Making Decisions: Gender and Sport Participation Among British Adolescents

Jay Coakley
University of Colorado

Anita White
West Sussex Institute of Higher Education

This study explored the dynamics of how young people make decisions about their sport participation. In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with 34 young men and 26 young women, ages 13–23 (only 3 were older than 18), from predominantly working-class families residing in an industrial area southeast of London. Interviews focused on descriptions of sport experiences, how young people defined and interpreted those experiences, how this influenced decisions about participation, and how participation was integrated into the rest of their lives. We found that young women and men shared concerns about their transition into adulthood and had common desires to develop and display personal competence and autonomy. However, these common concerns were significantly mediated by gender. Furthermore, gender differences were found in the ways sport experiences were defined and interpreted, in the ways that constraints related to money, parents, and opposite-sex friends operated, and in the ways that past experiences in physical education and school sports were incorporated into current decision-making about sport participation.

In 1985 the British Sports Council initiated a media-marketing campaign designed to ‘‘sell’’ sport participation to young people, especially 14- to 18-year-old working-class youth who had quit or never participated in organized sport programs. The campaign, promoted under the slogan ‘‘Ever Thought of Sport?’’ involved three waves of poster blitzes (on buses, in underground stations, etc.), a series of radio commercials featuring a popular comedian promoting organized sports, six promotional half-hour television programs accompanied by leaflets, and a special phone-in service to provide information on available programs. The poster blitzes were scheduled to coincide with school vacations. In addition to the national campaign, regional and local sports council offices and departments promoted specific programs in their own areas. The general goal was to get young people switched on to organized sport activities, which were defined by

Jay Coakley is with the Sociology Department at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, CO 80933-7150. Anita White is with the Sports Council, 16 Upper Woburn Place, London WC1H OQP England.
many adults in positions of power within the Sports Council as constructive and healthy leisure pursuits.

The overall success of the campaign was mixed. Although some sport programs did attract new participants, it was generally felt that young people had not been favorably influenced by the media-marketing materials. Many people thought the images used in the campaign were derogatory and patronizing. For example, posters portrayed those who did not participate in organized sport programs as dull, apathetic, and “switched off” to life, while participants in formally organized programs were portrayed as clean-cut, energetic, interesting, and “switched on” to life (illustrated by a bright, switched-on light bulb above their heads).

This paper is based on a qualitative evaluation study carried out in conjunction with the campaign: the study was funded by one of the regional Sports Council offices (Greater London and South East Region). The director and staff in this office were interested in more than the planned statistical summary of national pre/post campaign participation data. Instead of focusing on the campaign itself, we collected data on the sport participation choices made by young people in the targeted age groups, the social and relational contexts in which choices were made, and the connection between choices and the ways in which the young people perceived themselves and their lives.

The study was grounded in an interactionist approach. It was not assumed that young people somehow get socialized into sport in response to external influences, nor was it assumed that socialization into sport conforms to an instantaneous conversion model, although that was the model on which the Ever Thought of Sport? campaign was based. Instead, it was assumed that young people become involved in sport through a series of shifting, back-and-forth decisions made within the structural, ideological, and cultural context of their social worlds. Therefore the study was designed to explore the following:

1. The problematic nature of both participation and nonparticipation in sport;
2. The decision-making processes underlying sport involvement; and
3. The ways in which sport participation decisions are related to the situations and events in young people’s lives, and to the ways young people see themselves and their connections to the rest of the social world.

Stevenson (1990a, 1990b) used a similar approach in his study of the process of identity development among young people as they became involved in and committed to the pursuit of goals in specialized, elite amateur sports. Donnelly and Young (1988) also used an interactionist approach in their study of the process of identity construction and confirmation among serious rock climbers and rugby players. Unlike the research of Stevenson or Donnelly and Young, this study did not focus on elite athletes or on those whose identities as athletes were exceptionally salient and grounded in a long-term association with a specific group of fellow sport participants. Instead, our sample consisted of young people who did not have exceptional physical skills or a strong desire to take sport seriously; these were young people for whom sport involvement was not a central life concern or a central source of self-identification. Nevertheless, we were concerned with how these young people went about making choices to participate or not participate in formally organized sports and in informally organized physical activities.
In line with more recent critiques of the "socialization into sport" literature (Fishwick & Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer, 1987; Greendorfer & Bruce, 1989; Hasbrook, 1989; McPherson, 1980, 1986; Nixon, 1990; Theberge, 1984), we were interested in the ways in which young people act as agents creating their own sport lives within the constraints of the social situations in which they make choices about what they will do and who they will be. Although this study was not designed to highlight the effects of gender in this decision-making process, we found that gender had a powerful and pervasive impact on the lives of the young people we interviewed. This paper demonstrates the importance of gender, by itself and in conjunction with class, in understanding the decisions young people make about sport involvement.

Methods

The Interviews

In-depth semistructured interviews were conducted with 26 young women and 34 young men, ages 13–23, only 3 of whom were older than 18. Half of the interviewees were chosen because they were actively involved in a series of sports programs promoted in conjunction with the Ever Thought of Sport? campaign, while the other half were identified by teachers or program organizers as dropouts or nonparticipants. In selecting the sample, we attempted to talk with equal numbers of males and females from as many racial and ethnic backgrounds as possible.

About 85% of the young people were white, native Britons, while 15% had other racial or ethnic backgrounds (blacks with either African or West Indian heritage, Indians, and other Asians). About 75% were from working-class families and 25% were from moderately successful middle-class families. Interviews lasted about 45 minutes each and were tape-recorded. Conversations elicited information about personal background including school attended and employment status, living situation, family, and the occupations of the adults in their household.

The order in which topics were covered during the interviews varied for each respondent depending on the circumstances under which the interview was conducted and what was disclosed in response to questions about personal background. Our intention was to make the interviews as much like informal conversations as possible. We did not want the young people to be intimidated, nor did we want them to think that we had some hidden agenda underlying our interviews.

Despite variations, each interview usually began with questions about the respondents' sport background and the activities they engaged in during their leisure time. After obtaining general descriptions of the nature and frequency of their leisure activities, we asked specific questions about what happened when

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1 The Greater London and South East Regional Sports Council commissioned this study as part of a larger evaluation of a campaign designed to attract more young people into sport. A full report, including background information about the respondents, the area in which the research was conducted, and recommendations to the Sports Council is available (White & Coakley, 1986).
they first decided to become involved in certain activities, their initial experiences in those activities, the dynamics of staying involved, and how they perceived their involvement patterns in the future. Furthermore, we asked about relationships between specific leisure activities and friends (same sex and opposite sex), family members, school, work (where appropriate), and any other people and activities. The overall goal of the interviews was to elicit descriptions of the events and situations associated with decisions to participate or not participate in targeted programs as well as sport and leisure activities in general.

In our discussions about participation decisions, we avoided asking "why?" questions. Such questions usually encourage answers in the form of clichés because people often find it difficult to articulate their motives and, when they try, they often construct answers to justify their behaviors in ways they think the interviewers will accept as legitimate. Instead, we focused on what, when, and how things happened in the young people's lives. This made it much easier to probe for clarification in an unthreatening manner. We never wanted the young people to think we were challenging their decisions or demanding explanations for why they did certain things, or why they chose some activities over others. We were looking for descriptions for what happened in their lives rather than justifications for why they did what they did.

We were pleased with the dynamics of the interviews. The respondents generally enjoyed talking about themselves, and even the shy or defiant ones seemed to warm up after the conversation got going. In only one case did we seriously doubt the honesty of the information being disclosed by a respondent.

Qualitative Analysis

It is not easy to use interview data as a basis for making conclusions. Such data cannot be used to generate statistics that can be compared and analyzed apart from the lives of those being studied. However, they do provide information beyond the sometimes superficial responses elicited by survey questionnaires sent to a large sample of respondents. The challenge in analyzing interview data is in identifying patterns in the responses of different individuals and highlighting important content in a wide range of information given by each respondent.

After completing each interview, we made notes about any aspects of the interview that might be helpful during the analysis phase. As soon as possible, we listened to the tapes together, noted emerging patterns in the data, and transcribed key statements made by the young people. Throughout the analysis process we raised critical questions about our interpretations of interview statements. When making sense out of these statements, it was necessary to interpret them in light of how behavior is influenced by the social settings in which choices about behavior are made; therefore, factors such as age, gender, social class, race/ethnicity, and the nature of important relationships in the person's life were taken into account during the interpretation process.

Findings

The interview data indicated that the decisions young people made about sport participation reflected the following:

1. A consideration of the future, especially the transition to adulthood;
2. A desire to display and extend personal competence and autonomy;
3. Constraints related to money, parents, and opposite-sex friends;
4. Support and encouragement from parents, relatives, and/or peers;
5. Past experiences in school sports and physical education.

Each factor is discussed in the following sections with reference to the ways in which young women and young men define themselves, their lives, and the place of sport in their lives.

1. Decisions about sport participation were based on concerns about becoming adults. Decisions about participation in sport activities were often grounded in concerns about how those activities were connected to the young person’s transition into adulthood. This was especially the case for those over 15 years of age. Most of these young people were extremely sensitive to the issue of growing up, and they often chose leisure activities they thought would either prepare them for adult roles or give them opportunities to do adult things (i.e., to be independent and autonomous). They seemed to recognize that the transition from adolescence to adulthood was a significant turning point in their lives, and they spent considerable time and energy trying to move through that transition successfully. Decisions to participate in certain sport activities were most likely made when the activities were seen as related to this transition to adulthood. When the activities were seen as interfering with this transition, or if the activities were associated with childhood, the young people almost always decided not to participate.

Some young people clearly indicated that involvement in highly structured adult-organized sport programs was subjectively associated with being a child or being a student, two roles they often wanted to leave behind them. For example, a 15-year-old told us that she and her friends dropped out of school netball in their 3rd year because they thought it was “babyish.” One of the things making it babyish was that they had to play with younger girls. A further problem was that boys were often around to observe them, and they did not want boys defining them as immature. When young people linked a sport activity to childhood, they defined participation as either irrelevant to the way they saw themselves as adolescents or as babyish. The result was that they did not seek opportunities to become involved in organized sport activities.

This orientation was also noted in our interviews with young people who had just made the transition from primary school to secondary school, especially in the case of young women. Some respondents thought that when they entered secondary school they were supposed to be “grown up,” and that being grown up did not involve playing “kids’ games” or learning to do physical activities and sports normally learned as a child in primary school or in children’s programs. They thought that if one did not already know how to do certain physical activities or play certain sports, it was not appropriate, in light of their concerns about becoming adults, to go back and learn what they had not learned during childhood. This conclusion was most likely among young people who perceived sport programs as organized and supervised by adults who would treat them as children instead of as young people concerned with taking control of their own lives.

To our respondents, being an adult meant having a job and being independent, or being married and starting a family, but it did not mean playing sports in settings that could not in some way be linked to adulthood. For those with this
orientation, making the decision to participate in an organized sport program and learning to play sports that others learned to play as children was perceived as a step backward in their development.

Young women were more likely than young men to conclude that sport had little or nothing to do with adulthood for them. They did not define sport in ways that would connect it with the process of becoming a woman. In fact the opposite tended to be the case. Becoming a woman, according to the norms they had learned while growing up, usually meant that sport participation was given a low priority in their lives. More relevant to womanhood were activities and relationships through which femininity, in a traditional sense, could be reaffirmed. The young women generally used traditional gender stereotypes to define what should happen during their transition to adulthood. Among young men, sport participation was much more likely to be seen as compatible with becoming a man, even when it had no direct connection with jobs or future careers. Involvement in sports was seen by some as a reaffirmation of their manhood. However, the young women did not see their womanhood similarly reaffirmed through sport participation.

The only exceptions to this pattern were three young women who clearly saw sports and physical activities as avenues through which they could prove to themselves and to males that they deserved respect as competent human beings. For example, a 17-year-old who did weight training explained her interest in the following way:

I think mainly I want to be able to be equal with the blokes because I think too many girls get pushed around by blokes. They get called names and things. I think that's wrong. They say "a girl can't do this, a girl can't do that," and I don't like it at all. I'd rather be, you know, equal.

A second young woman, 15 years old, indicated that sport was just as important for girls as it was for boys because "if you sort of excel at sport as a girl, at least you get the respect of the boys rather than hearing 'oh, she's a sissy little girl'." Another young woman, an 18-year-old who had taken a sport leadership training course and who was very sensitive to the chauvinism of many males, took great pride in showing males that their gender stereotypes did not apply to her in sport settings. She explained her orientation in a description of what happened in a volleyball game in which she was the only female participant:

There was a few chauvinistic men there but I proved myself in the end. We all had a game of volleyball and I was the only girl playing. First they said "don't pass it to her." Little did they know I was one of the best players at our school. I started doing these smashes over their heads and won their respect in the end. But you really have to prove yourself to them, but they're alright now.

2. Decisions about sport participation were based on concerns about personal competence. In our interviews it was apparent that young people were most likely to participate in a sport activity when it was seen as an avenue for displaying or extending their competence. Research has shown that perceived competence is a primary motivational factor underlying voluntary participation in any sport activity (Burton & Martens, 1986; Evans & Roberts, 1987; Feltz & Petlichkoff, 1983; Klint & Weiss, 1987; Nichols, 1984; Roberts, Kleiber, &
Duda, 1981), so this was not a surprising finding. For example, a 13-year-old dancer explained that she liked dancing "because I know myself I can do it."

A thoughtful, unemployed young man who had just turned 20 said that without certain skills a person could not experience the challenges provided by sports and leisure activities. He played chess and board games because he was good enough at them to experience the challenges they offered. But the challenges offered by football (soccer) escaped him because he didn't have the physical skills needed to play the game at a certain level. He explained, "I'm not very interested in football...if I was a better player, then yes, I'd play more." A 16-year-old member of a cycling touring club told us he would not join a racing club until he knew he was "good enough."

A 14-year-old who enjoyed basketball at her school said she would not join a basketball club because "I'm not very good...if you're not good, you get shown up, don't you? You feel stupid—if you do something wrong you feel stupid." A 17-year-old explained, "if I did something that I didn't feel so useless at, I'd keep at it...But when you're useless at something, you're not so enthusiastic."

Perceptions of competence also had an impact on the decisions of young people with high level skills. A recurring theme in our interviews with a few of the young people who had been regularly and seriously involved in a particular sport was that a participation turning point usually came when they decided their skills had realistically "reached their peak." Reaching their peak occurred when they realized that skills would not continue to improve or that improvement would demand more time and energy than they were willing to commit, given their expanding interests and changing priorities.

When this happened, continued participation became problematic. Those who decided to continue usually saw participation as compatible with their transition into adulthood or as an opportunity to develop skills having occupational relevance. For example, two dancer/gymnasts, one 15 years old and the other 18, who decided to take a sport leadership training course (similar to a coaching education certification program) had both realized that they could go no further in developing their own performance skills, and that continued involvement with dance and gymnastics depended on moving into teaching and/or coaching roles.

Gender had a powerful effect on the way in which young women and young men defined themselves as sportspersons. Decisions to participate in sport were generally based on a conclusion that involvement was consistent with their self-definition. In our interviews with young women it was noted that self-definition occasionally interfered with making decisions to include sport participation as part of their lives. The young women in our sample were not as likely as young men to define themselves as sportspersons, even when they were physically active. For example, a number of young women did not consider themselves to be sportspersons even though they were regularly involved in physical activities such as swimming or skating.

They had learned to define sport and sport participation in a very restricted manner. Their restricted definition led them to conclude that if the activity was not competitive, if there were no winners and losers, if there were no formal commitments to achievement and improvement, and if there were no organized teams or matches, then it was not sport. In their statements about sport participation, they indicated that sport was something they had occasionally participated
in when they were in school, but it was not what they did on their own for recreational purposes. They had concluded that sport was much more compatible with being a man than with being a woman, and that being a sportsperson usually entailed involvement in an organized, competitive, physical activity. Therefore, when someone mentioned sports they simply tuned them out and heard little about what was being said, even if it was encouraging.

Among a few of the young women, this orientation had been intensified through their experiences at school. For example, a 15-year-old secondary school student astutely observed that if girls were supposed to play sports at her school, they should not have been assigned a gym so small that they couldn’t play any active games. She was keenly aware that the boys in the school had access to a larger gym for their physical education classes and sport activities, and she had concluded that the physical education teacher had not taken the young women seriously enough as sportspeople to give them an equal share of the sports facilities and resources at the school. She informed us that she had picked up a very clear message in this situation: girls were not meant to take sports seriously. Throughout the interview, it was clear that she didn’t take sport seriously in any way.

The young men, on the other hand, were much more likely to define themselves as sportspersons even when they were not regularly involved in a physical activity. Very few young men had not had at least some experience with football, and it seemed that even minimal experience with football or cricket provided a basis for identifying themselves as sportspersons. The fact that sport and sport participation was positively associated with manhood and masculinity in their minds served to encourage and reaffirm this conclusion for most of the males. However, there were some exceptions to this. Some young men who lacked skills in popular sports, especially football, had received such negative feedback that they had taken great care to avoid any participation in organized sports. They had become physically inactive or had restricted involvement to informal physical activities done on their own or in the company of a close friend or family member.

3. Decisions about sport participation reflected constraints related to money, parents, and opposite-sex friends. Financial constraints had a significant impact on the sport participation patterns of both young women and young men in our sample. The availability of material resources affected access to transportation, the equipment used in certain sports, and facilities and programs in which there were entry fees, users fees, or membership dues. For example, an 18-year-old who had participated in dance and gymnastics for nearly 9 years indicated that money had long been an issue in her mind even though her parents had supported her involvement. She explained,

I felt very bad, my mother wanted me to carry on but I felt guilty. When I started, the other girls, their dads were solicitors and bank managers and doctors and we were really the lowest of the low; my dad’s a carpenter, you know...It didn’t bother me until I started realizing that prices kept going up and I needed new changes of leotards and tracksuits.

The lack of money would have caused her to drop out of the program, but she became an assistant instructor so her participation fees were waived. A 15-year-old high school student from a working-class family also noted that her sport participation was limited because “Whenever you want to go somewhere...
[money] is always a problem...First problem is how to get there, second problem is money.' Others, both males and females, told us they lacked the necessary equipment to participate in available programs.

Despite recent changes in the definitions of gender roles for women, parental constraints were mentioned almost exclusively by the young women in our sample. They encountered more constraints than their male counterparts when it came to making decisions about sport and leisure activities. Interview data suggested that parents were more protective of their daughters than of their sons. Girls' schedules were more closely monitored, and parental expectations were more clearly stated as to where their daughters could go to participate in any leisure activities, who they could go with, and when they had to return. These expectations seemed to lead many of the female respondents to be more careful in selecting and becoming committed to leisure activities, including sports. For example, joining a school team sometimes presented problems because practices or matches often did not end until dusk or later, and the trip home would have to be made after dark (which came very early between late October and early February in England).

Many of the girls were required to make special arrangements with parents or friends if they expected to be out after dark. When we probed this issue, most of the young women seemed to accept these expectations as normal in the sense that they voiced no objections to them. But it was clear that their awareness of and response to these expectations had an impact on their decisions about sport participation. For example, cooperation between participants' families facilitated the attendance of four 14-year-old girls at a basketball course. The course was held Tuesday evenings between 5:30 and 7:30 at a sport center a few miles away from the girls' homes. Arrangements were made between families for the girls to go directly from school to one of their homes, where they would have tea and do homework before being transported to the sport center by one of the parents. Another parent would pick up the girls at the end of the session and take them home.

Without this support and facilitation by their parents, it is unlikely that these girls, though very keen and highly motivated, would have participated in the basketball course. We spoke to two other girls who dropped out of the course and discovered that despite enjoying the first sessions and wanting to stay involved, they were unable to do so because the father who had been providing rides was moved to a later shift at work and could no longer take them to the sport center; other private transportation was not available.

Many of the young women in our sample were also expected to give their parents a relatively accurate accounting of their leisure activities. From their comments about what they said to their parents, it seemed that the legitimacy of their accounts could be increased if they pointed out they were with a close friend. Therefore, while young men often hung around with a group of nameless 'mates,' girls were more likely to say they spent time with a known 'best friend.' This tendency to emphasize a single best friend known by parents seemed to be partially linked to parental constraints and the conditional permission girls received from their parents to participate in leisure activities.

Conditional permission was tied to subtle expectations related to leisure activities. For example, a few young women noted that their parents did encourage them to do things after school and on weekends as long as they met other conditions.
that were built right into and accepted as part of the parent-child relationship. So they did not do things that would keep them out after dark or keep them from getting home to help with the family meal or clean up around the house. In discussing this issue, a 16-year-old told us, “I think my parents encouraged me. Well, if it was dark they weren’t too keen on me staying behind [after school]. If there was someone to walk with, I’d play; if not, I wouldn’t stay.” Fairness did not seem to be an issue when parental protectiveness constrained the sport participation of girls and young women; the basis of the constraints were either accepted or associated with parental concerns for their safety and well-being.

The young men and boys in our sample seldom mentioned anything indicating an awareness of such clearly understood conditions related to their choice of activities. As a result, they freely used public transportation, even after dark, and they made decisions about leisure activities without feeling constrained by anticipated conditional permission from parents. Although none of the boys or young men discussed this issue, it was clear that they would have had difficulty associating parental constraints with concerns for their safety and well-being; they seemed to take their independence for granted, and they saw their safety and well-being as things to be handled on their own.

Because of the structure of most male/female relationships, the sport and leisure activities of young women were often altered when they had boyfriends. Young men were more likely to be the dominant persons in the relationships mentioned by the young people in our sample. Young men with girlfriends initiated most of the activities done as a couple, they usually had the final say about activities, and they more often chose to do things on their own than was the case for the young women who had boyfriends.

A few of the young men we interviewed were explicit in saying that they would not allow girlfriends to interfere with their leisure activities. This did not mean they were unconcerned about their girlfriends, but they usually based their decisions about leisure on their own interests and preferences. The young men also tended to assume that if they wanted to do something, their girlfriends would be supportive of their decision. For example, when asked about how his girlfriend might influence his decisions about sport participation, an 18-year-old told us, “I do what I want,” and that once he made up his mind to do something it would be okay if his girlfriend followed him, but if she didn’t want to, he’d do it without her. Similarly, a 16-year-old member of a roller hockey club indicated that his girlfriend was important in his life, but that she knew better than to interfere with his hockey participation. Another hockey player, a 19-year-old, said that his girlfriend usually attended his weekly games but that she couldn’t go to the last game because the car was too full of male players and their male friends.

In our interviews with young women we heard a clearly different story. They were much more sensitive to the sport and leisure preferences and patterns of their boyfriends, and they usually tried to anticipate those preferences and patterns before they made decisions about their own activities. They often gave their own interests a low priority for the sake of maintaining their relationships with their boyfriends. Their relationships took priority in their lives, and their sport and leisure activities were often chosen because they fit with the interests of their boyfriends. For example, a 17-year-old who ice skated three times a week before she met her new boyfriend explained that she had “cut skating down to once in a blue moon...I started going with my boyfriend and I just lost
interest in skating really...He skates very badly...We tried skating together, but he’s not really keen on it...If it weren’t for him, I think I’d go every night...I don’t have the money to do much; I rely on my boyfriend really."

4. Decisions about sport participation reflect support and encouragement from significant others. The interview data clearly indicated that decisions to begin participation in a sport, as well as decisions to continue participation, were tied to encouragement and support from others who were important in their lives. The patterns of influence coming from these significant others varied according to age, gender, and class. For 13- to 16-year-olds, encouragement and support from parents were particularly important. Several of the young people (ages 13 and 14) in an organized tennis program told us that their parents had seen the program advertised locally and had encouraged them to enroll.

Moreover, parents often provided the money and transportation needed to begin and continue participation. This was especially crucial for young women because they were much more likely than their male counterparts to have less flexible expectations about away-from-home activities. Parents were also important in encouraging continued participation among the younger respondents. A 13-year-old girl told us, “Last year I wanted to give up dancing but my Mum and Dad just kept on pushing me, saying, ‘you can do it’...and now I know I can.’"

For young people over age 16, the significant others were more likely to be adults who served as advocates or models for them. Two young women who participated in a sport leadership training course had enrolled because their gymnastic teacher, whom they respected and looked up to, had suggested they should. They knew very little about the course before they went, but the strong recommendation and encouragement from their teacher was a sufficient basis for deciding to attend. Similarly, two of the young men who took the same course attended on the recommendation of their supervisors at work. Again, the significance of the person who made the recommendation was more important than what they knew about the course itself. In another case, a 23-year-old mentally challenged woman was given much needed support by an older woman staff member, whom she described to us as “my best mate.” The respondent, who attended an organized program for adolescents, also told us that it was the staff member who had given her sufficient confidence to try activities such as bowls, badminton, and table tennis, and who had provided further assistance by accompanying and playing with her.

Friends of the same sex also provided social support for young people in the process of getting involved and staying involved in sport. Young women were more likely than young men to mention the influence of same-sex friends. A number of the young women indicated they would not have made the decision to participate in an activity or scheme unless a friend accompanied them. For example, the four basketball players we interviewed all provided strong social support for one another in addition to the support provided by their parents. This support had been especially necessary during their first sessions because most of the other participants were males who were a potential source of intimidation for the young women.

The young men were not as apt to say they needed a friend to accompany them when they began participation in a sport activity or program. A few of the young men had initiated participation in activities or programs knowing that some-
one they knew would be there, but instead of looking for personal support related to their participation, they indicated they simply wanted to find a familiar face.

5. Decisions about sport participation reflect past experiences in school sports and physical education classes. The finding that decisions about sport participation reflected past experiences was not surprising. However, what stood out was that many young people, especially young women, made specific references to school related experiences when discussing their current attitudes toward sport. What had happened on school teams or in physical education classes served as the basis for what they expected in future sport experiences. Sometimes these memories were positive, but more often they were negative and affected current motivation and interest in a negative fashion. The major themes in these negative memories revolved around boredom and lack of choice, feeling stupid and incompetent, and receiving negative evaluation from peers.

For young women, physical education was often associated with feelings of discomfort and embarrassment. Usually it was not the activity itself that turned them off physical education and sport but the rules and arrangements pertaining to gym wear and the changing/showering routine that typically accompanied physical education in schools. For example, in response to a question about physical education, a 14-year-old secondary school student answered, “I didn’t like gym...because I was bigger than everyone else, and if we had to do things like going over benches and if we had to crawl through, I hated that ‘cause me and my friend were big.” She had enjoyed ice skating when it was offered as an option, but it only lasted for a short time. She had played netball with the school team but had dropped out after playing goalkeeper during a 14–0 loss by her team. She explained that after the game, “Everyone was going ‘oh, it’s your fault,’ and I felt a bit bad. And it was cold and I just had to stand there.”

In other comments about physical education experiences, a 13-year-old young woman said,

I don’t like it. I don’t like going in the gym when you have to have bare feet, there’s always a risk of passing verrucas [plantar warts] and athlete’s foot...that makes me shiver. I don’t like that. And I don’t like showers either. I think we should have separate showers. We’ve got them but they’re not in use. There’s a lack of privacy. It’s totally open. You’re not allowed to take your towel in with you. You’ve got to hang it up on the rail and walk through...Most of us in our year forge notes to get out, you know, headache, heavy cold, whatever. Mostly it’s because they don’t like cold weather and having to wear shorts...And the gym for girls is too small to do anything.

Similarly, a 14-year-old said she never liked physical education classes because she was made to “go running round the streets in these horrible short skirts.” Privacy and appearance issues were important for young women. Unless sport participation allowed the young women opportunities to control their presentation of self in a way that fit with their definition of who they were, they were not likely to participate.

The young men we interviewed were less likely to voice dissatisfaction with past experiences in physical education and school sports. It seemed that the physical education and sport activities were organized in ways that fit more closely with their interests and skills than was the case for young women. But
we also suspected that young men were less likely to admit they did not like the sport activities they played during physical education classes and after school. None of the young men complained about the cold weather or about having to wear shorts, or about the showers. The only negative memories discussed by the males were those related to being teased or called names by their peers during activities or games, especially football games. Apparently, braving the cold weather and handling interaction in a locker/shower room were seen as compatible with the way these young men saw themselves and their connections to peers.

There were also some favorable comments about school sports and physical education. A few of the young men we interviewed indicated that their current interests in sport were grounded in earlier experiences at school. Although they had not been regular participants in a certain sport when they were introduced to it, they felt familiar enough with it to take it up later. Some young women spoke positively of opportunities they were given to participate in nontraditional activities like skating. They also enjoyed sex-integrated activities such as badminton and basketball, which were offered during their senior year.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

The interview data collected in this study of adolescents clearly showed that sport participation was not a separate experience in young people's lives; the decision to participate in sports was integrally tied to the way young people viewed themselves and their connection to the social world in which they lived. They saw sport activities in terms of how they were related to self-concept and what they wanted to do with their life. Identity was a major factor in the decision-making process, but simply being an athlete was not an identity that the young people in our sample saw as satisfactory or satisfying in light of their self-concepts and overall life goals. In other words, these young people did not see sport as central to their lives; sport participation and sport skills were peripheral to other issues and concerns. Involvement and commitment to sport and leisure shifted over time, depending on new opportunities and changes in the lives and self-concepts of the young men and women.

The young men and women we interviewed seemed to be especially sensitive to making the transition into adulthood, and they shared concerns about the future they could create for themselves and the people they would become. They also shared a desire to develop and display personal competence, be it in sport or in activities having occupational relevance. These concerns and desires were worked out within the constraints of the social world in which they lived. Access to material resources as well as the dynamics of class relations influenced the range of choices and the decisions these young people made about sport participation. For example, working-class youths not only lacked resources to participate in certain sports but they were not eager to participate in sports identified with the middle class because their participation might evoke ridicule or rejection from those whose support was valued and needed as they made the transition into adulthood.

Although economic factors were important in our data, constraints related to gender and gender relations emerged as especially influential in the decision-making process. As part of the everyday reality of social life, traditional cultural practices related to gender seem to have been taken for granted by most young
men and women in our sample. Resistance to traditional cultural practices was minimal. None of the young men and only a few of the young women we interviewed demonstrated awareness of issues or inequities related to gender, even though their decisions about sport participation clearly reflected the ways in which traditional gender definitions had been incorporated into their identities.

Gender distinctions relative to sport have traditionally been made explicit in British schools through sex-segregated physical education curricula in which females and males are usually taught different activities in single-sex groups, by same-sex teachers (Leaman, 1984; Scraton, 1986, 1987). Within the social organization of the schools, sporting prowess has generally brought high status to young men but not to young women. In our data this seemed to be reflected in the fact that young men were more likely than young women to be ridiculed if they were physically inept and clumsy, while young women were more likely to see sport as irrelevant in their lives. Coed physical education classes in the later secondary years were welcomed by some of the young people we spoke to, but there were others, mostly young women, who were not keen on such an idea because they perceived their competence in sport and physical activities to be especially low.

Many of the young women in our sample had been switched off sport long before they left school. But even for those whose school experiences had been positive, continued participation in sport was unlikely unless they were directly involved with other individuals who could sponsor and protect them. For example, if a family member or close friend known to the family was involved in sport, then it was considered appropriate and safe for a young woman to participate in a program or an activity. If this was not the case, young women, even if they wanted to participate, would not be likely to receive the necessary support and encouragement from others who generally sanctioned their activities.

For young men there was usually no problem in being out and away from home after dark. Interview data indicated that groups of young men were free to decide, on the spur of the moment, to engage in whatever activities appealed to them such as an informal game of football or a visit to a snooker hall. As they explained this, it was clear that they did not feel they had to make arrangements in advance that would then be submitted for approval from parents, girlfriends, or anyone else.

Parents were not the only ones who restricted the freedom of young women in our sample. Brothers and boyfriends also took a protective (and controlling) stance in their relationships with their sisters and girlfriends. In their eyes, venues such as snooker halls were considered unsuitable places for girls to go, particularly if they went alone. It was permissible for the young women to go to such places with their boyfriends or brothers, but when they went with men, they would generally end up as spectators and supporters rather than participants in games or activities.

Most young women accepted this form of "protection" that ultimately limited their active participation in games and sports and destined them to be passive spectators. However, there were a handful of exceptions. For example, an unemployed young woman took pleasure in weight training because it gave her a forum in which she could demonstrate toughness and strength to men who might want to push her around. Two other young women felt an enhanced sense of pride and self-esteem when their physical abilities enabled them to compete effectively with men in sport contexts. This suggests that sport participation can be a means for individual women to extend and display competence in ways that give them more personal control over their lives vis-à-vis men, or at least a
feeling of more control. However, few of the young women in our study saw or used sport in this way. 

Our findings about the ways in which gender is related to decisions about participation in sport and leisure activities are not new (see Frith, 1984, pp. 52-56). However, they do extend what is known about the ways in which socialization is related to sport participation. Young people do not get socialized into sport in the sense that they simply internalize or respond to external influences; nor do young people get socialized out of sport in the sense that they drop out in response to external influences. Instead, sport participation (and nonparticipation) is the result of decisions negotiated within the context of a young person's social environment and mediated by the young person's view of self and personal goals. Neither participation nor nonparticipation is a "once and for all time" phenomenon explainable in terms of a quantitative, cause-effect methodological approach.

This means that instead of focusing on the statistical correlates of sport participation, nonparticipation, or dropping out of sport, those in the sociology of sport might spend their time more fruitfully by studying decision-making processes in the lives of young people. When the focus is on decision-making rather than sport participation/nonparticipation, it is clear that there must be a concern with process, context, and human agency. The literature in the sociology of sport probably has enough studies reporting lists of sport participation patterns with accompanying lists of variables associated with those patterns for particular people at particular points in time. There seems to be a need for more accounts of ongoing, actual experiences and the decisions related to those experiences.

With respect to applied issues, the ultimate goal of this study was to provide British Sports Council administrators and staff, as well as coaches and recreation workers, information about how leisure and sport were integrated into the lives of young people. The implications of this study for organizations such as the Sports Council, which is on record as committed to increasing the participation of women in sport, are clear. An appreciation of the ways in which gender relations operate to restrict women's sport and leisure choices should help teachers, coaches, organizers, and leisure providers to design opportunities for girls and young women, and become increasingly sensitive to the need for overall changes in gender relations. Furthermore, an awareness of how activities preferences among young people are influenced by socially imposed gender and class cultures provides a basis for insights about how to introduce new participation opportunities into the lives of young women and men.

If the goal of leisure provision is to provide only what young people have had opportunities to experience in the past, the constraints built into gender and class relations are reproduced again and again. Care and sensitivity are needed in order to provide young people opportunities to raise questions and move beyond what has traditionally been available and accepted. Only then will leisure and sport become avenues for eliminating socially imposed constraints grounded in gender and class cultures. For adolescents looking toward becoming adults, this would make sport participation a more attractive alternative in their lives than it is now.

References


