Understanding the Motivations and Constraints of Women in Triathlon

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Despite passage of Title IX in 1972 within the United States and the passage of the Brighton Declaration in 1994 at the global level, gender inequities continue to exist within sport. Men and women who compete in the same sport continue to be presented with different opportunities, different salaries, and different facilities. In particular, whether at the amateur level or the professional level, women have always been underrepresented in the sport of triathlon. According to USA Triathlon, participation is increasing, however, as women comprised 37.1% of participants in 2014. Triathlon has also gained support at the intercollegiate level and has been elected as an NCAA Emerging Sport for Women. Despite these steps forward, many within the sport believe that change is not occurring quickly enough. As such, movements like “50 Women to Kona” have been established with the intent of creating equal opportunities for men and women at the professional level. At the amateur level, organizations like TriEqual, a group “dedicated to fairness, development, and equality in the sport of triathlon”, have been formed. Despite efforts like these, however, there exists very little research on what factors motivate women to enter the sport of triathlon and what factors exist as barriers to the sport. The purpose of this project is to identify and explore these factors such that movements like “50 Women for Kona” and organizations like TriEqual can use this information to accomplish their respective missions and goals.

In its simplest form, motivation can come from within (i.e., internal motivation) and/or be the result of external rewards. When viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, however, motivation is a multi-faceted construct that includes characteristics like an individual’s psychological needs, his or her interpersonal relationships, his or her goals, social and cultural meanings and norms, and so on (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Further, there is an interchange between an individual’s needs and the context in which these needs surface such that motivation can be facilitated or thwarted. Applied to the context of triathlon, one might presume, based on low participation rates, that women’s motivation to enter into and compete within the sport is primarily thwarted. Data show, however, that women continue to participate, thus suggesting that these women are overcoming contextual and cultural constraints. Taken together and given the current state of triathlon, the first aim of this study is to investigate the motivations of women within the sport of triathlon.

Whether social, structural, interpersonal, or intrapersonal, individuals are constantly negotiating constraints on a day-to-day basis (Crawford & Godbey, 1987). According to the Leisure Constraints Model, structural constraints include things like family, finances, seasons, climate and so on. Interpersonal constraints include one’s relationships or lack thereof and intra personal constraints include one’s psychological state(s) and individual attributes (Crawford & Godbey). These constraints impact one’s intent to engage, continue, and/or specialize in any given activity (Crawford, Jackson, & Godbey, 1991). Thus, applied to the context of triathlon, it is just as important to study the constraints experienced by women, as it is to study their motivations, as an understanding of the social and cultural constraints experienced by women within the sport of triathlon could prove beneficial for researchers and practitioners. Accordingly, the second aim of this study is to investigate the constraints experienced by women within the sport of triathlon.

As mentioned above, in order to better understand the motivations and constraints experienced by women in the sport of triathlon, we must examine motivations and constraints at various levels. Thus, we have coupled the tenets of Self-Determination Theory with the Leisure Constraints Model (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford et al., 1991).

Participants are currently being recruited through triathlon organization e-mail lists and social media pages. They are being asked to participate in a survey that includes demographics questions (e.g. gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, training habits, etc.), the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (4 items; Brewer et al., 1993), The Motives for Physical Activities Measure-Revised (MPAM-R; 30 items; Ryan et al., 1997) and 4 items regarding competition from the Motives of Marathoners Scale (Masters et al., 1993), 9 items from a Constraints scale
developed by Hubbard and Mannell (2001), and a question asking for their contact information if they would be willing to be interviewed at a later date. All items were altered to specify triathlon where necessary (e.g. triathlon instead of running or triathlete instead of athlete).

Data analysis will include reliability analysis, Cronbach’s alpha, inter-item correlations, and corrected item-total correlation for all scales. Any scales without internal consistency will have the appropriate items deleted and the scale reliability will be recalculated without those items. Multiple regression analysis will be utilized to test (1) the direct effects of identity on constraints and motivations, (2) the indirect effects of identity on motivation, and (3) the direct effects of constraints on motivation. Results from this study are expected to show that identity, motivations, and constraints are related.

There has been relatively little research done examining women’s participation in triathlon. This study aims to add to the body of research by examining the relationships between identity, motivations, and constraints in a growing sport. Additionally, there has been a serious push for increasing the opportunities for women and number of women participating in sport, which can only be done by understanding the motivations and constraints of women who want to or already are participating. This study will begin by identifying the constraints current participants face and their motivations, which sport organizations can use to develop policies to help other women overcome barriers to participation and feel empowered through their participation. Specific suggestions for sport club and event managers and coaches to implement will be discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.