



Juggling motherhood and sport: A qualitative study of the negotiation of competitive recreational athlete mother identities

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Qualitative research on physically active mothers has shown that recreational sport allows for personal, social and cultural barriers to be renegotiated in ways that facilitate well-being and sport participation. The purpose of this study was to extend this understanding by examining competitive recreational athlete mothers' negotiation of sport training and competition in relation to their identities.

Design: A qualitative approach grounded in social constructionism and discursive psychology was used to theorize athlete mother identities as constructed within nuanced cultural discourses, with multiple meanings and effects (e.g., psychological, social, behavioural) on women's psychological, training and parental experiences.

Method: An interpretive thematic analysis (TA) was conducted on in-depth interviews with 7 North American recreational athlete mothers, who train to compete in national and/or international sport competitions.

Results: A central theme constructed multiple meanings of motherhood and athletic experiences: *juggling motherhood and sport*. The meanings of motherhood and sport were multiple and fluid depending on three sub-themes, which were used as strategies to negotiate identities as athletes and mothers: 1. adjustment of training and competition; 2. support as multifaceted and negotiated; and 3. reciprocity of motherhood and sport. These themes highlight the nuanced ways in which juggling motherhood and sport are negotiated in relation to socially constructed identities, in constraining and emancipative ways.

Conclusions: This study extends research on the social construction of cultural identities in sport psychology and work on athlete mother identities into competitive recreational athletics.

Despite physical activity participation decreasing for mothers (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005), some mothers maintain physical activity participation (Batey & Owton, 2014; McGannon, McMahon & Gonsalves, 2017). Focusing on physically active mothers is important to learn more about how they navigate psychological social and cultural barriers that often constrain activity (Hamilton & White, 2010; McGannon et al., 2017). Sport participation is one fruitful avenue to learn more about the negotiation of cultural norms of good mother and care giving ideals, which can subordinate women's physical activity pursuits (Batey & Owton, 2014; Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; McGannon et al., 2017). Such ideals stress that women care for children and place family needs above their own (Miller & Brown, 2005). These notions concerning motherhood and cultural norms are grounded in social constructionism, whereby 'motherhood' is viewed as the product of individual, social and cultural discourses which interact to create particular meanings concerning mother identity (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Vair, 2013).

From a social constructionist perspective, discourses circulate

certain meanings about motherhood which become forms of truth and difficult to challenge because they are also tied to gender ideologies (i.e., expected behaviours based on cultural values and norms). These practices include the prevailing notion that women's true calling is to have children and care for them and that men's true calling is to be providers (Bailey, 2001; Choi, Henshaw, Baker, & Tree, 2005; Sorensen, 2017; Vair, 2013). However, culture rather than biology tells us what it means to be a mother, what behaviours are appropriate for mothers, and how motherhood shapes identity (Bailey, 2001). Although it is established that domestic duties and childcare can be shared to enhance physical activity participation for both partners (Hamilton & White, 2010), discourses of good motherhood tied to the foregoing gender ideologies structure women's motherhood and caregiving practices in ways that often constrain physical activity (Batey & Owton, 2014; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). Complicating matters for working mothers are discourses of balance within which women negotiate tensions between work, leisure and motherhood as personal choices that may better their lives, but are linked to

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psychological distress due to failing to do it all with ease (Choi et al., 2005; Wattis, Standing, & Yerkes, 2013).

The circulation of such discourses and the practices within them may also change across geographic locations, and with that, the social and structural support that mothers receive may also change, making it more or less likely they take time for themselves. This notion opens up possibilities for resistance through tactical use of discourses and the reinforcement of them through social and structural supports (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). For example research has shown that in some European countries (e.g., Sweden) with egalitarian policies concerning paternity leave for both partners, gender ideologies regarding equal division of domestic labor may allow some mothers to negotiate more work-family balance in ways that lead to more leisure time for themselves without guilt (Sorensen, 2017). Such negotiation does not however, mean that all women are immune to nuanced discourses even when structural support is present. Other research has shown that in North America (e.g., Canada) some working mothers still experience the pressure of having to do it all even when structural/policy support is offered, due to nuanced balance discourses and a gender binary that holds women responsible to be good mothers and good workers (Vair, 2013).

Women negotiating motherhood and an elite athlete identity may be vulnerable to experiencing guilt in relation cultural discourses that suggest they 'do it all with ease' or that 'good mothers' prioritize children, as they devote extensive time to training and travel which keeps them away from children (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). While the exploration of sport and motherhood is recent, a small body of social constructionist qualitative research on elite athlete mothers has been insightful toward learning more about the foregoing discourses and the role of these in women's experiences and elite sport participation. Some elite athletes reconfigure a singular athlete identity into one in which 'mother identity' is an added dimension, expanding life perspective when performance goals fall short (Debois, Ledon, Argiolas, & Rosnet, 2012; Martinez-Pascual, Alvarez-Harris, Fernández-De-Las-Peñas, & Palacios-Ceña, 2014). Other athletes negotiate intertwined 'athlete-mother' identities to demonstrate excellence in both sport and family realms (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Other women experience guilt in maintaining athletic identity but ease guilt by integrating family support into sport performance and competition goals (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016). Athlete mothers also experience psychological tensions from the 'push-pull' of athletic and domestic spheres due to internalizing cultural expectations that mothers 'do it all' (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). Some elite athlete mothers find the pull to preserve a singular athlete identity so strong in light of performance discourses, that athletics and motherhood are viewed as incompatible, experiencing psychological distress and deselect from sport (Douglas & Carless, 2009; Martinez-Pascual et al., 2014; Ronkainen et al., 2016).

The above findings indicate that an interplay of cultural discourses concerning motherhood and sport construct athlete mother identities and associated meanings in different ways, with different resulting effects (e.g., psychological and performance enhancement, distress and sport disengagement). Sport psychology research focusing on media representations of elite athlete mothers sheds further light on the role of cultural discourses within which meanings of motherhood and athletics are constructed with implications for sport participation. Sport psychology research on media representations has shown that the media circulates care giving ideals within good motherhood discourses, resulting in women prioritizing 'good mother' identities over athletics and normalizing guilt (McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012) or rendering sport and motherhood incompatible due to emphasizing singular high performance discourses and values (Cosh & Crabb, 2012). Other media work shows that discourses construct elite athletics and motherhood as compatible, offering resistance to a good mother identity through the construction of a super mum identity in reconfigured

performance discourses emphasizing enhanced focus (McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke & Busanich, 2015; McGannon, McMahon, Schinke & Gonsalves, 2017).

The foregoing research on elite athlete mothers shows that women negotiate nuanced tensions within a range of cultural discourses tied to gender ideologies and expectations for mothers and/or athletes, which have a range of implications for their lives. While more work is needed to learn more about this trajectory for elite athlete mothers, women engaged in recreational sport pursuits have been left out of sport psychology research. Qualitative research grounded in social constructionism in sport sociology and leisure studies has shown that studying recreational sport and motherhood holds potential to learn more about the negotiation of gendered discourses and cultural ideals concerning sport and motherhood. This research has shown that snowboarding (Spowart, Hughson, & Shaw, 2008), surfing (Spowart, Burrows, & Shaw, 2010), distance running (Batey & Owton, 2014; Bond & Batey, 2005) and swimming (Evans & Allen-Collinson, 2016) serve as outlets of self-identity expansion for mothers. Similar to research findings on elite athlete mothers, this research also points to women using sport as a tool to renegotiate cultural ideals and discourses of good motherhood to enhance well-being through prioritizing leisure pursuits. This research has also shown that women still strive to live up to good mother ideals and experience guilt when training (Batey & Owton, 2014).

As yet, no published research in sport psychology has explored recreational athlete mother's experiences, particularly of those who train with the goal to compete in races within their sport outside of an elite level sport performance context. Studying recreational competitive athlete mothers provides the opportunity to learn more about work-family balance for athlete mothers, since they negotiate careers outside of sport, with sport not being their primary job as in the case of elite athlete mothers (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017). Additionally, competitive recreational athlete mothers train for specific sport performance goals and competing in races as opposed to participating in sport for fitness and/or fun (Batey & Owton, 2014; Spowart et al., 2010). One study in sport psychology focusing on digital media/online identities underscores the advantage of focusing on this segment athlete mothers. McGannon et al. (2017) looked at recreational competitive athlete mother runner's identity construction in an on-line running community with over 75,000 subscribers. This discursive psychological study identified two primary discourses: discourse of transformation and empowerment and a, which constructed identities of 'role mother/advocate' and 'resilient mother runner'. These discursively constructed on-line identities showed the emancipative and constraining potential of discourses. The meaning of sport was linked to possibilities for competitive athlete mothers to overcome difficulties (e.g., motivation, good mother ideals) but also highlighted difficulties athlete mothers have negotiating motivation, injury and good motherhood pressures in relation to their identities.

1. Purpose and research questions

The presence and number of mothers engaging in sport pursuits – from elite to recreational, to competitive recreational— is growing, and with that, research in sport psychology is beginning to focus on the social construction of athlete mother identities. Although more has been learned about the socio-cultural context of motherhood and athletics within sport psychology and sport sociology, the experiences of recreational competitive athlete mothers have not yet been explored to learn about the social construction of athlete mother identities and sport participation. As noted, this focus provides an additional window into understanding facilitators and barriers of athlete mother's physical activity, within the context of work-leisure balance. The present study sought to extend such understanding using a social constructionist conception of identity via the following research questions: 1. how do athlete mothers negotiate their identities as athletes and mothers within

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