Health and Physical Literacy in Sport: An Examination of the Associated Benefits and Risks of Football Participation across the Life Course

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Football is a very popular sport in the United States and many people participate in football because there are some potentially great tangible and intangible benefits (Singer, 2008; Migliaccio & Berg, 2007). However for several decades there has been a growing need to address the physical and health risk aspects of participating in football, which primarily include concussions and the effects of such an injury on participants (Collins et al., 1999, Macciocchi et al., 1996). More recently, scholars have moved towards defining the physical and health aspects of all physical education, physical activity, and sport (i.e. physical literacy and healthy literacy) (Berkman et al., 2010; Giblin et al., 2014). Physical Literacy (PL) is a multifaceted conceptualization of the skills needed to realize potentials through embodied experiences such as physical activities and sports (Giblin et al., 2014). Healthy Literacy (HL) “the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, understand, and communicate about health-related information needed to make informed health decisions” (Berkman et al., 2010). Together PL and HL serve as an ideal intersection for points of reference to examine and explore the motivating factors that influence individuals’ decision to participate in sports and other physical activities; specifically football, given the well-known healthy and physical risks.

Objectives and Theoretical Framework

The purpose of our pilot study was to explore the motivating factors that influence football participation as it relates to the associated benefits and risks of playing football throughout the life course. The research questions we explore are as follows: (1) what social factors motivate football participation across the life course? (2) What benefits and risks do parents and athletes associate with playing football at various levels? (3) What role does health literacy and physical literacy play in the decision to play football at the youth, adolescent, college, and professional level? (4) Are there any differences in the decision to play football after having experienced the benefits and risks associated with participating in football? Some of the potential benefits may include: access to and opportunities for a free college education, being active and healthy, and learning social skills. Some of the potential risks may include minor to severe injuries (i.e. sprained ankle or concussion).

Method

We conducted fifty-five semi-structured, qualitative interviews with athletes and parents at varying stages of football participation. Participants included individuals from the following groups: (1) flag football players (ages 4-7, n=5), (2) pee wee tackle football players (ages 8-10; n=5), (3) junior tackle football players (ages 11-13, n=5), (4) high school football players (ages 14-18, n=5), (5) parents or guardians of the aforementioned groups (n=20), (5) current Division-I college football players (n=5), (6) current National Football League players (n=5), (7) retired National Football League players (n=5). Participants were recruited via purposive, convenience sampling. We used a list of predetermined questions during the interviews. The interview questions specifically addressed the socializing forces of football participation, the perceived health benefits and risks of participation, and the perceived role of injury in sport. Parents of minor participants completed consent and assent forms. Additionally, the parent or guardians of minors and other adult interviewees completed a brief demographic questionnaire at the end of each interview, which asked their age, racial identity, educational attainment, and current occupation.

Findings

Preliminary findings suggest that decisions about football participation are influenced by a variety of internal and external factors, which include: love for the game, social interaction (i.e. friendship and team camaraderie),
active/healthy lifestyle, encouragement from family and friends, and perceived opportunities. Parents and athletes reported resembling views about the associated health benefits and risks of football participation throughout the life course. Retired professionals indicated higher levels of concern for long-term health complications related to football participation. We identified a disconnect between the perceived health benefits and risks among participants and the explicit goals of health and literacy programs. Although there is need for more research on this topic, our findings will help facilitate research on this topic in the areas of medical sociology, sociology of sport, and sport management. Future researchers may consider conducting more focused studies dealing with either physical or health literacy separately as they relate to football participation, other physical sports, or sports more generally.