



Keeping pace: Mother versus athlete identity among elite long distance runners



Francine Darroch^{a,*}, Heather Hillsburg^b

^a University of British Columbia, Canada V6T2B5

^b Lakehead University, Canada P7B5E1

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways elite female athletes negotiate the competing identities of motherhood and athlete as they return to high-level training and international competition after giving birth. This paper draws on findings from 14 semi-structured interviews with world class runners from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. We identified three main discourses: first, participants reported that support from their spouses, families, and sponsors allowed them to make meaningful decisions about elite sport and motherhood; second, elite female athletes reported feelings of guilt upon their return to training, which in turn, gave rise to a binary where athletes felt that motherhood necessitated selflessness and running required selfishness; finally, some participants reported that running/competition enhanced their mothering, transforming the ethic of care that informed their guilt into a site of empowerment.

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Literature review

The discursive landscape surrounding pregnancy in Westernized countries is rife with contradictions. Pregnant women are subject to imperatives surrounding their bodies and pregnancies including “eat junk food but do not get fat, wear sexy clothing, but be a good ‘selfless’ mother. Be fit but do not exercise too much” (Nash, 2011, p. 51). This is part of a broader social pattern where “childcare and domestic practices for ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ are partly reinforced as natural and taken for granted ‘facts’ in concrete institutional practices (e.g., unpaid or lower pay for domestic labor, maternity leave offered only for women or less time offered for paternity leave for men, media constructions that reinforce gendered roles)” (McGannon & Schinke, 2013, p.181). Thanks to these factors, women tend to leave their professions, transition to part-time work, and put their careers on the ‘back burner’ (Ranson, 1998) when they have children. New mothers are also subject to the powerful social imperative that they must sacrifice their leisure time to fulfill familial obligations. This is compounded by the reality that mothers have less unambiguously free time to devote to leisure or exercise than their male partners, and tend to be less involved in organized leisure activities outside of the home (Parker & Wang, 2013). New mothers are also less likely to be physically active than mothers with school-aged children (Marcus, Simkim, & Taylor, 1994), and studies

demonstrate an overarching, inverse relationship between motherhood and participation in physical activity (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). This reinforces, and is reinforced by, women's role as primary caregiver within the family (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005), and many mothers limit their participation in leisure activities to a support role, such as driving children to their activities. Leisure thus becomes an extension of their roles as mothers (Miller & Brown, 2005). This is detrimental to mothers' emotional and physical well being: a woman's self-esteem increases when she is physically active during and after pregnancy (Nash, 2011). Exercise and leisure offer mothers, and particularly mother-athletes, a means to maintain an aspect of the pre-pregnancy identities (Nash, 2011).

Outside of time constraints and the unequal division of domestic labor, there are social and ideological factors that impede mothers from pursuing leisure and/or competitive sport. Post-partum, many women confront the construct of the ‘good mother’, calls for them to be selfless and self-sacrificing, putting the needs of their families first (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). Dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood and the corresponding construct of the ‘good mother’ create barriers to women's participation in fitness activities (Miller & Brown, 2005). This is partly the product of patriarchal discourse, which situates women as naturally fulfilled by motherhood, and thus not needing time for leisure, or requiring complex identities (such as career-mother or athlete-mother). If mothers do not reproduce these norms, they risk being labeled as ‘bad’ or ‘selfish’ women who ignore their responsibilities (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). This construct is grounded in an

* Corresponding author at: School of Nursing, University of British Columbia, Canada.
E-mail address: francine.darroch@ubc.ca (F. Darroch).

ethic of care, which Carol Gilligan originally proposed as an integral component of women's moral development (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan's ethic has been linked conceptually and empirically to women's lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure (Miller & Brown, 2005).

Mothers' emotional responses to this ethic of care, and the corresponding construct of the 'good mother,' limit their participation in leisure and in the formal workforce. Studies consistently show that women who devote time to pursuits outside of the home experience feelings of guilt and selfishness (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). The tensions that women experience between familial and professional obligations are particularly well illustrated by studies about women's return to the academic workforce. For example, Ornstein, Stewart, and Drakich (2007, p. 8–9) found that female professors were reluctant to discuss balancing tenure and promotion with their familial responsibilities because they worried that their colleagues would perceive them as not dedicated to their careers. Like their non-academic counterparts, female professors also undertake the majority of domestic duties, which compromises their ability to produce quality research (Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010, p. 39–44). It is very difficult for women to negotiate these competing obligations, and they often report feeling like 'bad academics' and/or 'bad mothers'. We can attribute this, in part, to the reality that many sectors (including academia) operate on a male-centered model, which assumes that an employee either has no children, or has a full time partner who fulfills the majority of domestic work (Mason & Goulden, 2004, p. 88). In their discussion of the academic workforce, Dryfhout and Estes (2010, p. 112) explain:

the occupational structure of academia does not accommodate individuals with significant familial demands [...]. Given the mismatch between the ideal worker norm, which characterizes academia, and the fact that women are still likely to shoulder a larger share of family responsibilities than men, it may be that having children leads women to seek other positions or even other occupations that are more family friendly.

It is clear that family planning, child-care, and work-life balance are important issues for women who decide to pursue careers both within and outside of academia. Given the tensions mapped above, it is sadly unsurprising that once women juggle a career and domestic responsibilities, engagement in sport or leisure becomes an impossibility.

Studies consistently show that new mothers sacrifice their participation in physical activity in order to meet the needs of their spouses and children (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). Like women who return to work postpartum, new mothers often report feeling selfish when they participate in leisure or sport, and these feelings were a significant deterrent from physical activity (Thompson, 1999). When new mothers were active, they "explained their 'time out' as an additional responsibility that had to be juggled alongside household demands" (Miller & Brown, 2005, p. 411). As a result, participating in leisure or physical activity could increase, rather than relieve, the stress new mothers experienced. Mothers developed different strategies to cope with these feelings. For example, those who were active before their pregnancy saw physical activity as a means through which they could better fulfill their roles as mother and wives, and these respondents framed exercise as "a pleasure or a 'release' rather than work or a chore" (Miller & Brown, 2005, p. 414). While these two bodies of literature do not initially seem related, taken together, they reveal that women feel the same feelings of guilt (although, to varying degrees) when they participate in activities outside of the home such as work, sport, or leisure. There are few studies, however, that explore the realities of elite athlete-mothers, for whom the boundaries between work and exercise (or leisure) are blurred. Our study attends to this gap in literature, as the co-participants in our study are professional runners who earn a living through endorsements, appearance fees at races, government funding, and prize money. For these women, abandoning a career and abandoning sport become inextricably linked. It is worth noting, however, that our participants' salaries fluctuate from year to year: they can earn financial bonuses for exceptional

times and/or winning races, whereas poor results do not yield financial rewards. While many have spouses who are the principal breadwinner, these women's participation in sport far exceeds that of mothers who are the subject of much of the literature surrounding leisure and motherhood. For our participants, being an elite athlete is a 24-hour a day commitment, much like having a child. They dedicate hours a day to training and recovery (physiotherapy, massage, sport psychology), and they must also devote their spare time to rest, sleep, eating nutritious food, travel to meets, and endorsing products for their various sponsors. In effect, for our participants, sport is their job, and thus comparing their experiences with data surrounding women and work is useful as the time commitment required to compete at an elite level is often more demanding than that required to participate in the formal workforce, and poses specific challenges for chronically sleep deprived new parents. Comparing mother-athletes with mother-workers is also useful because the former group experiences the same feelings of guilt as the latter upon re-entering the workforce postpartum. Both groups require strong support networks to meet their competing obligations, this study explores what forms these supports take for elite runners.

The studies that do exist about elite athlete-mothers foreground the overlaps and incongruities between the experiences of mother-athletes and those of other women. For instance, in their study of 9 elite athlete-mothers in New Zealand, Palmer and Leberman (2009) found that many elite athletes experienced intense guilt upon their return to high-level sport. These mother-athletes missed their children's milestones (birthday parties, the acquisition of new skills) and relied on networks of friends and family for childcare support. Mother-athletes experienced guilt in the same contexts as other new-mothers, and like their peers, these feelings were inextricably linked to the ethic of care. Respondents not only felt that they should put their family's needs before their own, but they felt the added pressure of balancing the demands of sport, paid work or endorsements, and family (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Appleby and Fisher (2009, p. 4) explain "the social expectations of motherhood can also be complicated for female athletes as they re-enter sport after giving birth. In many cases, the responsibility of motherhood must be balanced with other life priorities such as training and competing, both of which may take a significant amount of time away from family". For many elite runners, these factors are compounded when they adhere to traditional notions of femininity and motherhood that demand self-sacrifice, or rely on the ethic of care described above. As a result, "women negotiating motherhood and an elite sport career may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing guilt in relation to an ethic of care, as they devote large amounts of time to training and sport related travel which keeps them away from children for lengths of time" (McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015, p. 52). Mother-athletes successfully negotiated these feelings by viewing sport/leisure as a right, rather than a privilege or as an act of selfishness (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). It is important to note, however, that Palmer & Leberman's respondents competed in team sports, which presents an additional set of time constraints. These women must meet their teammates regularly for practice, whereas our participants enjoyed more flexibility as they competed in an individual sport. In fact, it is possible that the flexibility of long distance running allows women to pursue sport post-partum as they can more easily schedule training around their other obligations.

The tension between motherhood and athletics is exacerbated by media discussions about pregnancy and elite sport. In Australian sport, for example, stakeholders tend to view pregnancy as a problem or an impediment, rather than a cause for celebration (Nash, 2011, p. 10). Similarly, Appleby and Fisher (2009) found "in the running community, pregnancy was seen as something antithetical to running well". This perception is not universal, however, and media outlets have begun to celebrate "Olympic moms", that is, mothers who compete at the Olympic level who manage to "do it all" which erases the neo-liberal scripts inherent to the image of the "super-mom" (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012). Given these

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