Fractured Sport Socialization Dynamics: Incorporating Socialization into Sport and Socialization Through Sport

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According to Donnelly (2002), studies about who becomes involved in sport, how they are engaged in sport, and the influences that sport have on them, have been of great importance in the realm of social science. Yet, without understanding the nature of sports participation that situates in various contexts where those sports participation takes place, claiming the existence of a strong connection between the event of sports participation and its resulting developmental outcomes has been proven to be misleading. To some degree, that may be the reason why while many studies have asserted numerous benefits of sports participation, others have pointed out the contradictory nature of sports involvement. As Coalter (2007) claimed, sports participation is not automatically linked to various social benefits and/or negative results. Many of the alleged benefits (e.g., sense of competition and teamwork) and adverse effects (e.g., discrimination) of sports participation may be traced to other life circumstances and events. Therefore, I argue that we could not fully understand one’s sports experience and outcomes without looking into where it is originated, how it comes into being, and particularly how it connects to the other aspects of one’s lives. In colloquial words, the outcomes one get out of his/her sports experiences relate to not only what happens on the sporting field but also what is behind the scene.

The traditional approach in the existing sport literature to examine sport socialization is to investigate “socialization into sport” and “socialization through sport” as two separate processes, the former emphasizing on factors that introduce one into sports participation while the latter focuses on various developmental outcomes one could gain from sports involvement (e.g., Coakley, 2001). I would argue that using such “split-off” (the neglection of the inseparability between socialization into sport and socialization through sport) approach to investigate sports socialization and its outcomes has a lot of drawbacks and is incapable of presenting the entire picture of sports socialization. By emphasizing on socialization through sport, research not only results in contradictory findings as previously mentioned but also leaves an impression in the field that what one gets out of his/her sports experiences comes solely from the sporting field, ignoring the contributing factors outside of the sporting field. By focusing on socialization into sport and merely identifying factors that influence one’s sports participation, research ignores the fact that sports participation is a continuous and dynamic process. For example, a child’s sports performance may serve as an important factor which affects parents’ further engagement to his/her sports involvement. Overall, such ignorance of the inseparability of socialization into sport and socialization through sport may lead to a phenomenon in the sports literature that few researchers have made efforts to fully understand the dynamic sport socialization process happening both inside and outside of the sports field. The purpose of the current study is to bridge the conceptual gaps in the existing sport socialization literature by demonstrating the inseparability of the notions of socialization into sport and socialization through sport.