

# More Than Just Letting Them Play: Parental Influence on Women's Lifetime Sport Involvement

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This qualitative study uses expectancy-value and life course theories (Giele & Elder, 1998) to examine both the proximal and distal impact of early family socialization on enduring female participation in sport. Seventeen National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I female head coaches from the U.S. participated in interviews regarding parental influence on their sport involvement. Participants revealed three general mechanisms of sport socialization: a) role modeling, b) providing experience, and c) interpreting experience. Parental influence impacted their enduring involvement in sport by normalizing the sport experience, particularly in terms of gender, and by allowing them a voice in their own participation decisions. Insights regarding the roles of both parents and the interactive and contextual nature of socialization for increasing female participation are discussed.

Cette étude qualitative utilise les théories sur le cours de la vie et celles sur les attentes et la valeur (Giele et Elder, 1998) pour examiner l'impact de la socialisation précoce sur la participation continue des femmes en sport. En tout, 17 femmes entraîneuses de la division I de l'Association nationale du sport universitaire américain (NCAA) ont participé à des entrevues au sujet de l'influence des parents sur leur participation sportive. Les participantes ont révélé trois mécanismes généraux de socialisation au sport : les modèles de rôle, le fait d'offrir des expériences et l'interprétation d'expérience. L'influence des parents a eu un impact sur leur participation continue en sport en normalisant l'expérience sportive, particulièrement en termes de genre, et en leur donnant une voix au chapitre des décisions de participation. Le rôle de la nature interactive et contextuelle de la socialisation et le rôle des deux parents son également discutés en lien avec l'augmentation de la participation sportive.

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The involvement of females in sport continues to be a concern for researchers and practitioners from a variety of disciplines. Attracting and retaining women because of health and obesity concerns (Brustad, 1993, 1996; Freedson & Even-son, 1991), adolescent risk protective factors (Guest & Schneider, 2003; Tracy & Erkut, 2002), the impact of important policies such as Title IX (Greendorfer, 1977; Weiss & Barber, 1995), the need to challenge gendered assumptions (Claring-bould & Knoppers, 2008; Deutsch, 2007; Shaw & Slack, 2002), and the need to improve the underrepresentation of females in coaching and sport administration (Acosta & Carpenter, 2006; Inglis, Danylchuk, & Pastore, 2000) are the specific concerns of many researchers. In all cases, investigators are interested in uncovering the factors related to the enduring involvement (i.e., lasting participation over time) in sport and physical activity for females.

One approach to this issue is to examine the people who are influential in introducing and encouraging sport participation for females. It is well accepted that parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and coaches all play a role in influencing attitudes and behaviors, at least during childhood, regarding physical activity and sport participation for both boys and girls (e.g., Brustad, 1988, 1993, 1996; Coakley & White, 1999; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Greendorfer, 1977, 1993; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; McElroy, 1983; Patrick et al., 1999; Sage, 1980; Weiss & Glenn, 1992). The influence of these individuals can range from simply encouraging continued participation by taking children to sporting events to teaching values and norms associated with sport participation and physical activity. The latter, especially when combined with opportunities to observe and participate, creates a powerful social process for children referred to as socialization (Bandura, 1977; Greendorfer, 1993; Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990).

Socialization, when situated within social learning theory, is defined as an interactive social process whereby individuals are exposed to salient forms of information regarding expectations and norms within a particular social setting or role; consequently, they learn to behave in accordance with these expectations and norms (Bandura, 1977; Greendorfer, 1993; Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990; Weiss & Glenn, 1992). Therefore, socialization is more than simply exposing individuals to different activities or opportunities (e.g., math, science, sports), rather it is an active social process whereby values and norms are transmitted, taught, and hopefully adopted by the individuals being socialized. Further, socialization is not a one-way process. Individuals do not simply conform to all that is being taught. Instead, they participate in and influence the socialization process by embracing, rejecting, and/or providing feedback to the socializing agents (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990). Thus, as individuals mature they come to define their own set of values, make a greater number of independent decisions, and start to develop their own social identity.

One particular theoretical model that has been helpful in explaining the socialization process is the expectancy-value model (Eccles et al., 1983; Eccles & Harold, 1991; Fredricks & Eccles, 2002, 2004). This model assumes that socializing agents' values, expectations, and role modeling behaviors influence a child's choice of academic and cocurricular activities, and his or her choice in continuing such activities. A review of the socialization into sport literature and Eccles' model reveals that parents have the most direct impact on socialization when a

child is young, but that influence potentially wanes during adolescence when teacher, coach, and especially peer input becomes more salient (e.g., Anderssen, Wold, & Torsheim, 2006; Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Greendorfer, 1977; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; Weiss & Barber, 1995). In fact, much of the research across disciplines assigns enormous influence to the role of peers shaping the sport experience during adolescence, thus suggesting that parental influence is significantly diminished beyond the childhood years (e.g., Patrick et al., 1999). There is somewhat of a discrepancy, however, among various disciplines regarding whether parental influence is only important in a proximal sense (i.e., during early childhood) or also in a long term (distal) sense. Most of the work in sport sociology has focused on early parental impact (see Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991 for a review) whereas human development and education literatures have focused on both the proximal and the distal or adulthood impacts (Fredricks & Eccles, 2004; Heard, 2007; Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

There are a few U.S. and European sport and physical activity studies that have provided descriptive evidence that early parent role modeling might contribute to females' college sport participation (e.g., Greendorfer, 1993; Sage, 1980; Weiss & Barber, 1995; Weiss & Knoppers, 1982). These studies suggest that perhaps socialization has both proximal and distal impacts (Scheerder et al., 2006). Yet, we know little about this impact in terms of length and type of participation and the specific parental contributions (Carlson, Scott, Planty, & Thompson, 2005; Greendorfer, 1993; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Patrick et al., 1999; Sage, 1980). Thus, examination of the specific processes and the longitudinal outcomes (i.e., enduring participation) would certainly contribute to our understanding of socialization into sport (see also Scheerder et al., 2006).

Life course theorists, based in multiple disciplines, argue that amid personal and social life changes and transitions, threads of continuity persist in a person's life; among these threads are significant individuals to whom one's life is linked (Giele & Elder, 1998; Sweet & Moen, 2006). Studies based in this perspective demonstrate that early parent-child relationships have a distal or long-term impact on child behavior that endures into adulthood (e.g., Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Heard, 2007; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). That is, although direct parental influence might wane during adolescence, the effects of early socialization into sport may be experienced more distally with internalized values and norms influencing sport behaviors into adulthood (Bandura, 1977). Consistent with this argument, we contend that the early parental socialization of females is likely to have a strong and lasting impact on their lifelong sport and physical activity behaviors, including participation and perhaps even career choice (e.g., coach, athletic administrator).

The purpose of this study, therefore, is to use a life course perspective and qualitative methodology to examine the distal or long-term impact of early parental socialization into sport for females, which includes actual participation in sport and other sport-related roles such as coaching or managing. This study, consequently, contributes to the socialization literature regarding both the proximal and distal impact of childhood socialization into sport and the specific parental contributions toward this process. By examining these factors, we can continue to identify ways of increasing females' entrance into and retention in sport.

## Review of Literature

Eccles and colleagues' expectancy-value model, largely developed in the U.S., was originally used by scholars in the area of education and human development but has also been applied by researchers in sport psychology and sociology (see for example, Fredricks & Eccles, 2002; Eccles & Harold, 1991; Greendorfer, 1993; Weiss, & Glenn, 1992). Tenets of the model have been used in multiple disciplines and settings including education and sport, making it a useful framework for examining complex processes such as socialization into sport. The model is based on the assumption that the decisions of individuals to participate in activities are made in the context of a variety of choices and that socialization agents play a vital role in influencing one's choices (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002). The framework explains how expectancies of abilities, skills, interests, and parental values together shape children's experiences and their choices to begin and/or end participation in activities. That is, parents are likely to provide encouragement and support for activities that they deem important and in which they perceive their child will experience higher levels of success. So, children will tend to behave in accordance with their parents' beliefs about their potential success and the importance of success in that activity (Bois, Sarrazin, Brustad, Trouilloud, & Cury, 2002). It is important to note that the expectancy-value model has been developed for and tested in the context of children's (rather than adolescents' or adult's) lives. That is, it assumes a short-term perspective of entering and participating in sport, rather than a longitudinal perspective of staying involved over the life span and the factors that might influence lifetime sport involvement.

## Parental Influences on Socialization

The expectancy-value model proposes that three parental influences contribute to a child's socialization into sport. That is, parents serve as: (1) role models, (2) providers of experience, and (3) interpreters of experience (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002). Role modeling behavior, which has been the focus of much of the psychology and sociology of sport literature, influences children's participation in sport, with physical activity patterns of children paralleling those of their parents (Davison, Downs, & Birch, 2006; Freedson & Evenson, 1991; Greendorfer, 1977; Sage, 1980; Scheerder et al., 2006). Parents act as role models when their behavior demonstrates the value they place on sport and physical activity through actively engaging in coaching, participating, or just enjoying sport. Parents can serve as positive role models; in fact, the Wilson Report (Wilson Sporting Goods, 1985) estimated that 70% of women in the U.S. who participated in sports had parents who also engaged in sport or fitness activities. More recently, Price et al. (2008) in the U.S. and Scheerder et al. (2006) in Belgium found a significant relationship between parental modeling and adolescent and adult female participation in physical activity.

Parents also can facilitate the involvement of their children in sport by providing children with resources, equipment, encouragement, and/or opportunities for participation in sport (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002). For example, Brustad (1993)

interviewed middle-class, American athletes and found that parents stimulated their initial interest in sport by encouraging them to try new activities. These athletes also explained how parents provided resources such as transportation, entry fees, and time to support their involvement (see also Coakley & White, 1999; Davison et al., 2006; Thompson, 1999).

The expectancy-value model also assumes that parental influence extends to interpretation of what children experience. That is, parents can transmit values and norms through communicating their beliefs, acceptance, and support of their child's participation in sport. Numerous studies have demonstrated the importance of parental interpretation, often showing that too much parental feedback causes undue stress in young athletes, but that appropriate amounts of encouragement and support can increase enjoyment and longevity of the athletes' involvement (Brustad, 1993; Davison et al., 2006; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). For example, Morgan and Giacobbi's (2006) study of elite U.S. college athletes found that ongoing parental social support was important to helping young athletes overcome obstacles and remain involved in sport.

Parental interpretation is a powerful mechanism because it communicates expected and valued behaviors. An assumption of the expectancy-value model is that children internalize parental values and expectations. In addition, the model assumes that children try to behave in ways that maximize their acceptance in the social setting (Bandura, 1977). Thus, if parents communicate that they value sport participation, children will likely participate, at least while they are young. As children mature, they might internalize such values and develop their own identity in sport, choosing to participate even after direct parental influence is removed (Patrick et al., 1999). The expectancy-value model, however, does not address the longevity of parental impact. Thus, one way to extend the model and increase our understanding of the socialization into sport process is to examine whether parental impact tends to have only a proximal or both a proximal and distal impact on female sport participation.

## **Proximal vs. Distal Impact of Parental Socialization**

Although it is well documented that parents play a central role in influencing sport participation during childhood (Brustad, 1993, 1996; Greendorfer & Lewko, 1978; McElroy, 1983), parental influence during adolescence is difficult to track. During this time other socializing agents such as peers, teachers, and coaches also begin to exert an influence on sport participation and the child starts to make a greater number of independent decisions (Fredricks et al., 2002; Patrick et al., 1999). Adult athletes report that parental behavior during childhood (ages 5–12) was more influential than parental behavior during adolescence (Woolger & Power, 1993). Greendorfer (1977), Bois et al. (2002), and Horn and Weiss (1991), in U.S. and French-based studies of middle-class, mostly Caucasian youth, all found that peers became more important socializing agents during adolescence. In fact, many scholars argue that the effects of parental socialization are centered in early childhood (i.e., not late childhood or adolescence).

The more distal impact of parental socialization, however, is seen in a few studies (e.g., Carlson et al., 2005; Perkins, Jacobs, Barber, & Eccles, 2004; and Scheerder et al., 2006). For example, Fredricks and Eccles' (2002) found that

parents were influential in children's beliefs about their success levels in math and sports. Although it was noted that the relationship was stronger in sports than in math, both relationships were found to strengthen during high school years. Although the parents' expectations and values were noted during childhood, the children still behaved according to their parents' expectations when they reached high school. Further, Weiss and Barber's (1995) study of U.S. female collegiate volleyball players found that support and encouragement from almost every relationship (parents, peers, teachers, and coaches) increased from childhood to college for these women. Therefore, the importance the athletes' parents placed on college sport participation might have played a role in their decisions to continue pursuing sport later in life, even if the parents were no longer directly or intentionally exerting influence.

### Long-Term Influence of Parental Socialization

**Athletic participation.** Although the influence of socializing agents at different life stages seems to vary, there is some support for the idea that early parental socialization might have an impact on a child's behavior at least until college age. Few studies have been done with participants beyond college age on the impact of socialization into sport (Greendorfer, 1993). Therefore, examination of an adult's perspective of their parents' impact on their sport beliefs, values, and participation adds value to the literature on parental socialization into sport and its potential long-term impact on female involvement.

**Other adult forms of participation.** Limited opportunities curtail competitive participation for most women after their high school or college involvement. How, then, do women continue sport involvement as adults? One might become an avid sport fan, participate recreationally, administer sport, or coach. Current college coaches, in fact, cite the desire for continued involvement in sport as a central reason for pursuing the profession (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). Although research links parental influence and career aspirations (e.g., Dick & Rallis, 1991; Young et al., 2001), it is unclear the role early parental socialization would have among individuals in sport careers. An examination of women who have chosen to extend their sport careers through coaching will lend insight into the distal impact of early socialization into sport and also provide information on ways that women's continuing involvement in various sport capacities can be increased.

### Life Course Perspective

Extending inquiry into the careers of women in coaching must examine their lives over time rather than at a single point. Life course theory has emerged as a valuable tool for uncovering the ways in which sociocultural elements affect individual choices and life pathways, as well as the ways in which individuals respond to socially defined expectations and norms (Giele & Elder, 1998). Life course theorists are concerned with the threads of continuity and major turning points that define a person's life over time. Rather than attempting to control for sociocultural and other contextual factors, life course theory incorporates an examination of their influence on individual life pathways and decisions (Sweet & Moen, 2006).

Factors such as social change, political events, age, and education affect individual choices and often present times of transition or turning points within a continuous thread (Elder, 1998). Life course theorists try to examine how these contextual factors shape transitions and opportunities.

In addition, the use of a life course perspective includes an exploration of important linkages to other lives that have short and/or long-term impacts. These social ties, including family, school, or church, form the foundation of the life course as “lives are lived interdependently, and social and historical influences are expressed” (Elder, 1998, p. 4) through the linkages between individuals. For example, a life course theorist might examine how a person’s life linkage to a spouse would influence her career trajectory (Bruening & Dixon, 2008). The current study’s examination of long-term effects of social and contextual influences highlights the need for “locating human development within the historically and socially situated roles and contexts that shape self-assessment, preferences . . . and opportunities” (Sweet & Moen, 2006, p. 189), thus making a life course perspective a valuable research approach. In this study, it compliments and enriches the expectancy-value model, which has been used almost exclusively with children and at single points in time. Life course theory allows the examination of the factors and relationships seen in the expectancy-value model as they are viewed and potentially reframed over one’s various life stages and relational transitions.

## Method

The participants were 17 female NCAA (National Collegiate Athletic Association) Division I head coaches from the U.S., who were part of a comprehensive study on work and family in sport (see Table 1). As part of this study, we have previously explored work–life balance and gender in athletic departments (Bruening & Dixon, 2008), whereas the focus of the current study is on parental socialization. The participants represented the sports of rowing, volleyball, soccer, lacrosse, tennis, basketball, and gymnastics and hailed from multiple geographic regions. This sample was selected because they represented a group of women with long-term involvement in sport. They had been employed as head coaches for 2–12 years. The participants, all mothers, classified themselves as White and middle or upper-middle class with regard to current socioeconomic status (SES). They came from a variety of backgrounds in terms of family structure, SES (most described as lower to middle class), religion, and geographic location within the U.S.

The mothers were 40 years old and younger (range = 29–40), such that they were all of school age when Title IX was passed in 1972. This situates their life course in a unique point in the history of the U.S. because they were part of the first generation who had full access to sport opportunities afforded by Title IX. At the same time, it is assumed that they understood, at least to some extent, the position of women’s sport and related opportunities for girls and women before this legislation. Furthermore, their age at the time of the study places them in a different context than most of their mothers, who had less access and acceptance in the sport realm and who filled more traditional family roles (i.e., most of the mothers were homemakers while the participants were very young).

**Table 1 Descriptive Data of Participants and Family Sport Background**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Sport</b>	<b>Years as head coach</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Siblings</b>
Casey	Lacrosse	3	Sport journalist (college)	Field hockey (college), coach (college)	None
Karen	Basketball	6	Golf (college)	Not specified	Basketball (6 played in college)
Melanie	Gymnastics	8	None	None	Soccer (high school)
Margaret	Volleyball	2	Not specified	Not specified	Not specified
Darlene	Tennis	5	Football (college)	Not specified	Not specified
Danielle	Soccer	7	Not specified	Cheerleader (high school)	Distance runners (still active)
Karla	Volleyball	10	Basketball (college)	Basketball (college)	Track, basketball, football (college)
Andrea	Soccer	7	Football (high school)	Field hockey (high school)	Soccer, softball, gymnastic (high school)
Nikki	Volleyball	10	College athlete	Not specified	Basketball (college)
Jane	Basketball	12	Baseball (college)	Field hockey (high school)	Football, hockey, track, basketball (college)
Jaden	Softball	9	Athlete (high school)	Cheerleader & athlete (high school)	Athlete (high school)
Jessica	Volleyball	11	Track and football (college)	Cheerleader (college)	Basketball (college)
Denise	Soccer	11	Track (college)	Tennis (college)	Field hockey (high school)
Desiree	Softball	7	Baseball (college), softball (recreationally)	None	Softball (high school)
Susan	Rowing	5	Rower (college), coach	Rower (college)	Rower (college), coach
Stacy	Soccer	11	Not specified	None	Soccer (college, professional)
Sarah	Volleyball	4	Football (college), coach (college)	Cheerleader (college)	Football (college), coach (college)



The participants for this study were chosen with the use of snowball sampling; initial contacts were made through the researchers personal networks and then those contacts identified other women who fit the criteria. Participants were then identified based on the sport coached, geographic location, and family status in order to obtain the most diverse group possible. From there, the women were informed of the study via e-mail. Those who indicated interest in participating in the study were contacted via telephone for further arrangements.

## Interviews

The coaches voluntarily participated in semistructured, in-depth interviews lasting 45 min to 2 hr. They were conducted on the participant's campus or at a neutral site (e.g., coaching convention). The interviews were divided based on their geographic proximity; one researcher conducted eight interviews, the other seven. Before and after each interview, the researchers discussed the interview guide and research questions to assure they were conducting the interviews similarly. This communication throughout the data collection was instrumental in connecting the researchers, aligning their interviewing styles, and revealing any trends in the collection process (Bruening & Dixon, 2008).

Questions followed an interview guide that was developed from life course theory (Sweet & Moen, 2006), work-family conflict (e.g., Allen, Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000; Bruening & Dixon, 2007; Dixon & Bruening, 2005, 2007; Dixon & Sagas, 2007), and gender studies in sport (Greendorfer, 1977; Inglis et al., 2000; Weiss & Barber, 1995; Weiss & Knoppers, 1982) literature. Participants were asked a range of biographical and social context questions including tracing their sport involvement and their career progression. They were also asked to trace their parents' influence on their lives in sport. Probes such as "How do you see that now?" or "Who do you think influenced that decision?" were helpful for eliciting rich information and helping participants develop a posthoc analysis of their life decisions (Sweet & Moen, 2006).

The conversations were digitally recorded and transcribed. After transcription, participants were given the opportunity to check their transcript for accuracy and meaning (Neuman, 2000).

## Data Analysis

The data were coded and analyzed with the aid of NVIVO 7 software using an ongoing coding process and the method of agreement (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The method of agreement focuses on what is common across cases such that patterns can be observed without overlooking critical exceptions (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Neuman, 2000). Themes were derived with attention to the literature and with openness to themes that emerged from the data. Researchers participated in this process by using two interview transcriptions as test cases (see Bruening & Dixon, 2008). The test interviews were independently coded and a master coding scheme was developed. After discussion, agreement was reached on final definitions for each theme.

The themes regarding socialization were coded: Parent Influence, Sibling Influence, Other Influence, and Foundational. Because this study was specifically concerned with parents, the Parent Influence theme was subcoded with attention to the expectancy–value model (Eccles et al., 1983). The subthemes were Role Models, Providers of Experience, and Interpreters of Experience. The other theme, Foundational, emerged from the data. This theme reflected statements the participants made about their early experiences being an integral part of the formation of their current views on sport participation and their self-perception of their career today.

Following Miles and Huberman (1994) we created a composite matrix of all participant demographic information to assess any additional trends in the data (e.g., was there a relationship between sport coached or played and parental influence?). The results that are based on this matrix include attention to relevant trends to aid the reader in gaining an appreciation of the backgrounds of the participants and the representativeness of the data.

## Results and Discussion

The results are presented in accordance with each of the three influences for socialization into sport and conclude with an examination of the foundational influence of parental socialization and its impact on sport involvement. We present quotes that best illustrate the results (Miles & Huberman, 1994) without overlooking exceptions that add to the richness and complexity of the participants' stories, as well as outliers and extreme cases that help validate the data. Therefore, each researcher identified quotations that she felt represented the thematic concept, with particular attention given to outlier cases that might “test and strengthen the basic findings” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 269). In this process, it was helpful that one of the researchers was not directly involved in conducting the interviews, thus providing protection against researcher bias from being too close to the data. Through an iterative process, we discussed each quote and came to agreement on its inclusion based on the salience of the quote, the representativeness of the theme, and the desire to ensure that all participant voices, particularly outliers, were heard (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### Parents as Role Models

Many, though not all, of the coaches were from what could be considered a strong athletic lineage (see Table 1). Nearly all participants indicated that one or both of their parents had participated in competitive sports in high school and/or college. For example, Casey's mother was a college athlete and coached, and her father was a sports writer. Darlene's father was an All-American Quarterback who “has a strong sports background. . . . He was at some tryouts for the Patriots [a professional team] when he was just out of college.” Although some might anticipate this would create demands and undue expectations to participate in sport, the participants conveyed instead that this role modeling served to make sports a normal part of their lives. The participants made the following statements regarding their parents' influence on them as role models:

My parents were pretty active in sports. My mom played . . . she was a physical education major in college, so she played . . . sports and was a tennis player. (Denise)

We basically were a very athletic family. . . . My father was a collegiate athlete. My uncle was a collegiate and professional baseball player. (Nikki)

I definitely have a unique family in that both of my parents played basketball in college . . . sports were just immediately a part of our lives. (Karla)

As far as sports are concerned we all played, six out of the eight of us went on to earn a college athletic scholarship . . . now we're all coaching. (Karen)

Thus, parental involvement seems to have shaped the life experiences of these women. The women participating in this study reported that they became interested because of their parents' participation. In addition, parental participation meant that sport involvement became a "normal" family activity. Interestingly, more fathers than mothers played competitively. This difference may be the result of generational social and cultural influences such as the availability of many sport opportunities for men and the lack of general acceptability of sport participation for women at that time.

It also appears that the influence of parental role modeling had an impact on adult participation and career choices. For example, Sarah said:

I have two brothers who are coaches. My older brother is the head football coach, my younger is the offensive coordinator, and my dad coaches the linebackers. He [my dad] was a high school football coach for 25 years. . . . My mom taught dance and baton twirling. So sport was always as big part of our lives.

The data revealed that the parents of these individuals who have persisted in sport were strong role models in sport and physical activity.

Role modeling appeared to have a strong influence on the participants' experience in sport (e.g., Greendorfer, 1977; Sage, 1980; Woolger & Power, 1993). In fact, it was quite striking how consistent the results were; only three of the women—Melanie, Stacy, and Margaret—did not have a parent who participated in high school or college sport. The experiences of these women show that the paths leading to adult sport involvement can be diverse. Instead of growing up around sport, these women were introduced to sport through their parents enrolling them in classes or leagues (tumbling, soccer) on a trial basis, and they reported that they developed a love for the sport on their own. Interestingly, even in the families in which parents were stronger role models, the women had to choose to participate in sport for themselves and sometimes preferred a different sport than their parents. For example, Karla described how she developed an affinity for volleyball because it was different from her family's game of basketball. She enjoyed having something that was uniquely hers.

Thus, role modeling seems to work by establishing the normalcy of athletic participation throughout the life course (e.g., active adult mothers playing tennis, running, etc.) and establishing the viability of a career in sport. Importantly, how-

ever, role modeling was not the only method of influence on the participants as indicated by the following facts: (1) not all of the participants had active parents as role models and still pursued lifetime sport; (2) not all of the participants' siblings chose a sport-related participation or career route, even though they were exposed to the same parental role models; and (3) the participants noted the importance of adopting sport of their own accord. This finding is consistent with the notion of socialization as an interactive process (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990) whereby individuals are not simply primed into accepting parental values but actively make their own activity choices. Even so, the fact that so many of these participants came from strong athletic backgrounds speaks to the power of role modeling for setting a norm that influences long-term sport involvement.

## Parents as Providers of the Experience

In addition to role modeling, the participants relayed a number of ways in which their parents provided sport-participation experiences for them. The types of provision can generally be divided into three categories: game attendance, coaching/managing, and transportation/logistical.

### Game Attendance

The participants clearly recalled that their parents were supportive of their early sport participation experience by attending games:

My mom went to all my high school games, kept score, and did all that . . . but they weren't these sort of monstrous parents, that are nuts about their kids sports. (Jaden)

My mom was always able to be at my games, and my dad couldn't because he flew so much. . . . My mom did not know basketball until I started playing it, but she really grew to understand the sport. (Jane)

My dad traveled a lot with his job, but he was able to work it so he could come. When I was in college he would get the schedule and then planned his work around it. And that is what he did throughout when we were kids, too. (Karla)

My mom was an ER nurse. . . . When I went into high school she shifted to a more regular schedule so she could see all my matches. (Margaret)

Game attendance was certainly a salient aspect of how parents demonstrated their support to the participants, one that participants specifically recalled and most frequently mentioned.

### Coaching/ Administration

The participants also mentioned, although less frequently, that their parents supported them by coaching or helping with the administration of their teams, particularly when they were young. The following examples illustrate this support.

My dad would go and support us, and he'd do everything to make the team successful behind the scenes, with fundraising and all that. (Jaden)

My dad's sport involvement definitely influenced me and my siblings. My dad was always our coach—baseball, soccer, everything. (Andrea)

My dad was usually the coach [for mine and my brother's basketball teams growing up]. (Karla)

Interestingly, of these participants who mentioned their parent as a coach, all of them said it was their father, not their mother, who played that role. It is also noteworthy that none of the participants' parents continued to coach them beyond youth sports.

### Transportation/Logistical

The participants also relayed that their parents supported their athletic involvement by providing transportation and taking care of other logistical aspects of participation such as laundry and paying for lessons and league dues.

My mom would bring us everywhere we had to be. . . . That was her role in supporting us. (Jessica)

We never had her as a coach. It is funny, I never thought of possibly having my mother as a coach. . . . She always did the concession stand and was a great fan and very supportive. (Andrea)

My mom was never the coach, but of course she was the chauffer. (Karla)

Just as fathers were always mentioned as the coaches, mothers were always mentioned as the transportation providers.

Examples of parents functioning as providers of sport participation experiences when the participants were children were abundant in the interviews. This finding is consistent with previous literature indicating that tangible support is one mechanism for encouraging sport involvement among children (e.g., Brustad, 1996; Davison et al., 2006; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006). Again, it is striking how similar the data are in this regard; none of the participants indicated a lack of support from either of their parents, and there were no clear patterns discernible regarding the relative importance of the role of the mother or father.

The data contributed further to our understanding of the support mechanism in at least three ways. First, these participants' responses show that both parents can provide valuable support. Although they followed stereotypical gender lines of fathers being coaches and mothers being transportation providers (Thompson, 1999), the participants indicated that both parents provided encouragement. Second, support can be provided almost in lieu of role modeling. That is, participants reported that they were influenced by their parents' support for their sport participation, even if their parents did not actively engage in sport themselves (or if they played a different sport). In fact, this support was one particularly salient area for women whose parents (especially mothers) did not participate. Similar to the

mothers of junior tennis players in Thompson's (1999) study, it might be that mothers view support of their children's activities as sport involvement for themselves, and in that way are actually role modeling for their children. Third, the participants interpreted the provision of support as evidence that sport participation was valued and worthy of spending family resources (e.g., time, money) to develop. In fact, for most of these athletes who reach a high level, they could not continue to participate without the logistical and financial support of their parents (see also Thompson, 1999). The provision of support in the forms of game attendance, coaching, and logistics seemed to be naturally coupled with an affirmation of their parents' approval of their athletic endeavors and later their choice of a sport career.

### Parents as Interpreters of the Experience

The participants also shared how their parents interpreted and communicated the value, appropriateness, and importance of sport participation through statements related to two general subthemes: gender appropriateness and encouragement without pressure. Gender appropriateness refers to sport participation being seen as acceptable and desirable for females. Encouragement without pressure refers to parental support of their participation in an undemanding manner.

**Gender appropriateness.** Most participants mentioned that their parents, especially their mothers, created an atmosphere in which sport participation was appropriate for girls. The participants felt this gender-supportive atmosphere was key to their participation, especially into adolescence, and that this was different than how their mothers were likely raised. The following examples reflect the gender appropriateness of playing sport for these women:

I think my views just stemmed from the way I was raised, and the opportunities that I had, without people saying, "You're a girl. You can't do that."  
(Denise)

I remember growing up I used to throw the football with my dad, and my dad always raised me [to think that] the girls can do anything that boys can do.  
(Sarah)

I think I learned that [women can do anything] by watching college softball growing up. I was thinking, "You can get a college scholarship in softball." I think that was huge because when I was little my dad would take me to all these college games. (Desiree)

I think that sport transcends those [traditional] roles. . . . I never felt like, "I'm a girl, and I shouldn't be doing this, or I shouldn't be hitting a ball this far." I just always identified as an athlete . . . competing made me feel strong and powerful, and I never felt some of the struggles that other girls faced.  
(Jaden)

My mom always tells the story of the first game I played [on a boys' team]. No one passed me the ball and finally someone passed it to me. And I dribbled, and I shot and made it. All the moms stood up and cheered. (Karla)

Interestingly, the notion that sport participation was gender appropriate came from both their mothers and fathers, indicating that both likely play a role in interpreting the gender appropriateness of sport for girls.

**Encouragement without pressure.** In addition, several of the participants described how their parents recognized their interest and/or talent in a sport and encouraged them to participate. Consider the following examples:

My father took me and my brother out when we were four or five years old. We'd throw the ball around, and then I started throwing, and he said, "Uh oh. She's going to be good, she's got some talent." So, they recognized that . . . so I got involved in that, and they very much encouraged that. (Jaden)

My parents supported me, and my mom was involved in my soccer stuff, but she was not overbearing and didn't push me to compete. (Stacy)

My parents were completely supportive; if I wanted to do gymnastics, [it was] wonderful. If I didn't want to do gymnastics, [that was] wonderful also. . . . If I wanted to quit, there would have been no ramifications. Because of that I ended up really enjoying my gymnastics experience. (Melanie)

The participants frequently spoke of encouragement and support rather than of pressure. In fact, some were explicit that their parents were supportive without pressure and that this led to their continuation in sport.

Parental interpretation of the sport-participation experience might be the most powerful form of socialization into sport for these participants. As Bandura (1977) argued, the interpretation communicates to the child what behaviors are valued and expected and how that child's behavior is (or is not) matching those values and expectations. Children then try to behave in ways that maximize their acceptance in the social setting. The results from this study indicate that specific interpretations of gender appropriateness and freedom to choose activities provided powerful socialization influences for these women, ones that appear to have both a proximal and distal impact on participation in sport.

Again, the participants' comments were remarkably uniform in insisting that a key to their continued participation was lack of pressure from their parents. Although the participants suggested that their parents did not pressure them to compete, they do not actually know how their parents would have reacted had they stopped participating in sport, because they are still active. It is possible that their parents would have reacted negatively to them dropping out of sport because of their identification as athletes and in a family with an athletic way of life. It is also possible that parents would have resented spending family resources on an athletic career that ended prematurely (Fredricks et al., 2002). Therefore, although it appears important that parents encourage their children in their sport roles, we must exercise caution when drawing conclusions about parental pressure when children wish to drop out.

The women reported numerous instances in which parental encouragement came in the form of affirming the gender appropriateness of sport participation for girls. The girls were told by both mothers and fathers that they could and perhaps should participate in sports, and that their athleticism was valued. As a result, they felt that their desire to participate was appropriate and should even be developed.

These results also highlight the value of life course theory as a compliment to the more child-focused and short-term perspective of the expectancy–value model. We discovered two additional findings when we applied a life course perspective to the data. First, the parental interpretation that sport participation was appropriate for girls demonstrated a generational influence bounding the sociocultural context of the parent–child interaction; sport participation was not considered appropriate for the participants' mothers (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991). In fact, several of the participants indicated that their mothers made deliberate attempts to communicate that sport participation was good because they wanted their daughters to have the experiences that they themselves had not been allowed to have. Second, the indication that sport participation was appropriate for girls had a powerful and lasting impact on these women's participation that has endured into adulthood. It is possible that their parents' acceptance of them as athletes transcended the opinions of other socializing agents, creating a buffer against outside social pressures and gender stigmas that often lead to dropping out of sport (Connell, 1987; Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006; Theberge, 2003). It is also possible that parents' acceptance indicated that coaching could be a viable career path for women.

Another specific method of parental interpretation indicated by the participants was encouragement without pressure. It was apparent that the participants' parents valued the sport participation experience, yet balanced their support with encouraging self-determination, independence, and making their own choices in their daughters. As Jaden said, "They really let me drive the bus." This parental approach likely contributed to all of the interviewees experiencing longevity in sport, because participation was valued and encouraged, yet not forced on them. This finding clearly indicates that parental socialization and influence is critical, and that socialization is a two-way process (Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991; Nixon, 1990). That is, by parents encouraging without pressuring, the participants were able to develop their own passion for the sport (or reject it), interpret their own sport experience, and develop their own set of norms and values. The literature on parental influence indicates that high levels of pressure are associated with stress and burnout in young athletes (e.g., Babkes & Weiss, 1999). Instead, the participants in this study continued to be involved in sport during shifts in their life course because they had the opportunity to enjoy sport for themselves.

## Foundational Influence

The final theme that emerged from the data relates to the participants' feelings that their parents' early influence became foundational to their sport involvement today by creating constructing sport participation as normal. The following examples illustrate this theme:

Growing up, sport was always available to us. It is a big part of our world and always has been. (Jessica)

I think my views just stemmed from the way I was raised. [My mom] never really pushed me in any direction at all. I just think I didn't know any thing different. . . . I saw her being active and it was kind of normal for me. (Denise)



All of my siblings played sports . . . and it has always been a part, just what we've always done. . . . I absolutely think my parents sport involvement influenced ours. (Andrea)

Sports have always been a part, and we often joke that I wish I had taken piano lessons, but sport is what my parents knew, and that is what we did as kids, and [me and my brothers] ended up being very good athletes. (Karla)

Regardless of the length of direct involvement by parents, these examples illustrate the foundational nature of early childhood experiences. Sport participation, a normal and regular part of life, became an inseparable part of these women's social identity, which has endured to the present time.

Examination of the participant's experiences provided insight into both the proximal and distal impacts of parental influence and into the specific parental contributions to their children's socialization into sport. Clearly, the impact of parental socialization did not end with adolescence. These women were socialized into what appears as a healthy and enjoyable relationship with sport that endured the test of time. If they merely adopted the values of their parents, they would have been more likely to end their participation in sport earlier in their lives. And, had their parents pressured them to participate, the chances are even greater that they would have exited sport. But the *way* they were socialized and their own active role in that process made a difference (see also Greendorfer & Bruce, 1991). This seems to fit with the interactive view of socialization and the maturation process that is part of expectancy-value and life course theories. That is, as children mature, they tend to take a more active role in socialization and develop their own sport identities, which is why participation continues even after direct parental influence wanes.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The existing literature is limited in its examination of the specific mechanisms and long-term influence of early sport socialization. The available literature focuses almost exclusively on the impact of parents as role models, providers of experience, and interpreters of experience during the early years of their children's lives. Although this study replicates some previous findings (especially with regard to role modeling) about proximal impacts, it adds critical insights to further understandings of distal impacts of socialization into sport and extends the expectancy-value model by uncovering how sport participants' perceptions of their parents' involvement is framed from an adult rather than a child's perspective and how early childhood socialization experiences shape adult choices and behaviors.

First, it is clear that socialization has both proximal and distal impacts, a finding that is highlighted by the use of a life course perspective. These distal impacts have been understated in the literature. The women in this study revealed ways that their parents influenced them early in their sport careers, yet they were clear that these influences lasted well beyond childhood. In fact, the participants stated that many of their views on sport participation for their own children stem from their parents' modeling. Particularly telling in this study was the approach the parents of the participants took toward sport involvement. The parents were sup-

portive but not overbearing. Compared with the over-competitive approach of many parents that the participants have encountered in their coaching positions, their own parents fit a different mold and one that they suggest supports long-term involvement in sport.

Second, the ways in which parents socialize their children may have an impact that extends beyond childhood. In particular, these women responded well to parental influence that normalized the sport-participation experience for girls—making sport participation a gender-appropriate activity. This influence also encourages children to believe that sport participation in general is desirable for girls. The perception that sport is appropriate for girls extended into the participants' adult lives despite various life transitions such as marriage and childbearing; this again demonstrates the value of a life course perspective for examining parent-child socialization experiences. Further, consistent with the style of positive encouragement the participants' parents chose (Coakley & White, 1999), the gender-related values expressed by their parents influenced their daughters to persist in sport: sport became their own choice and "passion."

Third, the results indicate that parents can exert influence in different ways. The expectancy-value model (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002) suggests that parents can contribute to the socialization of their children into sport by serving as role models, providers, and/or interpreters. The pattern that developed in this study reflected the gendered nature of providing (see Thompson, 1999). Fathers were identified as the visible administrators or coaches and mothers as the unseen providers of support and transportation. Interestingly, though, and in comparison with Thompson's study, the participants in this study seemed to place a greater value and appreciation on their mothers' contribution to their sporting careers, giving it high importance rather than marginalizing it. Perhaps this appreciation grew over time as the participants became adults and mothers themselves.

In addition, the participants conveyed strong support their mothers offered in the form of "you need to take advantage of the opportunities I did not have." The participants did not indicate gender differences in parental influence on their socialization but instead insisted that both mothers and fathers contributed to their involvement. They also noted that it will be interesting for their own children's socialization, because the participants' children will see their mothers in coaching roles, not just "taxi drivers."

Obviously, life course theory and the expectancy-value model together can provide valuable insights for examining the social processes and both proximal and distal impacts of parental socialization. The stories told at any one point in time, however, are bound to differ from those told at another point in time (Elder, 1998). Retrospective accounts, which were used in this study, can also be biased: participants reports can be either overly positive or negative narratives of their life course events based on their current situation. In this study, it is possible that because these women are still in coaching, they are overly positive about their childhood experiences and have overlooked some of the negative aspects, such as sacrifice of other activities (Fredricks et al., 2002) or dissension with parents regarding the intensity of their sport involvement (Morgan & Giacobbi, 2006).

As suggested earlier, the results of this study are remarkably consistent across participants. Although this is not necessarily a limitation, future research with a larger and perhaps more diverse sample (in terms of race and SES) would be

helpful in uncovering whether this uniformity is in fact an indication of theoretical consistency or if it is particular to this sample.

Future research should continue to consider both the proximal *and* distal impacts of socialization. That is, socialization into sports that starts early in a child's life paves the way for future sport involvement in a variety of roles. In particular, more qualitative research from different theoretical perspectives that seeks to understand socialization into sport on an individual level could shed light on this area. In addition, those who wish to increase women's involvement in sport must continue to learn more about early childhood experiences with sport. In an ideal sense, additional longitudinal inquiries must be undertaken to follow females throughout their sport experiences. In particular, research that focuses on the sociocultural contexts (e.g., gender) of socialization into sport across generations of parents can be informative and could also reduce some of the limitations of retrospective accounts. Through this type of inquiry, important life course impacts and transitions in female sport involvement can be identified. As a result, an understanding of the socialization and participation process can be built and both researchers and practitioners can more effectively support the long-term involvement of girls and women in sport.

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