficult moments he faced: the injuries he sustained, loneliness and the early return of the rest of his family to Argentina.

Messi's story may have taken different directions at each turning point: whether, where and how the medical treatment he needed was supplied; had River Plate in Argentina managed to lure Messi from Rosario to play in Argentinean soccer; had he decided to return to Argentina with his family instead of staying on in Barcelona; and whether he had accepted the later calls from the national team of Spain. In this last respect, contrary to the case of Maradona who played for two local clubs in Argentina before moving to Europe, some national journalists publicly doubt that Messi is truly Argentinean at all. They still consider him a Catalan product, who merely *plays* for Argentina.

Players such as Lionel Messi – neither *pibe* nor *caudillo* – have historically been more marginal for Argentinian identity construction. Indeed, the story of Messi arguably reflects broader tendencies and features about global football markets today, especially the capacity of the rapacious European elite to source South American talent at an earlier age. That is to say, the very best soccer players from South America go sooner, rather than later, in the twenty-first-century, to the large European clubs that hold the monopoly of the sport's capital resources. Not all succeed. But his sparkling club career in Europe and his uncertain treatment in Argentina may also carry messages about domestic football in that country, where critics have recently been accused of favouring 'balls' over talent and where the cultural weight once provided by street soccer has been under attack, with

no suitable educational models, like those in Spain, Germany and France, for example, to fill the talent production vacuum.

Thus, the very human and sometimes traumatic experiences of Messi in the national squads of Argentina are also a source for specific inquiries, for there is sociological ground to explore in the obvious comparisons here: Lionel Messi as a figure who has challenged the sacred aura of the mythology of Maradona, with similar skills on the pitch, but quite different styles of leadership and national representations off it. The gold medal in the Olympic Games for Argentina in Beijing in 2008 was undoubtedly one of the happiest moments for Lionel Messi with the national team, but the World Cup matches and finals lost on his watch are also part of a rather more plaintive national narrative of failure for the new century. So it proved in Russia 2018, as the coach Jorge Sampaoli expressed: “Messi has a revolver to his head called the World Cup and if he doesn’t win it he’s shot and killed.”⁷² It would be interesting, likewise, to analyze the four variables propose by Menger and see how not all of them were met in the environments of the national teams where Messi has played for Argentina.

We would end by saying that the socio-anthropological approach employed here could bring insights into the careers of those soccer and other athletes who have managed to reach the very top level, but also for explaining the circumstances of those who fail to do so. Through case studies, and human stories and their transitions, we may be better able to understand the exceptions and the filters for the vast majority of soccer prospects, some of whom may flicker very brightly very early on, but who are then put aside or excluded from the very highest circuits of prestige and global success later.

Notes

- ¹ cf. Sibaja and Parrish, 'Pibes, Cracks and Caudillos', 657.
- ² cf. Segura, 'Diego Maradona'.
- ³ cf. Levinsky, *Maradona*.
- ⁴ cf. Alabarces, 'La Patria, Maradona y Messi'.
- ⁵ *Eurosport UK*, February, 2016.
- ⁶ cf. '10 Impossible Things That Only Lionel Messi Is Capable of Doing', Youtube.
- ⁷ Balagué, *Messi*, 2014.
- ⁸ Hughes, *Sociological Eye*.
- ⁹ cf. Menger, *Le Travail Créateur*.
- ¹⁰ cf. Hughes, *The Sociological Eye*, 124.
- ¹¹ Chapoulie, *La tradition sociologique de l'école de Chicago*.
- ¹² Becker, *Outsiders*.
- ¹³ Chapoulie, 'Everett Hughes and the Chicago Tradition', 3.
- ¹⁴ cf. Menger, *Le Travail Créateur*.
- ¹⁵ Menger, 'Artist labor markets and careers', 547.
- ¹⁶ Damo, *Do Dom à Profissão*.
- ¹⁷ Bertrand, *La fabrique des footballeurs*.
- ¹⁸ Murzi and Czesly, 'De la humildad a lo mental'.
- ¹⁹ Valdano, 'Argentina now value "balls" over talent'.
- ²⁰ cf. <http://futbolistasaxem.com.ar>
- ²¹ Menger, *Le Travail Créateur*.
- ²² Filho, *O Negro*.
- ²³ cf. Da Silva, 'Pelé, racial discourse and the 1958 World Cup'; see Da Matta, *O Universo do Futebol*.
- ²⁴ Leite Lopes, 'The People's Joy Vanishes: Meditations on the Death of Garrincha'.
- ²⁵ cf. Levinsky, 'El río como hilo conductor del fútbol más bello'.
- ²⁶ cf. Sibaja and Parrish: 'Pibes, Cracks and Caudillos', 655-6.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 660.
- ²⁸ Sibaja and Parrish, Ibid., 661.
- ²⁹ Archetti, *Masculinities*.
- ³⁰ Levinsky, 'El río como hilo conductor'.
- ³¹ cf. Archetti, *La pista, el potrero y el ring*.
- ³² cf. Burnstein, *Maradona: iconografía de la patria*; see Segura, 'Diego Maradona'; see also Burgo, *El Partido*.
- ³³ Nagy and Fernandez, *De la mano de Dios a sus botines*.
- ³⁴ cf. Archetti, 'And give joy to my heart'.
- ³⁵ cf. Sibaja, *¡Animales!*, 367.
- ³⁶ Helal, *Mídia e Idolatria*.
- ³⁷ cf. Barch, 'Who is Lionel Messi?'.
- ³⁸ cf. Alabarces, *Fútbol y Patria*, 189.
- ³⁹ Salazar-Sutil, 'Maradona Inc'.
- ⁴⁰ Alabarces, 'La patria, Maradona y Messi'.
- ⁴¹ Valdano, 'Argentina now value "balls" over talent', 41.
- ⁴² Elias, *Mozart*.
- ⁴³ cf. Levinsky, 'Las mil caras de Maradona'; see Segura and Levinsky, 'Lionel Messi'.
- ⁴⁴ Chapoulie, 'Everett Hughes', 3.
- ⁴⁵ Faccio, *Messi*; Juillard and Fest, *Le mystère Messi*.
- ⁴⁶ Balagué, *Messi*.
- ⁴⁷ By Fabio Vargas, 2015.

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- ⁴⁸ Directed by Joan Pañella Garrido, 2017.
- ⁴⁹ Produced by *Depor TV* and directed by Víctor Hugo Morales in 2014.
- ⁵⁰ Balagué, Messi.
- ⁵¹ cf. Balagué, *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁵² cf. Menger: 'The market for creative labour: talent and inequalities', 153.
- ⁵³ Balagué, *Ibid.*, 47.
- ⁵⁴ Archetti, *La pista, el potrero y el ring*.
- ⁵⁵ cf. Elias, *Mozart*.
- ⁵⁶ cf. Hughes, *The Sociological Eye*, 130.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 124.
- ⁵⁸ cf. Julliard and Fest, *Le mystère Messi*: 59.
- ⁵⁹ cf. Del Frade, *La Ciudad Goleada*.
- ⁶⁰ Julliard and Fest, *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ cf. Balagué, *Messi.*, 90.
- ⁶² Julliard and Fest, *Ibid.*, 71.
- ⁶³ cf. Najarian, 'The Lost Boys'.
- ⁶⁴ Balagué, *Ibid.*, 103.
- ⁶⁵ Balagué, *Ibid.*, 135.
- ⁶⁶ Hughes, *The Sociological Eye*, 125.
- ⁶⁷ Menger, 'The market for creative labour: talent and inequalities', 153.
- ⁶⁸ Hughes, *Ibid.*, 124.
- ⁶⁹ Eliceche, 'Operación Messi'.
- ⁷⁰ Hughes, *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Valdano, 'Argentina now value "balls" over talent'.
- ⁷² Ducker, 'Messi carrying Argentina with "a revolver put to his head"', 15.

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