Examining the role and significance of parental support on children's uptake of sport

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Introduction

Previous literature has focused on motivations to participate in sport in a variety of ways, that is, the 'why' people get into sport. Less literature has examined 'how' people get into sport, that is, the key influencers; the 'who' behind decisions to take up sport. It is fairly well accepted that a person's gender, social class, 'race' and ethnicity, sexuality and whether they are disabled are key determinants of sports participation. There are additional complexities too, which demand we account for intersectionality, and the possibility that various identity markers overlap to both enable and constrain access to sporting opportunities. Contrary to these commonplace assumptions regarding the key 'determinants' of sports participation, a number of studies have postulated that it is actually family cultures that have the strongest influence on individuals' propensities to play sport (Birchwood et al., 2008; Wheeler, 2011). This is not to discount these other determinants because clearly these are present in all family contexts.

This chapter argues that parents have a significant influence (positive and negative) on uptake of sport among their children, and for ensuring continued engagement thereafter. However, it would be wrong to assume that sport is valued by everyone. Indeed, as this chapter will show, some children are actively deterred from participating in sport by their parents. Beyond the influence of parents, this chapter also points to the role of school and the community on uptake and maintenance of sports involvement.

This chapter examines the relationship between sport, the family, school and community using a social justice lens which advocates that everyone has the right to be involved in sport, irrespective of their gender, class, 'race'/ethnicity, sexuality, and whether or not they are disabled. Social justice research is however, more than simply assessing the

existence of disadvantage, it is (or at least should be) about embedding and assessing research influence and impact (Long et al., 2017). There may well be legislation in place (for example, The Equality Act (2010) in the UK) designed to redress certain 'imbalances' but there are persistent inequalities in accessing, participating and progressing in sport. Clearly, conceptualisations of social justice differ, but what they share is a recognition of inequality and a belief that inequality fundamentally does matter and is not commensurate with a socially just society. Crucially however, and as I have argued elsewhere, it is important to stress that a focus on social justice must be coupled with the belief in the existence of 'injustice', before change can occur (Fletcher & Hylton, 2018; Meir & Fletcher, 2019a). This is considered within the context of families examined in this chapter.

Sport, leisure and families

A great number of people are introduced to sport through the family and sport is something many families do and experience together (Elliott & Drummond, 2017; Jeanes & Magee, 2011; LaRossa, 2009; Quarmby, 2016; Trussell et al., 2017). For many families, sport is an important marker of their identities; something which sets them apart from other 'non-sporty' families (Fletcher, 2019). Families, too, are vitally important to sport as they invest a significant amount of time, energy and money into their consumption of it and, through primary socialisation, the next generation of players, spectators, coaches, referees/umpires and volunteers are introduced to it. However, 'doing' or experiencing sport and leisure *as a family* also runs the risk of conflicts and compromises over the wishes, wants, needs and preferences of different family members; not to mention being potentially stressful to coordinate (Mikkelsen & Blichfeldt, 2015) and unequally experienced (Musick et al., 2016; Trussell et al., 2017).

In an attempt to articulate the importance of leisure to family practices and family wellbeing, Shaw and Dawson (2001) coined the term 'purposive leisure'. According to Shaw

and Dawson, shared family leisure offers opportunities for children to learn moral and life lessons. Purposive leisure is also attributed with passing on parental expectations about behaviour and about life in general. This is what Dollahite and Hawkins (1998) refer to as generativity. To this end, Dagkas and Quarmby (2012) have suggested that families operate as a 'pedagogical' field where personal histories and prevailing social circumstances exert a strong influence on children's embodied physicalities. Within this context, parents are considered pedagogues, and families are engaged in the cultural transmission of values related to sport and leisure.

Most studies agree that children with more physically active parents are at a distinct advantage than children whose parents take no interest in physical activity (Quarmby, 2016). Likewise, studies also agree that the level of parental influence declines as both parents and children age (Quarmby, 2016). This is not to say that children automatically become less physically active, rather the influencers of this activity change to incorporate (or even orientate around) friends, coaches, and teachers (Day, 2017). These additional influencers are what I like to call the *extended* extended family (Fletcher, 2019). By *extended* extended family, I am referring to those *other* familial relationships where we feel loved, valued and supported by people from outside of our immediate family. It is my contention that bonds and relationships developed within the context of sport might legitimately be described as familial. Therefore, the concept extends our conception of family beyond the immediate family group to explore relationships developed in other contexts, notably through sport.

If we are to accept that parents (mothers and fathers together, though also separately) are *a*, or even *the* key influencer, this does beg the question of what becomes of young people whose parents do not/cannot support their sporting interests. It has been reported that children from lone parent families tend not to receive the same amount or kinds of support and encouragement for involvement in sport that their two parent, middle-class counterparts do

(Jenkins, 2009; Quarmby, 2016). Culture and religion have also been identified as particularly constraining for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) boys' and girls' participation in sport (Carrington et al., 2016; Matzani et al., 2017; Meir & Fletcher, 2019b; Stride et al., 2018). Moreover, questions related to gender, especially in the lives of girls, also continue to persist (Andreasson et al., 2018; Strandbu et al., 2019).

Now that I have provided a brief contextual and theoretical backdrop, I consider how participants in my project became involved in sport and some of the barriers encountered along the way. I identify three such routes, which often intersect: *family, school* and *the community*.

Family socialisation

Parents do not always (or even usually) enrol their children in sport with the expectation of them developing into professional athletes. Parents enrol their children in sport for a variety of seemingly non-sport reasons; aligned with the concept of 'purposive leisure' as defined earlier (Shaw & Dawson, 2001). For example, my research demonstrates that participation in sport is considered purposive in that, it is organised and facilitated to achieve particular long- and short-term goals, including keeping fit and healthy, helping make friends, and giving them credibility among peers (Fletcher, 2019). The latter was especially pertinent, though by no means isolated to boys who, it was often thought, rely on sport for the accumulation of playground capital. In some ways the family seemed to be important in reinforcing participants' likelihood of participating in sport, but in other cases, the family was a major constraint.

A relatively consistent narrative emerged around generativity, whereby individuals whose parents were involved in sport, or had been involved previously, were also likely to participate (Dollahite & Hawkins, 1998: Wheeler, 2011). There are exceptions of course. It is easy to see how choice of sport might be passed down through the generations as children watch and emulate their parents. Evidence from my research suggests that watching their father

play or kicking/throwing a ball around with their father was the staple of most participants' early years, though was particularly common for sons. Daughters regularly reported watching their father, but there was less evidence of them playing with him. No one mentioned watching their mother play or playing sport with their mother, though mothers were described as having an important supportive role. This finding is replicated elsewhere in literature that illuminates how mothers tend towards more 'backstage' practices, i.e., covert practices which often go unseen, but are nevertheless vital to supporting participation, such as being parent taxi. In this regard, it has been claimed that much of the 'hidden work' of sport socialisation and family leisure falls to women (Trussell et al., 2017). Such hidden work is no doubt essential to a child's enduring participation, but is scarcely acknowledged in the sport and leisure literature.

That fathers would introduce their children to sport and then actively nurture that interest was a common theme in this research. There were however, some instances where fathers were not around to do this. Indeed, some fathers' relationships with their children are defined more by absence than by presence. Father absence can be due to a variety of reasons. It may be by choice, or at least self-inflicted; those fathers who abandon their responsibilities, for example (see Blankenhorn, 1995). But often, absence is not by choice, for example non-resident fathers who are created through separation or divorce, or fathers who are separated through their occupation (e.g., being a professional athlete or deployed in the army), for whom their job has a deleterious impact on the amount of time they spend with their children (Watson, 2016).

In my research, where participants were raised in lone-parent families (invariably by their mother), barriers to sport participation were in large part financial, and attributed to or at least exacerbated by father absence. In all such cases, mothers were described as supportive, but as single parents, the time and resources they could devote to sport was highly constrained. That said, the view that father absence has inevitable negative impacts on the lives of fathers

and their children is being redressed with a growing body of research that directs attention away from father absence or deficit-related matters, and highlights instead how fathers can cope with separation and divorce, lead fulfilling lives and make major contributions to their children's development (Jenkins, 2009; Schänzel & Jenkins, 2017). For Jenkins (2009), where fathers experience sporadic or highly regulated contact with their children, the significance of this contact becomes less on the amount of time spent together, and more on what they do and the quality of interactions when they are together.

School

The second route into sport described by families I have worked with was school (Fletcher, 2019). In the UK, Physical education (PE) is a compulsory part of the curriculum for all pupils at every Key Stage, from age four to 16. It is up to schools to determine how much time is devoted to PE in the curriculum but departmental guidance recommends that they should provide pupils with a minimum of two hours of PE per week. The role and purpose of PE and school sport in England has evolved substantially over the last two decades. During this time numerous policy initiatives were implemented that made PE and school sport a key aspect of policy across government departments of health, education and sport (Lindsey, 2018). It was widely advocated that PE and school sport would play a significant role in helping government to achieve its broader (non-sport) social policy goals related to social justice, such as increased educational attainment, reducing the attainment gap, enhanced social cohesion and, to a lesser extent, health (Lindsey 2018; Meir & Fletcher, 2019a).

Within my research, school was often mentioned as *complimenting* existing practices of parents/families, but in a number of cases participants recalled how their parents had not been supportive, meaning that school would play a much more prominent role in their socialisation into sport. It was more common for some groups to refer to barriers than others.

Notably, BAME participants and older women were most likely to refer to having experienced resistance from their parents. Mo, for example, was born in the UK but his parents had migrated to the UK from the Kashmir region of Pakistan in the 1950s. He has three children aged between 1 and 13. Like most migrant families living in the UK at that time, Mo's parents were working class and to encourage social mobility, they had encouraged him to put his energy into his studies, rather than other leisure pursuits, which his parents perceived to have limited prospects of leading to a career (Bains, 2013; Fletcher et al., 2014; Long et al., 2015; Wilding, 2018). Having not had the encouragement of his parents, Mo's entry into sport came at school, and was warmly attributed to 'one particularly enthusiastic PE teacher'.

It is not that sport was absent from the lives of theBAME participants, like Mo. Indeed, a number of participants referred to the availability of sport on television, but sadly their parents' interest in watching sport did not necessarily transfer into encouraging their children to play. In the absence of any sustained parental influence, therefore, school, teachers and friends would take responsibility for nurturing interest. The most significant barrier to receiving parental support expressed by BAME participants was class in that, in an effort to provide for their children, their parents became increasingly time-starved. Class was certainly not a barrier experienced exclusively by BAME participants however, but it certainly was exacerbated among these groups (Lammy, 2013; Reynolds, 2009). There were other barriers that were experienced exclusively by BAME participants; most notably, racism. Participants reflected on how migrant groups frequently experienced barriers in their attempts to join and play sport for 'White' sport clubs; the result of which was that their early experiences of sport were restricted to opportunities provided at school (see Fletcher & Walle, 2014).

There is a mature body of literature which documents the barriers to sport facing BAME young people and adults (e.g., Carrington et al., 2016; Fletcher & Hylton, 2016; Ratna & Farooq-Samie, 2017). Though implicit in much of this literature, rarely have authors addressed

the impact of family and parents on these experiences (Stride et al., 2018). There was also a feeling that the extent to which sport mattered in BAME families depended on whether they were discussing sons or daughters. The most prominent examples came from the female Muslim participants, such as mother of three, Harpreet, who believed being the daughter of Muslim parents constrained her entry into sport. She attributed this to culture and traditional gender-specific expectations of Muslim girls, which she acknowledged were evolving for the better. In other examples, it was suggested that participation in sport was not necessarily understood (or supported) by older members of their family. There were a number of interesting examples of how ethnicity, gender and age can intersect within sporting contexts whereby, for younger participants, engaging in sport was normal and unspectacular, though for older members of their family, participation might be considered more radical; as pushing ethnic, cultural and gender boundaries.

It is now well acknowledged that parents will not automatically discourage their daughters, from any ethnic group, from pursuing an interest in sport (Bains, 2013; Matzani et al., 2017; Ratna & Farooq Samie, 2017; Stride et al., 2018). This study was no different. Girls regularly spoke about the positive influence of their parents on their entry into sport. Nevertheless, the shift in perception about the suitability and acceptability of sport for girls is still a fairly recent development. As this study took an intergenerational approach, which captured the view of women who grew up prior to these shifts, narratives addressing parental support differed considerably depending on the age of participants. Girls in the study tended to speak about having received support in much the same way as boys and men would, but the experiences of some women were much less positive. While by no means discouraged from participating in sport, older women in the study referred to receiving ambivalent support from their parents in that, while their parents had ensured they were equipped to play sport at school, they showed little interest or ambition in facilitating it outside of school. Other participants

cited a reliance on school; not because their parents lacked interest per se, rather because, at the time, formal opportunities for girls outside of school, such as clubs and coaching were not necessarily available. These women tended to speak positively about the changes witnessed since their childhood, but nevertheless lamented that the level of provision for young girls available now was not available when they were growing up.

While there did seem to be some patterns attributable to culture, ethnicity and gender, I must stress the importance of avoiding essentialism as there was also evidence of inter-family differences. Wheeler (2011) has previously argued that children whose parents provide support and encouragement are more likely to participate in sport than children whose parents do not. The greatest influences on parental support, or lack thereof were undoubtedly generation, gender, ethnicity, and their intersections. Barriers to participation among BAME groups and women and girls certainly do exist, but these barriers are becoming increasingly opaque and are more evidently moving away from outdated parental expectations and stereotypes related to acceptability (Carrington, et al., 2016; Long et al., 2015; Matzani et al., 2017; Ratna & Farooq-Samie, 2017; Stride et al., 2018).

The community

At the outset to this chapter I referred to the notion of the *extended* extended family, and advocated for the importance of family scholars looking beyond immediate family networks to consider other relationships we might well conceive of as being familial. A focus on familial relationships shifts our focus away from family being constituted by specific people (i.e., kin) or a specific place (i.e., the home or household) to consider the wider family network and diverse family arrangements. This is an important observation because beyond family and school, participants in my study also spoke of being introduced to sport more informally via observing others playing in the community, such as in parks, or the streets. As mentioned

above, when the older women respondents were growing up, opportunities for girls to play sport formally were limited. In the absence of any formal opportunities, participants referred to 'roaming' the neighbourhood with friends, searching for signs of sport being played, and initiating opportunities for themselves. For mother of two, Stacey, this was normal; it was what children (and especially girls) had to do at that time because other opportunities were minimal: 'There were places that you went to play, like the field. There was sport on it all the time in them days.'

Stacey is married to Shawn who grew up in a nearby village. Shawn's parents were landlords of a local public house, which significantly constrained their leisure time, while also ensuring that he and his brothers were well known in, and connected to, the community. Shawn has coached junior football and cricket for over 20 years. His son is actually a professional cricketer. Having seen the benefits formal opportunities can offer, he was even more frustrated about the lack of opportunities to play sport when he was growing up. Of those that were available, he remembered fondly how members of his local village would congregate around a Saturday afternoon football match, which created much needed opportunities for play and community togetherness.

However, not everyone manages to access community sport opportunities. Take the experience of Yusuf for instance. Yusuf migrated to the UK from Bombay (now Mumbai) in the early 1990. He was in his early 20s. He brought an interest in sport with him, but struggled to access sport through formal routes because he did not understand the UK pathways. His experiences of growing up in India were in stark contrast to those who grew up in the UK. In India, grassroots sport is played predominantly in the streets or Maidans (playing ground), with little guidance or input from adults or coaches (Bose, 2006). For Yusuf, growing up in this environment meant that sport was everywhere. Wherever he was in the city, at any time of day, he had access to some kind of sport. As a result of these prior experiences and, in particular,

the ease of participation, Yusuf found the structured nature of UK sport; with its set times and locations to be quite exclusionary. For a discussion of the benefits of diversifying the formal sport 'offer' to 'hard to reach' groups and young people, see Hylton et al. (2015) Jeanes et al. (2019) and Long et al. (2015) respectively.

Routes into sport are undoubtedly now much clearer and the overall provision for sport in the community, at school and at local clubs is more developed than when Shawn, Stacey, Yusuf and others in this study were growing up. It remains important for young people to be exposed to sport in their local communities, whether formally or informally. As I have demonstrated elsewhere (Fletcher et al., 2014; Hylton et al., 2015), sport is played in a variety of settings, by a variety of people, and the model that sport should be played in organised leagues and teams does not necessarily work for everyone. Indeed, this finding is replicated in a variety of national contexts (see Jeanes et al., 2019). For some young people, the idea of joining in a game of 'jumpers for goalposts' football or quick cricket in the street or park is likely to be the only exposure they get. However, as Stacey pointed out above, the ability of young people to take it upon themselves to 'roam' around their local communities is increasingly constrained by, among other things, a culture of intensive parenting and moral panics around their safety (Johansson & Andreasson, 2017).

Conclusion

Access to sport is a basic human right and in a socially just world, everyone would have equal access and opportunities to progress. Of course, while for some sport matters, for others it does not. In the UK over the last 20 years we have witnessed a much more pronounced commitment among policy makers, sports organisations and governing bodies to social justice. There is clear evidence that, in a highly competitive marketplace, and in the race to increase participation figures, sport's administrators are having to come up with more innovative and inclusive

sporting practices to improve opportunities for BAME groups, women and girls, people with disabilities, the working class and others in sport. I would contend that the success of these initiatives relies heavily on families.

This chapter has revealed three routes into sport. Firstly, this chapter contends that parents have a significant influence on uptake of sport among their children, and for ensuring continued engagement thereafter. Parental influence was exerted in a number of direct and indirect, intentional and unintentional strategies and practices, which were invariably affected by the extent to which sport was valued by different members of families. This chapter reveals that sport was valued more by, and was more accessible to, White parents compared to BAME parents; clear generational differences exist in the way boys/men and girls/women were introduced to sport; and there was strong evidence of gendered parenting, whereby boys tend to be encouraged into sport more than girls. Moreover, children were also reliant on the influence of people outside of their family – their *extended* extended family - for example significant others at school and in the community. The role of the latter is certainly worth further attention given current evidence that parents and young people are increasingly turning to formal settings and professional sports coaches (Coakley, 2009) to facilitate sporting opportunities, not to mention evidence around the influence of informal sporting opportunities and spaces for connecting with 'hard to reach' young people (see Hylton et al., 2015; Jeanes et al., 2019; Meir & Fletcher, 2019b).

Contemporary society has seen a shift in the way young people are understood. In part, this re-articulation has emerged from ideas associated with a social justice agenda, including the importance of fairness, equity and citizenship (Miller, 2005; Rawls, 1993). This kind of thinking has led to an increasing recognition that there is a need to value and listen to the voices of young people to better understand their experiences. Young people have become positioned as 'experts' in their own lives (Stride & Fitzgerald, 2017). This way of thinking has found

purchase internationally through human rights.[1] In the UK, legislation (The Children Act, 2004) and policy (e.g., Every Child Matters, 2004) has echoed a need to recognise and engage with young people about their lives and, in so doing, has shifted the emphasis away from research *on* young people to research *with* and *by* young people, which is essential to better understanding how young people grapple with family practices in and beyond sport (Jeanes, 2013).

However, though advocates for social justice would welcome research which privileges the voice of young people, and which centralises their experiences (see Chawansky & Mitra, 2015; Jeanes, 2013;), I am also minded to recommend future research asks more meaningful questions on the impact of children on the sport and leisure activities of their parents/guardians. This is something I have begun (see Fletcher, 2019), but the weight of discussion has inadvertently privileged the influence of parents and their generative practices on children. Related to this, research might extend discussions to consider the influence of youth sport on couples and their time together. Research indicates that couples with children struggle to carve out time for themselves, choosing instead to prioritise the interests of their children. Given that parents spend a great deal of time, energy and resources facilitating child-centred leisure activities, including sport, it is not unreasonable to suppose that parents should derive some benefit for their efforts, without being accused of failing in their child-centred mission (Brown, 2018). Given that youth participation in (and indeed, removal from) sport is heavily influenced by parents, organisers of youth sport would do well to broaden the ideology that youth sport exists exclusively 'for the kids' and acknowledge that, not only can parents enjoy benefits from their participation, *they should do*.

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[1] For example, The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child: https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/what-we-do/childrens-rights/united-nations-convention-of-the-rights-of-the-child