

Family and Sport

Notable Contributions
to Sociology

Edited by
Steven M. Ortiz



Research in the
Sociology of Sport

VOL
19

FAMILY AND SPORT

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT

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RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF SPORT VOLUME 19

**FAMILY AND SPORT:
NOTABLE CONTRIBUTIONS
TO SOCIOLOGY**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

To sport families everywhere

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INTRODUCTION: SYNTHESIZING FAMILY AND SPORT

Steven M. Ortiz

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The sociology of family has always been taken seriously within the discipline of sociology. It is one of the most significant and prolific fields of study we support, and it has spawned a rich tradition of classic landmark research. Conversely, sociology as a discipline has a tendency to give less attention to the analysis of family and sport as a field of inquiry. As a result, sociological research that combines the study of family and sport remains on the fringes of our discipline without recognition as a cohesive field. Given this disparity, this volume seeks to make a contribution to the concerted study of family and sport, which is basically unprecedented.

Sports pervades global societies and displays profound social, family, and economic influence. Whether it is the adults or children who are interested or involved in some level of sport participation (i.e., leisure, lifestyle, interscholastic, intercollegiate, professional), sport socialization begins within the social institution of family, where a family's values, norms, interactions, and routines either support or reject sport participation (Messner, 2009; Messner & Musto, 2016). Available studies (e.g., Boudreault et al., 2022) suggest that generations of young people who participate in sports or whose parents are involved in youth sports, whether professionally or as an extension of parenthood, inherit uniquely multifaceted sport socialization challenges that can have enormous impact on their lives and the lives of those within their social circles, including the families they eventually create.

As someone who has conducted breakthrough studies at the nexus of family and sport for more than 40 years, I have observed and responded to this scholarly interest firsthand. Over the years, this included the first and only longitudinal study of women married to male professional athletes (Ortiz, 2020), immersive fieldwork experiences (Ortiz, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2005), publications focusing on realities women confront in the sport marriage (e.g., Ortiz, 2002, 2020, 2021), media experiences discussing my research in interviews with news/sport media for

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the past 22 years as a public sociologist and a highly regarded expert on the sport marriage (Burawoy, 2005; Ortiz, 2007), and teaching courses in the Sociology of Sport and Sociology of the Sport Marriage. Over time, the sport marriage has failed to develop into or exist as a subfield within our discipline, in spite of the fact that it is gaining more attention, and regardless of the impressive interest in the experiences of women in the sport marriage (e.g., Clayton & Harris, 2004; Farole, 1996; Forsyth & Thompson, 2007; Gmelch & San Antonio, 2001; Simonetto, 2019). Despite the interest of a few, our discipline has been slow to respond to or express interest in the basis for the spate of books authored by the wives of male professional athletes (e.g., Adams, 2011; Berti, 2004; Chittich, 2021), which have shared and described various marital issues. These books reveal certain facts about a woman's experience in the sport marriage and are trying to tell us something. These authors offer profound insights into the sport marriage that are largely unknown to sociology and the public in general. Moreover, our discipline has overlooked books (Allen, 2000; DeLaet, 1995; Pirone & Martens, 1988) and other accounts (McKenzie, 1999) about family relationships authored by daughters of fathers who had careers in professional sports. The relative neglect by our discipline must be addressed and this volume can be an influential contribution to a promising new field of family and sport that researchers can launch and establish a career in.

The reasons why children should be encouraged to participate in sports have been a traditional focus of social science research (e.g., Boneau et al., 2020; McGlynn et al., 2020). Although positive benefits of children's participation in sports are well-known, their involvement has been questioned (e.g., Eliasson, 2019; Merkel, 2013; Rotolo & Lengefeld, 2020; Turkeri-Bozkurt & Bulgu, 2020), such as parents who become overly involved in youth sports (Stefansen et al., 2018; Strandbu et al., 2019). We are less aware of potentially problematic issues related to sport participation and retirement from a sport career that confront families and marriages (e.g., Goodsell & Harris, 2011; Lamont et al., 2019; Ortiz, 2021), such as career-induced traumatic brain injuries that can seriously impact families and marriages and have long-term consequences (e.g., Faure & Casanova, 2019).

We live in a time when both the pace and magnitude of global social change is exponentially accelerating, and it is incumbent upon us as sociologists to meet this moment of radical transformation by asking difficult questions about how sport involvement both positively and negatively affects children and adults, as individuals and as family members (e.g., Ding, 2019; Garst et al., 2020). For example, gaining a deeper understanding of the family dynamics that create challenges when a family member's personal awareness or nontraditional choices – frequently made feasible only by shifts in cultural awareness and acceptance of change – is essential to helping families successfully adapt to norms and expectations both inside and outside the family. This can be taken into consideration in the sustained awareness and participation in lifestyle sports (Andreasson et al., 2018; Gilchrist & Wheaton, 2017; Goodsell et al., 2013; Li et al., 2021; Nash & Moore, 2021).

It can be argued that learning how families resist or adapt to change is even more relevant for sport families because sports has such global visibility, popularity, and influence. As a social institution, whose roots are steeped in

patriarchy, sports are often at the forefront on introducing fairly current personal and social issues to the public at large. For example, clashing interpretations of gender can make involvement in sports difficult for family members (e.g., [Adams & Leavitt, 2018](#); [Fruhauf et al., 2022](#); [Travers & Berdahl, 2021](#)) and become part of our public discussions as we see athletes challenge basic societal assumptions through heightened awareness of their personal preferences and life choices (e.g., [Hamilton, 2020](#); [Herrick et al., 2020](#)). Certain family and sport issues have triggered significant media attention and subsequently affected national and international conversations, which can promote scholarly, sociological, and public awareness and be the basis for examining family policies and family-related public policies at various levels of society. Yet, in my exhaustive search for contributors to this volume, a plethora of family and sport issues have, so far, not been addressed by sociologists. This means that we are missing opportunities to provide sociological evidence that can aid our understanding of these issues. Research on the family in the context of sports is relatively limited, leaving us with a pronounced gap in the sociological literature. Currently, many of the realities experienced and confronted by families who participate in sports are either hushed, misunderstood, or completely – sometimes willfully – ignored. Sociology as a discipline has long taken the stance that it values healthy families, but the paucity of sociological research at the confluence of family and sport calls this assertion into question.

By focusing on how families are affected by the sport participation of family members in a society where norms and values are rapidly evolving, this volume offers an important and unique contribution in an under-researched area of sociological inquiry. The chapters included here shed light on how patriarchal values have been deeply normalized within families nationally and internationally. It explores the effects of certain societal shifts on family relationships and directly challenges the patriarchal structure of global societies. Analyzing these issues from the microlevel of family serves to help us understand how they are interpreted and addressed – or not addressed – at the macrolevel of global societies.

VOLUME GOALS

The key approach guiding this volume is to offer a significant contribution to the establishment of family and sport as a field of study within our discipline. Taking into account patriarchy, the following chapters offer a wide range of viewpoints and a multidisciplinary focus on family and sport. This volume seeks to enhance our awareness of existing and recent family and sport issues. It provides much needed insight into the necessity and value of developing a clearly defined field of family and sport. Research on family and sport has appeared in various academic publications, but rarely as a sociological field of interest and research. This volume addresses what sociologists have long overlooked, presents a solution to this sociological oversight, and delivers a body of work that serves as the basis for further institutional growth and personal and social issues that future research should take seriously.

A Call to Action

As we know, family sociology and sport sociology are distinct fields within the discipline of sociology. Family and sport, however, does not exist as a different and separate field of its own. Given this continuing oversight, the study of the interrelationship between family and sport deserves our full attention, calling for a plan of action. Although this volume is rich with explorations of issues about family and sport, it barely scratches the surface of potential sociological research topics in this field. It is worth noting that most available literature on emerging issues in family and sport is published outside the sociological journals and books, and that includes many of the contributions contained within these pages. The American Sociological Association does not recognize family and sport as a field or subfield and peer-reviewed sociology journals that specifically address the convergence of family and sport is meager. This is a disadvantage to sociologists who want to build their careers in this field. The scarcity of family and sport research can be reversed if greater recognition were given to this developing field.

VOLUME CHAPTERS

Having a widespread impact, sports are a weathervane for troubling issues that affect family and sport in our patriarchal society. Currently, social changes are making such issues more transparent and this is evident in family and sport because the world of sports is a microcosm and mirror of society (Eitzen, 2015). Discussing his concept of the sociological imagination, Mills (1959) draws our attention to the basis of personal troubles at the microlevel and social issues at macrolevel of society. The personal troubles we find in sport involvement we find in the family. Conversely, the personal troubles we find in the family we find in sport involvement – both of which we find in our society. Specifically, family and sport issues embedded in sport participation are embedded in society. According to Eitzen (2015, p. 12), in concentrating on the social institution of sport, we can achieve a better understanding of the social issues in society. For example, the realities that women must confront in their participation in sports can inform us and provide insight into their personal troubles as survivors of institutionalized patriarchy in global societies. As athletes, spouses, and mothers, women have to cope with personal issues and social issues. Female athletes of color are the victims of double jeopardy, Black and female, and are oppressed by two major social issues, racism and sexism (Beal, 2008; Woods, 2015). As athletes, spouses, and fathers, men confront issues when they construct masculinity in each of these roles. Moreover, some combination of these multiple roles can result in role conflict. As professional athletes, for example, men have to cope with the responsibilities of domestic roles and stressors of their occupations, which can affect their performances.

The topic of family and sport encompasses a myriad of issues that exist at the microlevel and macrolevel of society. This volume draws our attention to issues that have not received the interest they deserve. As we shall see, certain threads

are woven together throughout the chapters and present different perspectives of family and sport, for example, gender, culture, and social class, to name a few. As threads of a rare fabric, each thread enlightens us and, when combined with a variety of theoretical approaches, provides a remarkable lens that helps us to better understand the most recent family and sport issues that are examined in this volume. The chapter contributions selected for this volume are quite diverse and are the basis for three major sections that address unique family and sport topics and introduce us to uncharted issues: (1) family–sport socialization, (2) sport as social control, and (3) work–family challenges.

Part I: Family-Sport Socialization

In Chapter 1, Aleksandra Stojanovska, Roslyn Kerr, and Greg Ryan analyze the roles of coaches and parents in children’s sport involvement in New Zealand. They test Coakley’s concept of the “great sport myth,” illustrate how it specifically manifests in family and sport socialization processes, and question the wisdom of parents not challenging the decisions of their children’s coaches. In Chapter 2, Tom R. Leppard and Mikaela J. Dufur ask and answer the question about how engagement in sports affects the parent–child relationship. Although the current literature has explored how sport involvement affects the father–child relationship, their study focuses instead on the children’s perception of the relationship with their mothers.

Part II: Sport as Social Control

In Chapter 3, Anne Schmitt and Matthew Atencio offer a robust examination of specifically how upper-class parents and other adults at locations in California and France actively work toward the reproduction of gender stereotypes and social class divisions among adolescents who participate in school-based sailing programs. In Chapter 4, Umer Hussain explores the cultural evolution of the “hymen rupture stigma” and how it influences Muslim women’s sport participation in Pakistan today. He contextualizes this cultural phenomenon in ways that give us a greater understanding of how Pakistani families reinforce the stigma, which permeates many conservative cultures. In Chapter 5, Vera Lopez focuses on how high school coaches interpret the obstacles that confront Latina teens who want to play sports. She offers a keen analysis of how deficit thinking can lead coaches to lay blame on parents – as opposed to social, economic, cultural, and political realities – for keeping Latina teens from fully committing to their sport, even when their desire is great.

Part III: Work–Family Challenges

In Chapter 6, Chuka Onwumehili and Unwana Samuel Akpan explore long-distance communication between married male Nigerian professional soccer players and their spouses when the player must live away from the family while working. Their interviews reveal how the women strategize for marital survival within a patriarchal culture that impedes their ability to fully claim

decision-making power. In Chapter 7, Diana Tracy Cohen takes a unique approach in her study of female triathletes. Using qualitative data that includes in-depth interviews and blog posts, she applies her “athletic visibility continuum” to analyze how women construct an endurance sport identity while simultaneously negotiating their identities as women and dedicated mothers. In Chapter 8, Francine Darroch, Audrey Giles, Sydney Smith, and Heather Hillsburg remind us that women continue to be disadvantaged in a competitive sport. In their study of elite female distance runners, they identify several factors these women are forced to consider in their family planning and postpartum life stages, while they try to manage the demands of their careers. They offer these women’s specific recommendations for contract changes that would support gender equity in sports.

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