

Empowering women through sport participation across the lifespan

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Women's sport motivations, experiences, and outcomes vary widely across culture and lifespan (Dixon, 2009). One outcome often associated with sport participation is empowerment. Indeed, sport participation can empower women and produce positive outcomes, yet sport experiences can also have negative outcomes such as disempowerment (e.g., Brace-Govan, 2004; Wheaton & Tomlinson, 1998). These dual outcomes suggest that sport does not automatically produce positive results, but is dependent on participant motives as well as the design and delivery of the sport experience (Chalip, 2006). The purpose of this study is to utilize Zimmerman's psychological empowerment (PE) framework and lifecourse theory to explore the sport experiences of women across several lifestages, and the empowerment processes and outcomes associated with those experiences.

At the individual level of analysis psychological empowerment is defined as a process by which individuals 1) perceive and gain control over personal issues, 2) understand their environment critically, and 3) take actions to influence the issues in their lives or communities (Rappaport, 1987; Zimmerman, 1990). Zimmerman's PE framework (1995) provides useful insights into the processes and experiences related with each of these. In addition, lifecourse theory (e.g., Sweet & Moen, 2006) suggests that people's lives, needs, and motivations must be understood in the context of their lifecourse. It is likely that the factors that impact both their participation and the potential empowerment will also vary over the lifecourse. Thus, if we are to design empowering experiences, we need to understand how specific sport experiences affect female participants' daily lives across different life domains and to identify which attributes of these sport experiences facilitate women's empowerment.

This study utilized an interpretive approach to capture women's sport experiences from their perspectives and in their own terms. This study focused on Korean women (married, single, with children, no children, ages 22-40 years) who live in South Korea, and who participate in some kind of sport (e.g., basketball, soccer, baseball, yoga, swimming). South Korea is a nation where women and men have traditionally been valued differently. Thus, life and sport experiences are quite different for women and men, especially over the lifespan and in different age cohorts (Renshaw, 2011). As gender roles continue to transition in this country (UNDP, 2009), South Korea provides a rich context for the study of women's individual empowerment over their lifespan.

Using snowball and purposive sampling, 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in person with Korean female sport participants. The interview guide consisted of three parts: backgrounds of respondents and their sport participation, description of their sport experiences that have strengthened and weakened their capabilities; description of how they would design a sport program to strengthen their capabilities. Probes

were utilized throughout to elicit information regarding the surrounding circumstances in which those experiences occurred and outcomes in their daily lives.

Initial coding consisted of both open and axial coding of themes interspersed with an examination of the relevant literature, including empowerment theory. Then, selective coding was conducted using Zimmerman's framework and lifecourse theory to examine factors related to participation as well as outcomes.

Nearly all the components and elements of the PE framework emerged in the data. Though the majority were empowering, both empowering and disempowering outcomes were identified. The empowering outcomes included focus on self, desire to change negativity in life, challenge of gaining new skills and knowledge, and resistance against gendered treatment.

Some of the sport experiences that affected the outcomes were sport as an outlet to relieve anger, focus on their bodies, learning new skills, and outplaying males. Disempowering outcomes included feelings of exclusion, discomfort around males, and no reduction in life negativity. The sport elements that affected those outcomes included overly public spaces, female-only programs, and negative reactions from significant others.

From a lifecourse perspective, results revealed that the sport chosen, the sport outcomes, and the empowerment outcomes were related to the women's lifestage. Younger women preferred co-ed sport experiences and the opportunity to try traditionally male sport. Older women, particularly married, preferred individual sport and female-only experiences. Some of the women's empowerment was limited to the sport context, while some infiltrated other life domains; their experiences and empowerment were tied to participant motives, participant lifestage, and program design (Dixon, 2009). These findings point to recommendations for sport managers in the concept, design, and implementation of sport experiences for women that have a greater impact on the participants' personal empowerment and that are specific to their cultural and lifestage needs and motives.

References

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