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A longitudinal analysis of commitment among competitive female gymnasts

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the dynamic nature of commitment *types* among elite female gymnasts. We conducted a 1-year follow-up of gymnasts (Weiss, W.M., & Weiss, M.R. (2003). Attraction- and entrapment-based commitment among competitive female gymnasts. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 25, 229-247.) to determine (a) their participation status in relation to previous commitment *type*, (b) whether commitment *types* change over time, (c) whether commitment *types* differed in social influence, and (d) whether commitment *types* differed on *level* of sport commitment. Participants comprised adolescent gymnasts sampled 1 year earlier (full sample for first purpose; subsample for remaining purposes). Frequency data showed that 86% of the gymnasts were still competing 1 year later, and participation status was related to commitment *type* the previous year. A cluster analysis revealed the same commitment *types* for gymnasts in the sample at both years one and two: attracted, entrapped, vulnerable, and uninterested commitment. A total of 63.5% of gymnasts were classified in the same commitment profile while 36.5% “cluster hopped”. Attracted gymnasts reported greater parent and coach support, lower parent and teammate constraints, and higher level of commitment than entrapped gymnasts. Collectively, findings highlight the dynamic nature of sport commitment.

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1. A longitudinal analysis of commitment among competitive female gymnasts

Motivation and continued participation in competitive sport are affected by several psychological and social factors (Scanlan & Simons, 1992; Weiss & Petlichkoff, 1989). Examining sport commitment is

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one way of looking at motivation to persist in one's involvement in organized athletic or other physical activities. The sport commitment model, proposed by Scanlan and colleagues (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993; Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt, & Keeler, 1993), suggests that athletes' enjoyment, personal investments, involvement opportunities, attractive alternatives, social constraints, and social support (Scanlan, Russell, Beals, & Scanlan, 2003) should predict athletes' *level* of sport commitment or their desire and resolve to continue participation.

Enjoyment, such as feelings of pleasure and fun, is the strongest predictor of sport commitment, with higher enjoyment being related to higher commitment (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993; Scanlan, Simons, et al., 1993). Personal investments are resources an individual puts into her or his sport participation, such as time, effort, and energy. Involvement opportunities are positive aspects or benefits of participating that individuals can only obtain if they continue in sport (e.g. winning awards, being part of a team, achieving goals). Both personal investments and involvement opportunities should be positively related to sport commitment. Attractive alternatives are any activities that might compete with one's current sport participation for an individual's time, energy, and attention. That is, how alluring or attractive are other options relative to one's current sport participation? Thus, attractive alternatives are negatively related to sport commitment. Social constraints refer to perceived obligation to significant others, such as parents, coaches, and teammates, to continue participation in sport. Feelings of obligation to others to continue in sport act to "pull" the athlete into staying involved, thus being positively related to level of sport commitment. Lastly, social support refers to positive regard from significant others and should positively influence sport commitment. Research by Scanlan and colleagues supports the linkage among these constructs with youth recreational, youth competitive, and adult elite-level athletes (Carpenter, Scanlan, Simons, & Lobel, 1993; Scanlan et al., 2003; Scanlan, Simons, et al., 1993).

In addition to understanding the factors that predict desire and resolve to continue participation, the construct of commitment has been conceptualized in terms of different *types* of commitment. For example, Rusbult (1980, 1983) demonstrated that individuals may be committed to their jobs or social relationships for positive reasons (attraction-based commitment) or for negative reasons (entrapment-based commitment). Schmidt and Stein (1991) proposed similar differences in commitment toward sport. They suggested that athletes committed to their involvement in sport because of *attraction* reasons should report higher benefits (similar to involvement opportunities), enjoyment, and investments, and lower costs and fewer attractive alternatives associated with their participation. In contrast, athletes who are committed to their sport because of feelings of *entrapment* should perceive decreasing or lower enjoyment and benefits, and increasing or higher costs associated with their involvement. Despite this negative outlook, and similar to athletes who exhibit attraction-based commitment, entrapped athletes perceive they have invested considerably to their experiences and do not see other activities as appealing or viable alternatives. Thus, entrapped athletes are experiencing greater negatives than positives associated with their sport involvement, but remain involved because they have invested so much and feel that other options are not available or satisfying. Schmidt and Stein also proposed a profile of a *low committed* athlete, characterized as having lower enjoyment, benefits, and investments, and higher costs and attractive alternatives. Given this profile, the low committed athlete is a prime candidate for dropping out of sport.

Research has demonstrated support for Schmidt and Stein's (1991) predictions with adolescent athletes (Raedeke, 1997; Weiss & Weiss, 2003) and coaches (Raedeke, Granzky, & Warren, 2000; Raedeke, Warren, & Granzky, 2002). Raedeke found four commitment types among competitive swimmers that provided support for most of Schmidt and Stein's predictions. Attracted and low-committed swimmers were identical

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