Critically Examining Postnatal Women’s Community Team Sport Participation: “Playing for Team Motherhood”

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Rationale: Motherhood places gendered expectations on women, through implications of gender roles (Lloyd et al., 2019; Trussell & Shaw, 2012), pronatalist ideologies (Parry, 2005), and intensive mothering practices (Henderson et al., 2016; Trussell & Shaw, 2012), that may inhibit their sport participation. Decreased sport participation is problematic for postnatal women, since they are at high risk of weight gain (Amorim et al., 2007) as well as depression and anxiety (Dunford & Granger, 2017; O’Hara & Wisner, 2014), which may negatively affect their health as well as their child’s (Demissie et al., 2011; McIntyre & Rhodes, 2009). Yet, research highlights strong relationships between individual exercise (Lloyd et al., 2016; Mailey & Hsu, 2017) and sport (Darroch & Hillsburg, 2017; Dilley & Scraton, 2010) to postnatal women’s health. Little to no research, however, has focused on postnatal women’s community team sport participation. Team sports are crucial to investigate as they may offer social and emotional support, a sense of community, help with identity transition, identity affirmation, and opportunities for resistance to gendered expectations of motherhood (Batey & Owton, 2014; Shaw, 2001; Trussell, 2015). These aspects of team sport have the potential to counter negative health effects of social isolation and postpartum depression that often accompany child birth (Dunford & Granger, 2017; Parry et al., 2013).

Aim of the Study: The purpose of this study is to understand the meanings and experiences of postnatal women’s community team sport participation. Specifically, the study aims to critically examine how the gendered expectations of motherhood impact their participation in community team sport after the birth of a child. The postnatal period is defined as women who are between six and 52 weeks post childbirth (Cramp & Brawley, 2009; Dunford & Granger, 2017).

Methods: Using a narrative inquiry methodology based in a critical feminist lens, six postnatal women who have returned to community team sport engaged in three interviews to provide an in-depth understanding of their experiences. Interviews were analysed using Pitre, Kushner, Raine, and Hegadoren’s (2013) double-hermeneutic narrative analysis, to examine what participants say as masters of their own experiences, context, storied space, and structural and ideological sites of their narratives (Pitre et al., 2013).

Findings: Three major stories emerged from the study’s findings, reflecting postnatal women’s journey when returning to community team sport: 1) Struggling with the Return to Team Sport; 2) Relationships Aiding the Transition Back to Team Sport; 3) Experiencing Resistance and Empowerment through Team Sport Participation. These stories express the pervasiveness of gendered expectations postnatal women face when returning to community team sport, while simultaneously highlighting their ability to actively resist and/or negotiate these expectations through community team sport participation.

Implications: Moving forward, this study will expand the limited critical feminist sport research on motherhood and postnatal women. Additionally, it provides insight to creating inclusive sport policies, programs, and services for postnatal women to enhance women’s quality of life and support life-long participation in sport.