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Examining social influences on the sport commitment of Masters swimmers

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The purpose was to use the Sport Commitment Model (Scanlan, Russell, Beals, & Scanlan, 2003) to examine social influences and the specific social agents/sources that foster a resolve to continue sport.
Design: Cross-sectional survey.
Methods: Masters swimmers ($n = 424$; M age = 54.0; 220 m, 204 f) completed a survey (Wilson et al., 2004) assessing perceptions of 2 commitment types, social support and constraints relating to 8 sources in their social environment, and perceptions of 4 non-social determinants (enjoyment, personal investments, involvement opportunities, involvement alternatives).
Results: In Analysis 1, only scores for support and constraints relating to each social source were entered into simultaneous regression models for functional ($R^2 = .11$, $p < .01$) and obligatory commitment ($R^2 = .39$, $p < .001$), separately. Critical social influence variables were identified, advanced to Analysis 2, and entered simultaneously with 4 non-social determinants into regression models for each commitment type. Enjoyment ($\beta = .42$), personal investments (.28), social constraints from own children (.15), and investment alternatives (−.12) (all $ps < .05$) predicted functional commitment ($R^2 = .57$, $p < .001$). Involvement opportunities ($\beta = .23$), involvement alternatives (.23), social constraints from spouse (.24), own children (.19), and training partners (.13), and social support from health professionals (−.15) (all $ps \leq .05$) explained obligatory commitment ($R^2 = .47$, $p < .001$).
Conclusion: When designing interventions to sustain participation, subsets of Masters athletes reporting a broad social network would benefit from a focus on reducing pressures from spouse, children, and training mates, while heightening support from health practitioners.

Cross-sectional trends have shown that, for populations on the whole, as people age, rates of sport participation drop at each successive stage of life (e.g., Owen & Bauman, 1992). However, one exceptional cohort contradicts this trend by demonstrating high participation rates in adulthood, and by showing remarkable adherence to sport across the lifespan, or re-engagement into sport at some later point in life. This cohort, referred to as Masters athletes, typically includes people over the age of 35 years who participate in competitive sport, and who acknowledge that their competitive aspirations engender a regular pattern of investment in preparatory/training activities. They are of interest in that they might inform our understanding of factors that facilitate sport commitment across the lifespan.

The Sport Commitment Model (SCM; Scanlan, Russell, Beals, & Scanlan, 2003) has been advocated to explain peoples' "desire and resolve to continue participation in sport over time" (Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler, 1993, p. 6). SCM is founded in social exchange theory (e.g., Rusbalt & Farrell, 1983) and the tenet that an individual's decision to sustain involvement in a target behavior (e.g., sport or job) is based on their coincident appraisal of three forces: those attracting them to the activity, those attracting them to alternative activities, and those restraining them from ceasing involvement in the activity. According to SCM, greater commitment is directly influenced by higher levels of enjoyment, involvement opportunities, and social support (i.e., attracting toward), higher levels of social constraints and personal investment (i.e., restraining forces), and lower levels of attractive involvement alternatives (i.e., attracting away) (Scanlan, Carpenter, et al., 1993). *Enjoyment* refers to feelings of positive affect, liking, and fun derived from sport. *Involvement opportunities* represent real or anticipated valued opportunities and benefits that are present only through continued sport involvement, such as the opportunity to

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be with friends, to travel, to become more skilled, or to achieve personal goals. *Personal investment* refers to resources such as time, effort, and money associated with sport participation that are irretrievable if sport involvement were discontinued. *Social support* is the "support and encouragement the athlete perceives significant others provide for their involvement in sport" (Scanlan et al., 2003, p. 379). *Social constraints* reflect expectations or norms from significant others that foster feelings of obligation to remain in sport. Finally, *involvement alternatives* refer to the attractiveness of alternative activities that would be more worthwhile or meaningful than continued sport participation.

Research in youth sport has shown general support for the determinants of SCM (Scanlan, Simons, Carpenter, Schmidt, & Keeler, 1993; Scanlan et al., 2003). However, the hypothesized contribution from 'social constraints' in predicting commitment has been inconsistent. Although social constraints represent a type of negative influence, increases in social constraints were viewed as a restraining force and thus originally posited to be associated with increased commitment. For example, it was argued that a person stays in sport to avoid the negative sanctions he/she believes would be experienced at the hands of others if they were to leave. Results indicate that social constraints had no effect on commitment when the social pressures were attributed to friends or parents (Carpenter, 1992), and a weak negative effect when the source of potential social pressures was not identified (Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Carpenter & Scanlan, 1998; Scanlan, Simons, et al., 1993). Finally, Carpenter (1992) found a weak positive effect of one particular form of social constraint, obligation to the coach, on commitment.

Social support was more recently added to the SCM (Carpenter & Coleman, 1998; Scanlan et al., 2003) and is hypothesized to be positively associated with commitment. Social support could not be previously independently distinguished as a determinant of sport commitment because it had been subsumed under 'enjoyment' and 'involvement opportunities'. With the addition of 'support' to complement 'constraints', SCM captures a two-sided perspective on social influence that aligns better with the original proposition of social exchange theorists, that is, social influence entails benefits and costs, and can have potentially positive and negative consequences (Rook, 1992). Preliminary research with adolescent athletes has demonstrated that fluctuations in social support over the course of a season were associated with changes in commitment levels (Carpenter & Coleman, 1998). Furthermore, elite young adult athletes related their enduring commitment to various agents of social support and endorsement, including family members, the sport community, friends, and media (Scanlan et al., 2003). Thus, given the equivocal findings related to 'social constraints' and the more recent addition of 'social support' to SCM, there is a need to examine how each construct predicts sport commitment.

Amongst older adults, higher perceptions of social support are associated with adherence to exercise classes, self-efficacy for physical activity, and perceived behavioral control in exercise settings (Chogahara, O'Brien-Cousins, & Wankel, 1998). Chogahara (1999) found that social support significantly determined leisure-time energy expenditures in a sample of active seniors beyond that explained by age, health status, and other socio-demographic variables. Sallis et al. (1989) and O'Brien-Cousins (1993) demonstrated that the activity level of older women was more strongly determined by social support than was the case for younger women, leading O'Brien-Cousins (1995) to identify social support "among the most promising variables explaining the deficient activity patterns of older adults" (p. 273). To date, research on social support in older populations has almost exclusively related to casually active samples who engage in physical activities that are less frequent, and less intense than those of sport participants (Chogahara et al., 1998).

In the present study, we aimed to ask participants about the nature of the influence that various people in their social networks provide, specifically asking about the degree of encouragement/approval, or the degree of pressure/potential disapproval that they perceive from others. This approach recognizes that social influence is not exclusively positive, and therefore, follows recommendations to independently assess both *positive* and *negative* social influences (Chogahara et al., 1998). Chogahara (1999) demonstrated the importance of a joint but independent assessment of these influences, and the need to assess these influences as they relate to various sub-groups in social environments. In a sample of active seniors, results showed that positive and negative social influence measures both significantly and independently predicted activity levels. Furthermore, the respective contributions of positive social influence and negative social influence on physical activity levels varied depended on whether the social influence measures addressed perceptions of one's family, friends, or health professional experts, demonstrating the need to consider different social sub-groups separately. Sasidharan, Payne, Orsega-Smith, and Godbey (2006) similarly demonstrated *source-specificity* of social influence in that perceived support from friends significantly influenced physical activity participation but support from family did not directly influence participation.

Few studies have examined social support with Masters athletes. Golding and Ungerleider (1991) discovered a weak positive association between training frequency and perceived social support from friends, but no association with perceived emotional support from various other social resources. Medic, Starkes, Young, Weir, and Giajnorio (2005a) found that Masters runners who trained with a coach, or with other sport peers, exhibited a more self-determined motivational profile compared to athletes with no coach, or those who did not train with a group. While neither study included measures for negative influence, both considered sub-group sources of support. Chogahara et al. (1998) proposed a possible list of sub-group sources or agents of social influence amongst older exercisers that included spouses, children, other family members, peers, exercise instructors (coaches), and physicians. In the present investigation, we examined both positive and negative influences reported by Masters swimmers, separately, in relation to these latter six sub-groups/agents, as well as in relation to swimmers' training mates and sport club peers. To date, no research has examined the two social influence dimensions as they relate to Masters' sport commitment, nor have any studies been published which related scores for these dimensions to identifiable sub-groups/agents in the social environment.

In Analysis 1, we employed items for the social support and social constraints constructs from the SCM, with each construct measured in relation to various sub-group sources/agents within swimmers' social environment. Our goal in Analysis 1 was to submit each of these source-specific measures for social support and social constraints to analyses that would explain sport commitment. Wilson et al. (2004) expanded the initial unidimensional construct for sport commitment to include two different types of sport commitment – one which reflects *functional* ("want to") commitment and another representing *obligatory* ("have to") commitment. Wilson et al. showed that for adult exercisers different groups of SCM determinants predicted these two different commitment types. In the current investigation, we therefore proposed that social support and social constraints determinants will directly but differentially predict levels of functional and obligatory commitment. In Analysis 1, we submitted the source-specific measures for each of social support and social constraints to analyses to predict functional commitment, independently from analyses to predict obligatory commitment. We hypothesized that social support would be positively associated