12

The Role of Sport in the Lives of Mothers of Young Children

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Introduction

This chapter serves to highlight the complexities of examining the role of sport in mothers' lives in contemporary Western cultures. Mothers, particularly those with children in infancy and early childhood, live at the intersection of competing discourses. The study of mothers' sport intersects the normative discourse on motherhood, which—in most Western cultures—tells women to selflessly devote themselves to their children, and the normative sport discourse, which values autonomy and independence. Sport scholarship, as well as popular media, have often been concerned with mothers' autonomous and non-obligated sport experiences and have positioned the family context, and children in particular, as constraining to women's sport participation (e.g. Cosh and Crabb 2012; Palmer and Leberman 2009). In contrast, a small body of research has shown that by considering the complexities of mothers' experiences, as

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well as the mothers' placement within these discourses, we can explore how maintaining greater openness when examining mothers' lives will allow us to break down the compartmentalization of mothers' sport experiences to better understand mothers' own meaning-making around the desirability of sport (or not) in their lives. In this chapter, I explore the possibility of examining mothers' participation in sport beyond the commonly accepted definition that 'sport' refers to participation in competitive physical activity.

Normative Discourse of Sport and Leisure

For most people in contemporary, Western culture, including sport and leisure scholars, central tenets of participation in sport and leisure emphasize freedom, personal satisfaction, independence, and autonomy. This is evident in the social psychological paradigm that frames most Western sport and leisure research. Framing participation as 'an experience or state of mind [that] is uniquely individual' (Mannell and Iso-Ahola 1987: 315) has contributed to the field's acceptance of the social psychological paradigm, which encourages practitioners and researchers to focus on constructing environments that lead to 'a predictably satisfying experience' (317). Since scholars operating within this paradigm are interested in explaining and improving individual's experiences within social contexts, researchers ask questions that focus on individuals' experiences of sport and leisure: benefits received, one's feelings and perceptions, results of treatments or experiments on the individual, motivations to participate, and other such components of an individual's participation (cf. Kleiber et al. 2011).

As these types of questions suggest, researchers are interested in knowing how 'people's personalities and the social situations that they encounter during their daily lives shape their perceptions, experiences, and responses' (Kleiber et al. 2011: xvi). In seeking this knowledge, researchers remain focused on the individual and are oriented toward research results that assist people in improving and increasing their positive sport and leisure experiences. Research findings that result from questions deemed important by this paradigm reinforce notions of autonomy, give

individuals the ability (and responsibility) to improve their participation and satisfaction, and provide measurable outcomes that are respected by our society at large.

Normative Discourse of Motherhood

While motherhood is complex and multifaceted, in contemporary mainstream Western cultures normative motherhood is generally portrayed as the gendered roles of a heterosexual couple raising children (cf. Chapman and Saltmarsh 2013). This normative discourse stems from wider cultural constructions of femininity and masculinity. Commonly, mothers are thought to be responsible for children's basic daily caregiving routine. While these responsibilities change over time, it is often expected that mothers will manage the feeding, diapering/nappy changing, clothing, bathing, transporting, health, and education of their children. Fathers, on the other hand, are often assumed to be responsible for making money, which frequently requires substantial time away from their children (cf. Sunderland 2006). This normative distribution of childcare provision is given the status of a biological imperative, suggesting that it is more natural for mothers to want to care for their children than fathers and that mothers have an innate ability that fathers lack. From infancy, this normative discourse of motherhood takes root because the discourse is reinforced through media portrayals, religious teaching, literature, and governmental policy, as well as through social norms and training (cf. Goodwin and Huppatz 2010). If mothers make choices to put their own needs or interests first, it is likely that they will confront the construction of normative motherhood, feeling guilty and/or being judged by others for putting their own needs above their children (cf. Arendell 1999; Goodwin and Huppatz 2010).

Examinations of Mothers' Sport and Leisure

The above discussion on motherhood and the literature on sport and leisure highlights how mothers' sport exists at the intersection of competing discourses: the normative discourse of motherhood that expects

mothers' to sacrifice their own interests and needs for the benefits of their children, and the normative discourse of sport and leisure that emphasizes autonomy and personal satisfaction. The scholarship on mothers' participation in sport has been framed by the paradigms and assumptions that exist in leisure studies (cf. Palmer and Leberman 2009). Such scholarship validates beliefs that familial leisure is beneficial for individuals, promotes bonds between family members, and encourages an increased sense of familial unity (cf. Orthner and Mancini 1991). Consequentially, family has been viewed 'almost by consensus, as a positive leisure context for the individual' (Harrington 2001: 346).

However, early feminist scholars critiqued the concept of family leisure as a positive context. These researchers pointed out that for women, and more specifically mothers, familial obligations exceeded work commitments outside of the home (e.g. Bella 1992; Wearing and Wearing 1988). Since feminist scholars argued that family leisure as a positive context examines leisure experiences through a male-centered focus, one might expect that research on women's leisure would have broken away from the traditional leisure tenets in the examination of motherhood; however, that has not been the case. Research focusing on mothers' leisure often parallels the traditional tenets, describing leisure as those activities that enable autonomy and individualization. This body of scholarship has argued that mothers need opportunities to engage in individual and independent leisure experiences, and seems to value autonomous sport and leisure activities over shared, familial experiences (e.g. Bialeschki and Michener 1994; Currie 2004; Larson et al. 1997; Miller and Brown 2005; Shannon and Shaw 2008; Trussell and Shaw 2007; Wearing 1990).

In examining mothers' sport and leisure, researchers conclude that mothers are limited and constrained by the presence of and obligation to care for their children. For example, Palmer and Leberman discussed how women stop participating in sport because of motherhood and that 'in most countries, pregnancy and childbirth historically have implied the end of professional sport involvement for women' (2009: 243). Shaw iterated the commonly accepted belief that mothers of young children are the most 'disadvantaged' group for autonomous participation (1999: 273). Likewise, in their examination of parental self-regulation as related to physical activity, Butson et al. found that mothers limited the time

they spend on physical activity, 'driven by an ethic of care' for their children (2012: 1137). These findings exemplify the assertion that children, especially young children, constrain mothers' participation in sport. Beyond the literature, divides between motherhood and sport and leisure participation are reified by media, cultural norms, and engrained social messaging that align pregnancy with the end of women's participation in sport (cf. Cosh and Crabb 2012; McGannon et al. 2012; Leberman and Palmer 2009).

Expanding Conceptualizations of Mothers' Experiences

Despite the meaning that mothers may place on activities such as playing an informal ball game with their children or taking their babies to 'mommy and me' yoga, researchers have traditionally excluded familial activities from 'true' sport or leisure participation (such as playing a game of soccer in an adult league) because they entail responsibility for one's child(ren). In their review of the literature, Craig and Mullan determined that a family's shared experiences 'cannot be defined as true leisure for the parent, but as part of childcare' (2012: 213). This quote exemplifies how existing scholarship has framed parental care as work and, consequentially, as divergent from 'true' sport and leisure participation. Moving outside of the social psychological paradigm, we can consider alternative ways to approach studying mothers' sport and leisure from mothers' own perspectives to expand our ability to better understand the role of sport in the lives of mothers, particularly mothers of young children.

Experiences of Elite Sport Mothers

Academic interest in mothers' sport participation is extremely limited and the few publications that exist focus on mothers who are privileged by their success in elite sports (Hodler and Lucas-Carr 2015; Leberman and Palmer 2011; Metz 2008; Pedersen 2001). While such pieces contribute to our understanding of mothers' experiences and meaning-making,

the interests and successes of elite sport mothers cannot be extended to most mothers. Elite sport mothers have access to sport resources (trainers, physical therapists, equipment, facilities, etc.) that are not commonly accessed by all and often have the financial means for a highly supported family environment (nannies, housekeeping, chefs, etc.) that most mothers cannot afford. However, as discussed below, the few studies that suspend the social psychological paradigm to examine the experiences of mothers who are elite athletes do provide some greater insight into the challenges that mothers face when making elite sport a life priority.

In the first examination of mothers who were also elite athletes, Pedersen sought to investigate what—at that time—seemed like a 'phenomenon [that] was not quite intelligible' (2001: 260), namely the existence of elite sportswomen who were also mothers. Although describing these women as 'deviations that are not readily explained,' Pedersen (261) sought to create space for, and understanding of, motherhood in elite athletics through eight in-depth interviews with elite Danish athletes, who were also mothers. Little description is provided about the methods, but Pedersen clearly brought an inquisitiveness and openness to the research, acknowledging that 'It certainly cannot be stated that the careers of elite sports mothers have originated from social traditions' (269). Instead, Pedersen described each of these mothers as a 'self-made expert' who developed 'mediating link[s] between such macro-aspects as sport as a social institution in a specific historical period, and micro-aspects ground in everyday activities in different life spheres' (270). By seeking to explore what seemed impossible, Pedersen came to recognize these women's navigation of the divergent, yet interlaced, social contexts in which they lived their lives.

Leberman and Palmer interviewed nine mothers in New Zealand, who also held leadership position in elite sports, including athletes, coaches, and managers. Utilizing a flexible interview script and qualitative analysis, the researchers sought to understand how these women negotiated the multiple roles in their lives as mothers and elite sport leaders. In their discussion, the researchers highlighted the 'interconnectedness of [participants'] social lives in the context of family and sport,' as well as the complexity of the women's lives (2009: 326). Rather than reinforcing 'the dialectic between work and family' (327) existing in most other literature,

these researchers examined how the women negotiated their lives, and potential constraints, to incorporate sport and leisure into their daily lives by 'actively seeking out social settings that were flexible in creating work-leisure-family balance' (327). However, the researchers also described the guilt, demands, and exhaustion these mothers experienced:

> Separating, neutralizing, and reframing strategies, strong support networks, and ongoing encouragement and advice from male and female role models and mentors, enabled these mothers to remain leaders in sport. These constraints were associated with feelings of guilt, stress, and exhaustion, a lack of flexibility in organizational practices and resource allocation regarding the presence of children and childcare, as well as underlying social disapproval from the wider community when women were perceived to be neglecting their caring and nurturing roles or challenging the invisibility of children in some work and leisure settings. (328)

Such depictions of mothers, who are elite athletes, highlight the complexity of balancing elite sport participation with motherhood. By intentionally seeking to examine mothers' negotiations between their careers and motherhood, sport researchers found that the interconnectedness of the mothers' experiences both enabled and constrained their participation in elite sport, as well as their professional careers and familial lives.

A few contributions to the sport literature focus on the experiences of an individual mother who is also an elite athlete. These contributions explore a woman's participation in depth, pulling together the multifaceted contexts that contribute to their success in overcoming the cultural norms that portray motherhood as the end of sport participation. Hodler and Lucas-Carr (2015) examined media portrayals of Dara Torres' 'comeback' to professional swimming after having a baby, winning three silver medals in the 2008 Beijing Olympics. Their critical analysis highlighted how media flattened the complexity of Torres' experiences to tell a story of autonomous success, which 'erases social inequalities' (14). They emphasized the complexity and interdependent nature of her lifestyle, which afforded her opportunities that are atypical for most mothers who are interested in sport and fitness. In a reflexive auto-ethnography, Metz

(2008) considered how Jackie Moore, a Women's National Basketball Association (WNBA) player, navigated the cultural contexts and discourses impacting her life to achieve success as a professional athlete, mother, and academic. Reflecting on Jackie's experiences, Metz mused how 'caught in a league that celebrates motherhood but does not uniformly support it as an organization, one finds a complex negotiation of the tripate of race, class, and gender…. The mothers of the WNBA bodies become representations, condensations of cultural stereotypes, the athletes' own perspectives and the cultural perspective' (274). In both examples, the researchers described the complex social, economic, and cultural contexts that enable these mothers to succeed as elite sport athletes.

Connections Between Leisure Literature and Mothers' Experiences of Sport

Moving away from elite athletes, there is an even greater dearth of research on mothers' participation in sport. Leberman and LaVoi lamented that 'mothers' voices are generally absent' (2011: 474) from our literature and in the following years, mothers' voices in the sports literature have remained virtually silent. Searching the sport literature for 'mother,' most results point to the role mothers have in facilitating others' sports participation. As Thompson explained: 'The relationship of adult women to sport, if they have one at all, is far more likely to be through their associations with others who play, such as their husbands' (1999: 2). Yet, we all know mothers do participate in sport, whether it be on recreational teams or through informal hiking groups or in family sport played at the local park. Palmer and Leberman described how 'academic work on women and sport has been rooted in leisure and cultural studies...where women's limited access to, and engagement in, leisure highlighted the gendered nature of leisure and associated spheres, such as sport and recreation' (2009: 241). Building off this foundation, leisure research that has explored mothers' experiences outside of the social psychological paradigm could inform preliminary understanding of mothers' experiences of sport.

A small body of research that explored mothers' leisure (beyond sport) enabled study participants to explain how leisure is meaningful in their lives. In one study, Freeman, Palmer, and Baker examined the leisure of women who were stay-at-home mothers and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Based on prior research findings, the researchers anticipated that study participants 'would not feel entitled to leisure or make it a priority in their lives' (2006: 209). Unexpectedly, the participants valued, prioritized, and felt entitled to these experiences; however, this time was not always autonomous, personal leisure. Instead, the women indicated that 'being a mother and spending time with their families' was what they enjoyed most in life (212). Rather than reframing these women's experiences, the researchers shared their conviction to 'trust that our participants are telling the truth and are the experts regarding their life experiences…[W]e did not feel it would be appropriate to impose a sense of oppression on these women when they did not describe such feelings' (215). Ultimately, the participants' experiences of 'development, self-determination, and self-expression…led [the researchers] to question assumptions that quality of life may be measured by the amount of unconstrained leisure time a person has available' (218). When the participants' experiences contradicted the researchers' understandings, rather than patronizing their study participants, the researchers stretched their own understandings of mothers' experiences.

In another study, Tirone and Shaw utilized a qualitative research approach to 'explore all aspects of life that [Indo Canadian] women found to provide a sense of satisfaction, fulfillment, enjoyment and relaxation' (1997: 227). While the researchers cited the traditional leisure tenets in this article, they were willing to suspend them for this population of mothers, who were not participating in a normative North American lifestyle. They concluded that people who have 'different life experiences' may not accept Western views of leisure and that 'further research will help [leisure scholars] to better understand marginalized groups and how they conceptualize the notion of leisure in their lives' (243). Similarly, the participants in the Tirone and Shaw study 'spoke of their families as being central to their lives…[F]amily members were considered to be of utmost importance to all participants' (1997: 232). Further, these women 'placed little or no emphasis on their own personal interests' (234). Additionally,

the researchers reported that the study participants 'were offended by some of the values held by North American women toward private time and time away from children, husbands and extended family' (241). Since the researchers were willing to acknowledge and interrupt their preconceived assumptions and beliefs about mothers' leisure, they were able to see leisure experiences that exist outside of autonomous, non-obligated time.

Building from the findings that these mothers placed great personal significance on their shared experiences with their families and children, my own research examined mothers' meaning-making while engaging in an attachment parenting practice (Soule 2013). Mothers who practice attachment parenting emphasize developing relationships with their children in a way that goes beyond a sense of obligation and care: their desire to deeply connect with their children surmounted their other interests. For this study, I conducted multiple phenomenological interviews with four mothers, in their homes, over six months. The participants explained that even when presented with an opportunity to socialize without their children or to simply have some time alone, they preferred to be with their children. One participant recounted:

> My mom was here the other night, she was like 'Go out … Leave the baby here with me. I will give him a bottle.' And it's just like, 'Mama you are trying to de-stress me but you are actually increasing my stress.'…It's actually more fun for me if I have an activity where I am watching my kids have fun, and I am having fun too. I don't particularly like doing things on my own, I actually prefer being around the kids. (Soule 2013: 90)

For the mothers in this study, meaning-making occurred through relational experiences with their children, which they said provided opportunities for growth, self-fulfillment, self-awareness, and joy.

The women asserted that their own independence had become less meaningful and less important since having children; however, they did make space for themselves and their interests within their family environments. For example, two of the mothers developed routines where they included their children in their personal physical activity by jogging while they pushed their children in their strollers. These mothers talked about

how incorporating their children into their sport impacted their focus; for example, there were increased interruptions to stop and pick up something a child dropped. While the women were clear that raising children in this way is not always easy and there are moments of doubt and frustration, they recognized their decision to be with their children as a day-to-day choice that they value. As one mother described:

> People always talk about 'You need a playroom. You need a playroom.' I don't want a playroom. I want our living room to be the playroom. I want to be able to play wherever we are because I feel like he is part of our family. (Soule 2013: 97)

For these mothers, sport and physical activity were another opportunity to connect and engage with their children within a healthy lifestyle.

In all of these studies on mothers' experiences, researchers suspended conceptualizations of leisure as autonomous, non-obligated activity in order to make sense of the mothers' own meaning-making. A similar application of suspending the social psychological paradigm may provide insight into how mothers participate in sport as it occurs within interconnected, relational contexts, and help practitioners when designing sport and physical activity for mothers of young children.

Exploring Family Activity Programming

Traditionally, it is assumed in physical activity programming that parental physical activity should be autonomous and that children are a constraint to participating in 'true' physical activity or sport. In my review of the literature, I was struck by how blatantly programming recommendations tend to emphasize the challenges of motherhood while overlooking the rewards of relational physical activities. For example, in a recent textbook, Yoder and Martinez stated:

> [K]nowing the demands and limitations placed on single mothers…professionals must offer programs that allow them the opportunity to participate. Perhaps that means that some fitness programs take place in the

> middle of the morning and the agency offers a toddler play period at the same time. Given the fact that money is in short supply for this population, the agency must also subsidize the program so that the mothers do not have to choose between their own physical fitness and paying the utility bills. (2013: 76)

Focusing on children as a constraint to mothers' physical activity participation, the authors claim that childcare would afford mothers opportunities for participation and there is an implicit assumption that mothers' sport participation should be autonomous and independent from their children. Such assumptions—stemming from central sport and leisure tenets—entirely miss the meanings expressed by the mothers in the studies discussed above. As an example, one of my study participants (Soule 2013) reflected on how she felt about life and parenting since separating from her husband:

> I worked yesterday and I was sad… I just felt like I needed to cry…I was just feeling cracked…We have work, we have family, we have leisure… everything has its own box. I wish that it would more connected. (169)

As a single mother, this participant would not likely appreciate a fitness class and separate childcare. Rather than more compartmentalization in her life, she yearns for greater connectivity between physical activity and family. Yoder and Martinez's (2013) recommendation echoes the advice of prior best practices for sport and leisure practitioners, which has likely shaped sport programming at many recreational sites. I wondered: How many mothers would appreciate program offerings that provide low- to no-cost opportunities to spend time with their children while engaging in sport and physical activities?

Testing these ideas, a colleague and I at the University of California began offering free family physical activity days at local school and community sites during summer vacation (Klisch and Soule 2015). More than 400 community members participated in these family physical activity days in the first year, which were led by a variety of community-serving agencies. Participating families rotated through activity stations, learning games and exercises they could do together for free in their yards

or at public parks. While the events were open to all community members, all of the adult participants were women who brought children with them. Through informal qualitative interviews, two meaningful themes about participation in these events were developed (Klisch and Soule 2015). First, participating families have high levels of desire to engage in community-sponsored family physical activity events, particularly in the summer months when the family members are all home together during the day. Second, participating family members (youth and parents) saw these family activity days as opportunities to bond with their family members in a fun way in order to achieve positive health outcomes. Building from these experiences, community agencies (such as local public health departments, city recreational centers, and participating school communities) continued to offer these summer family physical activity days and family participation continued to grow at each event.

Though scholarship and popular culture assert that mothers' sport participation ends with pregnancy, our own knowledge of mothers' engagement in sport belies these assertions. So, how do mothers experience sport? What are their own meanings around the value of sport in their lives? Although very small, both the body of scholarship on elite sport mothers and mothers' relational leisure experiences point to the complexity of mothers' lives and experiences, which, in contemporary Western cultures, exist at the intersection of competing discourses. To holistically explore the role of sport in the lives of mothers, there is a clear need to break down the compartmentalization that exists around the concepts of *motherhood* and *mothers' sport*. By allowing mothers' voices and experiences to inform our scholarship, we can begin to understand mothers' own meaning-making around the desirability (or not) of sport in their lives.

Conclusion

Traditional conceptualizations of sport present challenges for understanding mothers' experiences because many mothers have little opportunity for autonomous, non-obligated time to participate in sport since many are responsible for the care and upbringing of children. Feminist

scholars have pointed to the need for new definitions and research that can encapsulate mothers' experiences. Nonetheless, sport scholarship has continued to reify traditional tenets and positioned children as a constraint to mothers' participation in sport. Yet a smaller body of scholarship, which has examined mothers' experiences of elite sport and leisure outside of the social psychological paradigm, points to the existence of mothers' complex and interconnected sport and leisure experiences. While these studies have examined the experiences of mothers who identify with subcultural groups (e.g. elite athletes, members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, participating in attachment parenting), the findings have wide implications for the examination of all mothering experiences. The experiences of the women who participated in these studies suggest that the socio-psychological paradigm that has framed scholarship on mothers' sport participation may be too limited and not able to clearly describe mothers' meaning-making. Since mothers' lives often cannot be easily divided into siloes for mothering, professional, and sport activities, researchers need to explore into the places of overlap, interwoven meaning, and intersecting discourses that shape mothers' experiences of sport.

At the same time, the greater body of scholarship supplies countless quotes from mothers who desire greater autonomy in their lives and more time for individual leisure pursuits, including participation in sport. Considering these findings about mothers' sport participation, across our scholarship, may help us to recognize that while mothers are individuals who have agency in their lives, it is also important to realize that mothers' sport participation is not simply a reflection of an individual. Rather, mothers' experiences of sport reflect the interconnectedness of the social-cultural contexts present in the contemporary cultures in which they live. Understanding sport as situated within cultural contexts imbued with many layers of meaning (e.g. gendered, economic, racial)—rather than simply a reflection on an individuals' autonomous agency to participate in organized or unorganized physical activity—may provide the necessary space to allow us to break down the compartmentalization of mothers' experiences and more fully understand mothers' meaning-making around the role of sport in their own lives.

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