A Retrospective Analysis of Motivations to Participate in Youth Sport: Why Youth Sustained Participation

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Sport participation during the school age and adolescent child development stages is purported to advanced opportunities for psychological, psychosocial, and physical development (Fraser-Thomas, Cote, & Deakin, 2005). Evidentiary characteristics of this development are manifested in higher self-esteem, higher self-confidence, increased self and social awareness, improved social interaction, and improved physical development and trans-contextual fitness habits (MacDonald, Côté, Eys, & Deakin, 2011; Ruseski, Humphreys, Hallman, Wicker, & Breuer, 2014). However, despite the overwhelming evidence of the positive impact participation has on the individual, youth sport participation rates appear to be continuously declining, while attrition rates are increasing (Balish, 2014; King, 2015; Turner Perrin, Coyne-Beasley, Peterson, & Skinner, 2015). Further research on supporting youth sport participation is critical in today’s sport landscape, in consideration of implications for reducing childhood obesity rates (Turner et al., 2015) and managing the environments in which many of our youth are socialized (Petitpas, Cornelius, Van Raalte, & Jones, 2005; Woods, 2007).

The predominance of research on youths’ motivations to participate is comprised of the self-report data of school age children and adolescents. Though many motivations have been identified throughout the literature, among the primary reported motivations are: (A) to have fun, (B) to be with friends, (C) to get exercise, and (D) for the excitement or challenge of competition (Ewing & Seefeldt, 1990; MacDonald et al., 2011; Russell, 2014). These identified motivations are consistent across the body of research on youth sport participation. However, a gap still remains in conceptualizing these motivations in a pragmatic manner. To generate viable solutions to the concerning trends in youth sport participation, sport policy makers and practitioners need an applicable interpretation of the aforementioned motivations that supports inclusion in the youth sport environment. The objective of this study was to identify the primary factors in a youth sport environment that engendered continued participation. Specifically, this study aimed to identify elements of the youth sport system that supported a successful youth sport career, with success defined as maintaining participation into early adulthood, through the retrospective recall of athletes who continued participation.

In much of the extant literature, sport participation is examined through an application of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). However, limitations of applying SDT are that the constructs (autonomy, relatedness, and competence; Ryan & Deci, 2000) are context-specific, and the theory does not consider the impact of the individual on the environment. A youth’s career in sport is fluid, multi-contextual (often concurrently), and longitudinal, requiring and examination of the totality of the career as an amalgamation of multiple environments. As a complementary theory, Structuration Theory (ST) addresses the limitations of SDT through the construct of agency and the recursive relationship between the individual and the environment (Giddens, 1984). In ST, agency is similar to SDT’s conceptualization of autonomy, but is functionally determined by the framework of the environment in which the individual makes decisions. ST posits that an individual’s decision-making is determined by roles and expectations, which can fluctuate within and across environments, and that the environment is a production and reproduction of the individual’s actions. Thus, the environment is both the medium and the outcome of agency (Giddens, 1984; Malthouse, Roffey-Barentsen, & Watts, 2014), demonstrating a variation on the SDT constructs of relatedness and competency. This study interprets sustained participation through SDT, as the umbrella theory, and ST, as a complementary theory to address the fallibilities of SDT. ST has most commonly been applied to research on organizational behavior, but provides insightful theoretical applications through which youth sport environments can be examined (Cooky, 2009; Ogden & Rose, 2005).

In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with adult male soccer players (n=20) ranging in age from 18-22 years old. The athletes had maintained participation in sport from the school age child development stage into
adulthood as collegiate student-athletes at the NCAA D1 and D2, and the NAIA levels. The participants primarily represented the US youth sport structure, but included representation from youth sport structures in Brazil, Trinidad, and Peru. In the interview, the athlete retrospectively constructed a comprehensive account of his youth sport experiences across ages, teams, and sports in which he participated. The athletes were asked to detail their youth sport relationships with peers, coaches, and parents, as well as his relationship with each sport independently. Responses widely varied in the number of sports and which sports each athlete played, in the number and level of teams for which the athlete played (scholastic, recreational, or competitive), and in the value the individual placed on peer, coach, and parent relationships.

An audit trail details the interviews and the evolution of the interview guide, in order to demonstrate the dependability of the study. Primary theme saturation occurred at n=12, but 20 interviews were conducted in order to ensure credibility. Expectedly, the interviews evidenced considerable variation in the individual experiences in youth sport. However, four primary themes as relative constants in supporting participation were identified through the interview process: (1) the athlete’s perceived impact on the environment (i.e., in peer relationships, coach relationships, or in-play); (2) special interest (i.e., a consistent adult or authority figure who conveyed belief in the athlete); (3) personal and emotional investment of the coach; and (4) an individual desire for competition. The primary themes of perceived impact on the environment and the individual’s desire for competition are supported by the tenets of ST, while the special interest of an authority figure and the emotional investment of the coach are reflective of the constructs of SDT. The theoretical implications of the study can contribute to the body of knowledge that will advance restructuring and properly managing the youth environment to more effectively support continuing participation.

The practical implications of these findings are relevant for sport managers at many levels. The organized youth sport structure is currently comprised of interscholastic, recreational, and competitive opportunities for participation. It is estimated that the aggregate of the three levels of youth sport encompasses over 70% of our youth population (Turner et al., 2015), but more applicable, involves the respective coaches and administrators who lead youth sport. Managers of youth sport organizations, as well as sport governing body representatives, are responsible for coaching education, parent education, and player development curricula (King, 2015). The components of an environment that supports sustained participation, as examined in this study, can be employed in education curricula such as these.

References


