A Systematic Literature Review on Sport and Family Structure

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The support of significant others has been identified as an essential factor that influences an individual to make decisions to join, stay, and shift to higher levels of a sport (Green, 2005). Parents are known to wield enormous influence in the decision-making process regarding the sport participation of a child, as they are often the benefactors of their children’s ability to participate (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005). It is unclear, however, whether newly emerging family structure (e.g. Single-parent, LGBT parents, cohabiting couples) widely discussed in the family studies literature have been considered in the sport literature, or whether sport has been used as a context of study in family studies. Therefore, the aim of this review is to critically analyze publications that specifically targeted family influence on sport program participants as a central focus, with the intent to better understand how newly emerging family dynamics moderate or mediate youth sport participation.

Method

A systematic literature search was performed using a set of relevant criteria that were established a priori. Studies needed to: (a) be published in a peer-reviewed journal; (b) be conducted in English; and (c) either examine sport as discussed in a family setting or family as discussed in a sport setting. Published studies were identified through searches of relevant electronic databases. The following databases were examined: SPORTDiscus, Physical Education Index, First Search (ECO), GenderWatch, PAIS Index, Web of Science, PsycINFO, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, Scopus, SocINDEX, JSTOR, Social Sciences Citation Index, and Sociological Abstracts. Searches for literature in the aforementioned databases were conducted using the following search terms: family, sport, sport participation, physical activity, youth sport, parent, extended family, single parent, sibling, family structure. Searches were also conducted in a systematic manner guided by PRISMA (Moher et al., 2009). Multiple screening efforts of the literature were conducted by the authors, paring the initial 50,192 articles gathered to 213 that are included in this review. 213 articles were analyzed utilizing the Matrix Method (Garrard, 1999).

Results

Two main themes emerged: (1) literature in which the heteronormativity of the family structure is assumed (n=160); and (2) literature in which studies addressed families of a marginalized population (n=53). Of the 213 articles, 172 were conducted in international contexts and 41 were conducted in the US context. Themes that emerged in the heteronormative literature included motivation, coping with adversity, the role of significant others, and identity. In most cases, family structure was considered just as one of many variables rather than as a thoroughly examined context. Among the social justice literature, disability, single-parent, LGBT parents, cohabiting couples, extended family, and stepfamilies emerged as commonly discussed themes, in which these family structures moderated the sport participation experience.

Discussion

This review reveals that most studies treat family as just another explanatory variable and that sport management literature has failed to reflect the reality of changing family dynamics. Additionally, the findings suggest myriad future directions for research to examine new family dynamics in sport settings to contribute to practice and theory.