Exploring Meaning and Purpose in Adult Sport Participation

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Despite the evidence that sport, physical activity, and exercise provide benefits of increased health, which lower mortality and morbidity, there is still a dramatic decline in sport participation and physical activity with age (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2009). In fact, nearly 60-80% of adults are not physically active at a level to derive health benefits (Armstrong et al., 2000; Pate et al., 1995). Not only does sport participation decline with age, but older adults also tend to use greater discretion before committing time to extracurricular activities (Messler & Smith, 1994). In an attempt to assuage this issue, researchers have focused primarily on motives for participation (LaChausse, 2006) and barriers to participation (Cerin, Leslie, Sugiyama, & Owen, 2010). In addition to participatory motives, the individual’s perceptions must be considered as a function of the activity itself (White, 1995). These perceptions become the meaning that sport holds within the greater context of one’s life. Understanding meaning can assist managers to develop sport programming that facilitates adult sport participation throughout the lifespan.

Man’s search for meaning has been studied for thousands of years and has been evaluated by some of the greatest minds in history. Traditionally, the nature of the good life has been approached from the hedonic approach (pleasure and pain avoidance focus), eudaimonic approach (meaning and self-realization) and engagement (Morgan & Snyder, 2005). While meaning is difficult to define and evaluate, it is relevant to sport management because sport provides a role that can have deep meaning in people’s lives. As managers seek to overcome barriers to entry and to retain participants within athletic programs, it is important to understand the meaning sport plays in the lives of their consumers throughout the lifespan (Dionigi, 2006; Hirvensalo & Lintunen, 2011; Langley & Knight, 1999). Meaning provides a perspective beyond motives as these can vary due to barriers and life responsibility (Recours, Souville, & Griffet, 2004). However, the meaning and centrality of sport can reflect the strength of the cognitive linkage between the self and sport, and therefore, the degree to which they become devoted to sport participation (Kyle, et al., 2007). So, while motives are fluid and can vary throughout the life course, it stands to reason that if sport has great meaning and purpose in the life of the participant, then they would be more likely to continue participation despite life responsibilities (Kyle, et al., 2007). The findings from this study can lead to programming that will better serve sport participants based upon the meaning of sport and their involvement during a particular period of one’s life.

Therefore, purpose of this study is to understand continued sport participation into adulthood. This study seeks to determine the key factors that create meaning for an athlete in reference to their participation in sport as well as their level of involvement at specific life stages.

Prior to soliciting participants, IRB approval was obtained. The link to an electronic survey was emailed via sport organization managers to approximately 2,500 adult male and female sport participants aged 18-90 currently involved in sport programs. Participation was voluntary and consent was assumed with the completion of the survey. Targeted sport programs included parks and recreation leagues, competitive sport leagues, private sport clubs and training groups, semi-professional sport teams, and sport club alumni.

This study used quantitative data to examine the meaning of and involvement in sport. To explore the meaning of sport in the lives of participants, the Meaningful Life Measure (Morgan & Farsides, 2009) was used. The Modified Involvement Scale (Kyle, et al., 2007) was used to measure sport involvement. Demographic data such as sport participation history, athlete type, sport played, hours trained, gender, ethnicity, age, education, household income, and sexual orientation were also collected.

At the time this abstract was due, data was still being collected. Therefore, the analysis will be discussed in future
terms. Descriptive analysis will be conducted on the demographic data. Sport participation history will be used to classify athletes into three athlete type categories: continuing (athletes that have demonstrated continued commitment to one specific sport), switchers (athletes that participated in one sport in youth and picked up a different sport in adulthood), and adult-onset (athletes that did not participate in sport until adulthood). Once the athletes have been categorized, MANCOVA will be used to test differences among groups. The dependent variables will include the five meaning of life and one meaning of sport variables and the five sport involvement variables. The independent variables will include athlete type, gender, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The covariates will include income, education, and age. Tests for linear regression will be used to determine if involvement predicts meaning differently as a function of athlete type.

We expect that the three types of athletes will each have different levels of sport involvement, and will each report different levels of meaning for their sport involvement. Specifically, we expect that adult onset athletes will show higher levels of involvement and meaning than will the other two categories (because their new involvement in sport represents a recent personal discovery), and continuing athletes will show higher levels of involvement than switchers (because continuing athletes have demonstrated a continuing commitment). We also expect that the relationship between sport involvement and life meaning will be highest for adult onset athletes and lowest for switchers (for reasons comparable to those that lead us to expect mean differences). Because the study is still in progress, the results are forthcoming.

While it is difficult at this point to predict the findings, the implications for theory and practice are important to note. This research has the potential to unveil much about meaning sport has in the lives of adult participants beyond motivation. Ultimately, the findings may allow practitioners to better develop programs that support their participants and can perhaps mitigate barriers (Curry & Weiss, 1989). If we are able to delineate the impact of meaning for participants within each of these three groups, it has the potential to serve as a potent marketing and retention tool. This research can also shed light on the way in which adult participants consume sport over their lifetime. Targeted marketing or programming strategies based upon a participant's categorization (continuing, switcher, adult onset) may allow for more specialized offerings as well as the ability to more effectively meet the needs of the participant. Findings and further implications to theory and practice to be discussed.