Understanding the Negotiation of Constraints amongst Female Triathletes

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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. For example, at the women represent only 20% of participants in Ironman events (World Triathlon Corporation, 2016). According to USA Triathlon, participation is increasing, however, as women comprised 37.1% of participants in 2014 (compared to 27% in 2000). 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 to Kona” and organizations like TriEqual can use this information to accomplish their respective missions and goals.

Stebbins (1982, 1992, 2007) conceptualized serious leisure as engaging in physical activities that require perseverance and expending a great deal of effort in acquiring knowledge, skills, and experience. The demands of serious leisure make it a context that provides “particularly pertinent examples of how some people encounter and negotiate constraints” (McQuarrie & Jackson, 1996, p. 460). Identifying the endurance sport of triathlon as a form of serious leisure, Lamont and Kennelly’s work (Kennelly, Moyle, & Lamont, 2014; Lamont, Kennelly, & Moyle, 2013; Lamont & Kennelly, 2012) has focused on the motivations and constraints of amateur triathletes. Their findings suggest that, in order to maintain the strict regimen necessary to partake in triathlons, participants tend to take on the identity of triathlete, surround themselves with other triathletes who understand the demands of the sport, and proactively negotiate the omnipresent constraints encountered along the way (Kennelly et al., 2013). Further, constraints are negotiated because triathletes are motivated to continue to participate by things like acquiring physical fitness, forming social relationships, and achieving goals (Lamont & Kennelly, 2012). While Lamont and colleagues’ research is very informative, it fails to factor in the different experiences of male and female triathletes. Thus, extending upon their work, this study sought to focus solely on those who identify as women.

When viewed through the lens of self-determination theory, 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). 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. 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 the social and cultural constraints experienced by women within the sport of triathlon could prove beneficial for researchers and practitioners.
The purpose of this study was to explore the constraints experienced by female triathletes and how they negotiated these constraints. In doing so, we have coupled the tenets of Self-Determination Theory with the Leisure Constraints Model (Deci & Ryan, 2012; Crawford & Godbey, 1987; Crawford et al., 1991) to examine the experiences of females actively participating in the sport of triathlon. Participants were recruited through female-oriented triathlon organization e-mail lists and social media pages. Solicitation emails included the purpose of the study, assurances of IRB approval and confidentiality, and an invitation to participate in a telephone interview in which questions about their triathlon experiences would be asked.

Two researchers associated with the study conducted nineteen interviews. Women interviewed ranged in age from 23-62. They trained on average 12.3 hours per week (range of 0-24 hours), participated, on average, in 5.1 triathlons in the past 12 months (range of 1-12 races), and 16 identified themselves as triathletes. There were 11 Caucasians, 1 African-American, 1 Hispanic-Latino, and 1 American Indian/Native American. Fifteen were employed full-time, 1 volunteered, and 1 was employed part time. Seventeen had at least a college degree, and 8 had more than $80,000 in combined household income. Finally, they represented 14 US states (representing the South, Northwest, Northeast, Midwest, and West) and 2 foreign countries. Consistent with Patton (1990), interview questions embodied aspects of experiences, behaviors, opinions/values, feelings, and knowledge consistent with the purposes of the study. Data collection has been completed, and the interviews are currently being transcribed verbatim. While analysis is ongoing, preliminary results indicate that intrapersonal constraints were most prevalent amongst participants. As an example, participants experienced feelings of guilt and selfishness as a result of training demands. These constraints were negotiated by finding support from individuals both within and outside of the sport of triathlon. Structural constraints were also common, and most notably included perceived gender expectations. Seeking out social support also helped with the negotiation of these constraints. Thus, in instances of both intrapersonal and structural constraints, social support was integral to continuing one’s participation within the sport of triathlon.

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. The findings from this study provide insight into the constraints current participants face, which can be used to develop policies to help women overcome barriers to participation within the sport of triathlon. Further, implications for future research also present themselves, as constraints likely vary by factors such as race, age, occupation, and so on. Specific suggestions for sport club and event managers and coaches to implement will be discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.