Economic Uncertainty and Family Sport Participation: Implications for Practitioners in Community Sport Organizations

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According to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, the National unemployment rate in September of 2009 was at 9.8%. This is the highest rate since June of 1983, when the National unemployment rate was 10.1%. With many American families dealing with unemployment or underemployment, opportunities for parents as well as their children to engage in sport-related recreational pursuits can be compromised as a result of concerns related to the availability of discretionary income in order to support sport participation.

Crawford and Godbey (1987) identified three categories of constraints shaping opportunities to engage in recreational pursuits. One category, structural, includes lack of material resources (e.g., lack of money). Financial constraints as a factor shaping participation have been found in several studies (Coakley and White, 1992; Jackson, 1993; Raymore, Godbey, & Crawford, 1994; Brown, Brown, Miller, & Hansen, 2001). With the presence of constraints shaping participation opportunities, Hubbard and Mannell (2001) found that higher levels of constraint triggered greater efforts to counteract negative influences brought on by constraining circumstances. As the availability of financial resources for families disappear or become increasingly uncertain, efforts to neutralize these effects occur.

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into efforts families facing financial constraints have made in order to maintain sport participation opportunities. Two research questions accompany the purpose of this study. They are:

1) In what ways have financial constraints limited opportunities for family members to engage in sport-related activities?
2) What efforts have parents made in this uncertain economic climate in order to preserve sport-related participation opportunities for their children?

The economic downturn in the United States has affected citizens of all socioeconomic groups. Participants from middle-class households were selected for this study. Parents of at least one child who was under the age of 13 and was participating in recreational level organized sport shared their experiences of how economic conditions and financial constraints affected their own as well as their children’s sport participation opportunities.

Eleven parents participated in the study. Of the 11, seven were female (four self-identified as Caucasian and three as African American) and four were male (each self-identified as Caucasian). Participants’ ages ranged from 30 to 44 years of age. All of the male participants were married to their wives at the time the interviews were conducted. Five of the female participants were married to their husbands. Two of the female participants were single parents. They were parents in households of various income levels. Household income varied from approximately $30,000 annually to an excess of $60,000 annually. Nine participants worked in a variety of occupations outside of the home. Two female participants worked inside the home as homemakers. The size of the participants’ families varied. The number of children each participant had ranged from one to six.

Community recreation settings such as the YMCA were selected in order to locate participants. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. The interviews ranged from 50-60 minutes in length and consisted of various open-ended questions to which participants were able to elaborate on ways in which economic conditions have shaped their families opportunities and choices with regard to recreational sport participation.

The first research question focused upon ways in which economic uncertainty affected family participation opportunities in sport. A parent's fear of losing his/her job was a factor as several participants indicated their children used to engage in more than one organized sport-related activity; however, uncertainty with regard to their employment resulted in limitations upon their children's opportunities. It was not uncommon for parents to mention a "one sport per child" limitation. In addition, participants who engaged in sport-related activities on a first-hand basis indicated discontinuing their participation in order to save money so that their children could continue theirs. Participants who were members of families with three or more children were especially challenged to provide the participation opportunities their children desired. The amount of funding available for those endeavors was limited.
As a result, these participants were hesitant to allow one child to participate in more than one sport because in order to support that arrangement, opportunities for their other children would have to be cut.

The second research question focused upon ways in which parents who felt constrained by economic uncertainty negotiated this constraint in order to provide participation opportunities for their children. Several participants indicated working extra hours whenever possible in order to pay the participation-associated expenses. Another way in which participants negotiated this constraint was to provide their expertise as a form of payment. One participant whose family participated in karate had been able to maintain their participation because of the discounts she received as a result of volunteering her time in an instructional capacity at the location where her family took lessons.

Findings from this type of inquiry can be of use to practitioners in family recreation settings. Through gaining a better understanding of the factors that have affected a customer’s ability to engage in the services offered by recreational sport enterprises, programs and cost structures can be better tailored to accommodate potential user groups. With economic uncertainty facing many families, it is imperative that practitioners in community sport and recreation settings critically examine their cost structures and find creative ways to provide participation opportunities for families. It is also important they convey appreciation for the sacrifices their customers are making in order to provide opportunities for their children and subsequently maintain employment for those working in such environments. Without taking proactive steps to attract and maintain customers in this challenging time, practitioners in recreation sport environments may find it difficult to attract enough business to keep their operations functioning.