

**“TALKING” AND “DOING”: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC  
EXAMINATION OF THE DIALECTICS OF “KIDS”  
SPORT**

by

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AN ETHNOGRAPHIC EXAMINATION  
OF THE DIALECTICS OF “KIDS” SPORT

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis examines how children and youths from Vancouver, BC reflect upon and talk about their participation and involvement in organized sport activities. Based upon ethnographic interviewing and participant observation conducted at sport events, the thesis analyzes the narratives of children and youth who drew from their personal experiences as athletes and/or volunteers with organized sport. Issues discussed with young athletes raised issues such as the definition of organized sport, the social relationships and interactions that occur during participation in sport, and the manner in which children and youth sport should be structured and organized. This investigation, which employs concepts from the anthropology of childhood and sport, and gender studies, illustrates the dialectical relationship between lived experience and dominant discourses, and shows that children and youths are adept at constructing, engaging with, criticizing and rejecting discourses about organized sport, discourses that serve to both shape and contradict their experiences.

**Key Words:** organized sport for children; children's reflections; age roles; social construction of gender

**Subject Terms:** Sports for children; Sport – anthropological aspects; Children – anthropological aspects; Children - research

## **DEDICATION**

This work is inspired by the kids that I came to know during my time as a coach in the Kootenays. Their unabashed enthusiasm and honesty made me realize the diversity and complexities of childhood, and the importance of valuing their thoughts and perspectives on issues that matter to them.

I also dedicate this work to my family, whose support, encouragement and sense of humor were necessary for my ability to work through the many processes involved in this endeavor.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **TALKING WITH KIDS**

### **Introduction**

My interest in children and their participation in organized sport developed as a result of my own engagement with sport as both a child athlete and later as a coach. My fond memories of spending summers on my community swim team and travelling around southern BC with my high school basketball and field hockey teams subsequently motivated me to seek employment as a swim coach during my summers away from undergraduate studies. The allure of competition that had drawn me to competitive sports at a young age, and the rush of adrenalin I experienced after winning a swim race, held my attention until I entered my mid teens when the thought of a 6 a.m. practice seemed more ridiculous than fun. As well, the social networks I developed during these summers was an enormous draw, not only for the relationships that I developed with other kids, but also with the coaches whom I revered for their athletic ability and the respect they garnered as the directors of teams. As a coach, I became more aware of the reasons that I was drawn to organized sport as I associated with certain kids who I recognized as having the same goals and motivations for involvement as I did. Conversely, I came to appreciate that my own incentives for participation were far from the only reasons that kids partake of sport.

I was struck by the way in which certain kids who seemed to loathe coming to swim practices and competing in meets returned each season, despite the fact that their parents seemed more than willing to forfeit the early morning practices and fundraising duties expected of them by the team. Equally intriguing were instances where young “superstars” who seemed to have all the talent and potential in the world failed to come to practices and eventually dropped off the team because they were simply no longer interested, or had discovered another activity that could hold their attention. As well, the interactions between kids, parents and officials on the swim team that I coached, as well

as the interactions that occurred with other teams in the area illustrated the complex and multidimensional web of relationships, expectations and motivations for becoming involved in organized sport. The draw here was far more complex than simply “having fun”, although that was most definitely important. In view of the diversity of experiences and interactions that characterized each child’s participation in sport, I was somewhat surprised when I began researching organized sports for ‘kids’<sup>1</sup> to discover that so little attention had been given to the voices of the kids themselves.

Given the manner in which organized sport is socially constructed as an activity that is beneficial for the physical and social development of kids, it is baffling that so much of the research is conducted almost solely in terms of the voices and perspectives of the adult actors involved in kids’ sport. This focus on the objectives and opinions of adults, whether those of parents, coaches, sport officials, or experts in the fields of child psychology, development and education, speaks to the prevailing tendency to view children as a category whose members are largely unaware of their social position and surroundings, and incapable of articulating their opinions and beliefs regarding their experiences and relationships. Based on my own experiences with coaching and participation in sport, I was aware that kids’ experiences with and ideas about sport were complex, multidimensional and diverse. There is a wealth of information and perspectives that are essentially overlooked due to the manner in which society constructs or envisions the social, mental and physical abilities of children. I was therefore motivated to take account of the voices of the kids themselves, to position these young individuals who participate in various forms of organized sport (whether it be kid- or adult-directed) as the primary research participants, and to consider their personal accounts of their experiences rather than deferring to the interpretations of these experiences by their parents and coaches.

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1 My use of the word “kid” is grounded in Barrie Thorne’s discussion of the use of the term in her fieldwork with elementary aged school kids in the United States. She notes that while she and other adults used the word “children”, children themselves rarely used these terms. Instead, they refer to one another and to themselves as “kids” (Thorne 1994:9). Her decision to use the term “kid” shifted her position in relation to her participants from “top-down to side-by-side” (Thorne 1994:9). While I use the word “kid” to refer to all participants, whether they are 8 or 16 years old, I recognize that “kids” as individuals are diverse and distinct - I will therefore further identify them in terms of age, gender and their own distinctive life experiences.

## **Questions and Emerging Themes**

While this was an inductive study, in which issues and themes emerged in the course of my interaction with participants, my investigation was guided by a number of concerns, including: how do children explain and discuss their experiences of sport while participating within a sport organization? In what ways and terms do children characterize and express their experiences? With whom do children interact in organized sport and how do they negotiate the relationships involved with other children and with adults (such as parents, volunteers and coaches) in a sport organization? Further, is the forming of relationships an important aspect of sport participation for the kids?

Guided by these questions, my interviews and conversations with kids of various ages took many forms and covered an array of topics. There were, however, a set of emerging themes that surfaced continually throughout my research, and I have presented my findings according to these dominant themes that were discussed at length and by most (if not all) participants. I utilized a set of open ended questions that varied slightly from interview to interview – my questions therefore prompted participants' views on particular issues, such as what sport would be like without coaches or rules, or the importance of having friends around when embarking on a new sport. Participants also raised particular issues on their own, such as the health benefits associated with sport participation and the importance of team work. The themes that I have included are the issues that were spoken about at length by participants: the manner in which participants defined sport according to their own experiences; their ideas about how sport activities should be organized and structured; their thoughts on the values of teamwork, sportsmanship and the health benefits associated with sport; the social relationships with family, friends and coaches who take part in their sport activities, and the expectations of coaches; and finally, the manner in which youth volunteers expressed their experiences of coaching. All of these issues emerged as important ones for participants, and it is these themes that will structure my discussion.

My observations and discussions with participants were extremely diverse and multidimensional, and illustrate the challenges involved in attempting to get the “kids' own views” on these matters. Both the younger and older participants demonstrated a facility when responding to questions posed by an adult to employ particular discourses

that they think adults may want to hear. Alternately, they might be interpreting these discourses as comprising a “grown-up” view of sports. My point is that getting a better sense of what kids *really* think about sport might not be as simple as asking them, even if this stands as an essential first step towards gaining a more comprehensive understanding of what they think.

The purpose of this research is to explore individual kids’ reflections on their experiences and perceptions of organized sport from their own point of view. This study is not meant to be representative of all kids’ experiences with sport, but rather to investigate individual accounts and narratives concerning their own participation. A quantitatively oriented or statistical account of children’s participation would not readily capture the complex and multidimensional nature of individual experiences, and while useful for understanding issues such as the correlation between socio-economic status and sport participation, or access to and ability to participate in organized sport, statistical research would not have delivered the in-depth and layered accounts that can be acquired through participant observation and ethnographic interviewing.

### **Significance of the Research**

While there is a significant body of research that examines the realm of organized sport, this literature shrinks considerably when the focus turns specifically to children’s organized sport. Furthermore, this research tends to approach the subject either through the activities and concerns of adult actors (such as parents, coaches, and teachers) involved in child and youth sports (Dyck 1995; Dyck 2000b; Dyck 2002; Fleming 1995; Stodolska et. al. 2003) or by way of studies of one or another social institution (school, recreation centre, neighbourhood) that sports operate within (Anderson 2003; Andrews et al. 1997; Grey 1992; Hartman 2006; Mahiri 1994). These two focal areas have been investigated in order to gain a broad understanding of the diversity of actors, locations and social contexts within which organized sport functions, and the sometimes active involvement of parents with their children’s sports teams and clubs. All of these are important areas of inquiry that make a necessary contribution to an understanding of kids’ organized sports. There are, however, relatively few studies that examine sport

participation primarily from the perspectives and experiences of children themselves (Cooky and MacDonald 2005; Thompson et al. 2005; Kernan et al. 2005), and even fewer that offer an ethnographic account of children's sport activity that takes place outside of school (Dyck 2003; Fine 1987).

The scarcity of research that considers the diversity of children's experiences with sport participation is regrettable, for an understanding of kids' sports that is centred on the accounts of kids themselves illustrates the complex and multidimensional nature of organized sport, on the one hand, and the ability of kids to discuss and engage with dominant discourses regarding the social construction of childhood and sport, on the other. My research speaks to a gap in sport research by providing insight into how kids experience sport from their *own points of view* rather than from the perspectives of the adult actors involved. By conducting fieldwork at the site of locally organized and financially accessible sport activities, the voices of some of those children who have traditionally been left out of the research focused on children's organized sport will be heard and investigated in their own right.

As children's experiences are not exempt from the social forces that organize and structure society, my analysis and approach is informed by a feminist perspective that considers gender as a socially constructed category that serves to organize society in a manner that positions males and females in a hierarchal structure (Thorne 1994; West & Zimmerman 1987). The manner in which a biological understanding of gender differences informs and organizes society is manifest in the structure and organization of kids' sports. In many (but not all) kids' sports, males and females are separated into gender and age specific categories. This segregation is informed by an understanding of gender in which males are viewed as being more skilled, more aggressive and in need of being separated from less skilled and less aggressive females (Cooky & Macdonald 2005; Messner 2001). As active social beings, kids engage with, challenge and construct gendered discourses that inform their understanding of the *differences* between males and females (Chin 2001; Thorne 1994).

Children are not socially passive individuals "waiting" to be socialized and molded into adults; rather, children are active beings who are adept at constructing, engaging with and challenging discourses that position them within society. Children

exercise agency and are aware of the social expectations that are placed upon them by friends, family members and social institutions that they operate within (such as schools and clubs) and have independent ideas and perspectives concerning the activities that they engage in and the interactions that characterize these experiences (Caputo 1995; Dyck 2000a; James and Prout 1990; Stephens 1995; Thorne 1994). My understanding of children as active and diverse beings who possess social agency and abilities informed my investigation and conversations with participants, as it was their diverse and multidimensional experiences that I was seeking to explore.

## **Methodology**

I conducted fieldwork at the site of sporting activities organized by the organization MoreSports in the Vancouver area over a three month period in late 2007. I approached this organization about allowing me the opportunity to attend practices and games as an observer solely for the purpose of contacting kids who participate in organized sport.

As I am not a parent, a coach or a relative of a child who participates in any of these organized activities, my presence at kids' sporting events needed to be formalized in order to validate my attendance as an adult with no relationship to any of the children participating<sup>2</sup>. These practices and games acted as a formalized point of access in which I was able to meet with a diversity of kids and parents. All of the participants participated in a larger or smaller number of other sporting activities, either adult or child-organized, and we discussed these in our conversations and interviews. This research is first and foremost about those conversations, and is therefore not concerned with the MoreSports program specifically. Put simply, this thesis is in no way an evaluation or systematic examination of the MoreSports program. Rather, it is concerned with the diverse sporting experiences and perspectives of individual kids, most of whom I met while observing MoreSports activities.

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2 Conducting research in which children are not only the focus, but also the primary research participants proved to be a somewhat arduous and complicated process. I was met with a host of reactions from individuals when I approached them about participating - scepticism, wariness, boredom, enthusiastic support and excitement were but a few of the emotions that I was met with. These issues speak to the politics surrounding social science research in general, and more specifically, how research should be conducted when the participants are children.

MoreSports is a non-profit organization that was established in 1999. The organization provides accessible sport activities to children and families living in 16 Vancouver neighbourhoods. According to its website:

[t]he organization has a special focus on people who typically do not participate in sports such as girls, children from diverse ethnic groups, and those who simply face barriers to participation in sports such as cost...Community capacity building, sport development and youth leadership are the key goals of the organization. By reducing traditional barriers to sport and physical activity such as the cost of participation, transportation, lack of programming and facility infrastructure, plus inability to participate in more typical competitive sport systems, MoreSports is a true success story<sup>3</sup>.

MoreSports operates with the goal of creating sustainable sports initiatives in local neighbourhoods by involving all stakeholders (such as community centres, schools, local government, etc.) in the development, organization and implementation of sports programs. Central to their objective of creating sustainable community initiatives is the recruitment and training of youth to act as volunteers, coaches and coordinators with the organization. The organization's awareness and attention to the multitude of social barriers, such as language, transportation and registration costs that often prohibit many children and families from participating in organized sport appealed to my interest in gaining the perspectives of a broad range of children, not simply those with the financial and social means to participate in organized sport. My fieldwork was initiated in one neighbourhood "hub", an area that is economically and socially diverse and whose program coordinators were willing to have me observe the practices and games that took place. During this time I attended, as an observer, a basketball program that operated each Saturday from 9:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m. Children from the ages of 7 to 13 participated in practices, games and, later in the season, tournaments that drew teams from all over the Vancouver area.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.moresports.org/about>



## **Conducting Fieldwork “At Home”**

My decision to conduct fieldwork in my home city is a choice that is becoming increasingly prevalent amongst anthropologists. Indeed, looking through the graduate student profiles of many Anthropology departments in Canadian universities illustrates the broadening of anthropological research to include “home”, in the most general sense of the word, as a desired focus of inquiry. While traditionally ethnography has been employed as a method suited for studying “foreign” social worlds, recently anthropologists have recognized the value of this method for studying all social groups, be they geographically and socially removed from the researcher or not. Dyck asserts that this shift within the discipline reflects a realization amongst those conducting research that the prospect of studying “the Other” is becoming increasingly problematic due, in part, to the continual self reflection that the discipline is currently undergoing in regards to the exoticism that characterized anthropology over the last century (2000a:35). It is a choice, however, that is still met with scepticism by those who associate anthropological research with regional specialization that is culturally and spatially removed from the researcher’s “home turf” (Amit 2000; Caputo 1995; Dyck 2000b,). I was asked countless times by individuals within academia, as well as those unassociated with the academic world, how this research was anthropological if I was conducting it in Vancouver. The perception of anthropology as a discipline that studies “the Other” remains central to its popular image as a discipline.

As this was my first foray into anthropological fieldwork, I had no previous experience conducting research in an environment that perhaps more typically resembles the conventional rendering of a field site located far, far away. Despite the fact that my field site was a mere fifteen minute drive from my house, I most definitely experienced uncertainty and discomfort as an individual who did not quite fit into the mass of spectators that I sat amongst each Saturday. My status as an adult who was neither a parent, a relative nor a coach/volunteer with the sports team being observed was therefore noted by observant parents who returned each week to watch their kids play and could not clearly connect me to any of the kids on the team. The first question asked of me by adults (and by many kids) was “which kid is yours?” Not just anyone is allowed to observe children – a socially acceptable role must be established when working with

children (Dyck 2000b:40). The structure of Western age roles dictates that acceptable relationships between children and adults must fall within certain parameters in which roles are clearly defined, such as those inhabited by teachers, coaches, or the parents of friends (Fine 1987:222). Furthermore, the activities that I observed were extremely diverse in terms of the cultural and ethnic identities of the participants and their families, and there were many occasions in which the language being spoken around me was not one that I understood. I certainly did not feel an “insider” as I sat on the sidelines amongst a group of Filipino parents who seemed to know each other very well and loudly cheered (and heckled!) the kids on the basketball court.

### **Talk and Situated Action**

This research is based on findings that emerged from two methods: talking with child and youth athletes in both informal conversations and formal, semi-structured interviews, and observing in the form of participant observation at sporting events. These methods were situated in one or another specific context (the sporting event, the interview) and the actors involved (myself, the research participants, their parents) assumed roles that were recognized (a Master’s student conducting research, a child athlete, a youth volunteer, a parent of a child who plays sports) and referred to in order to situate the meaning of the interaction. Discourses concerned with children’s organized sport, the abilities of kids, and the social construction of gender include both talk and action, and therefore my approach needed to reflect this holistic understanding of discourses. I address this issue under the Analysis section near the end of this chapter.

The actions that I observed and the conversations that I had were specific to that moment and context. The nature of experience and identity is of course fluid and situational, and what one child or parent said during one interaction may not have been substantiated by their actions at another time and place. This is true whether they were speaking of their expectations regarding coaches, why they believe that many sport activities are separated by gender, or what they like and dislike about sport. This is not to suggest that their accounts are not reliable, but to illustrate that all social experiences and descriptions must be understood within a situated context. Miller characterizes this

disparity as the dichotomy between discourse and practice: “In some cases, the said and the done are entirely consistent and, in effect, entirely consistent with the same set of values, while in another arena they are entirely contradictory” (Miller 2001: 15). My findings do not represent what all kids do and say about their sport participation; rather, my findings illustrate what some kids said and did in the context of our discussions and the activities that I attended.

Conducting participant observation was an important aspect of this research. It not only allowed me the opportunity to engage in discussion with a range of parents and kids about their involvement in sport, but also permitted me to observe interactions between all individuals involved in sport (kids, coaches, volunteers and parents), and the mundane organizational components that are at the heart of many sporting activities. In order to gain an understanding of kids’ sports that was not simply based on the reflections of individuals, but also took into account the multidimensional nature of these activities, my presence at these complex and diverse activities was key. Without the combination of information gathered through informal conversations, observations and interviews, I would have less likely come to an understanding of the dialectics of kids’ sports that were generated in these contexts.

### **Parents and Kids: “And you are...?”**

While I did not conduct any formal interviews with parents, I spoke with many of them at length while watching their kids play basketball. After a few particularly interesting conversations, I asked individuals if they would mind my including our discussion in my notes, to which they agreed. I did not know any of the parents at these sports activities, and therefore my only relationship to them was as an individual conducting research for her master’s thesis. At the same time, however, I became quite friendly with a few of the parents who returned each week to watch their kids play. I often sat beside these parents on successive Saturdays, and I became acquainted with what was going on in their life away from the basketball court – their plans for Christmas, a sudden illness in their family, problems their kids were having at school. I was well aware, however, that our

conversations were for a purpose – as an ethnographic fieldworker I was “also exploiting this intimacy as an investigative tool” (Amit 2000:3).

When I was able to strike up conversations with parents, I usually asked them if they thought their kid would be interested in participating in an interview. Nearly all said that they thought their son or daughter would be interested. However when the practice was over and the parent introduced me to their kid, I was sometimes met with silence and a scowl. After these encounters, I rarely spoke with these kids again as I did not want them to feel coerced into participating in an interview simply because their parents had said that they would. There were a few kids, however, who came to know me and appeared to feel comfortable speaking with me, and it was these kids who I ended up interviewing.

My contact with the kids was fairly limited for the first three weeks of my fieldwork, and I began to fear that I would not have the opportunity to speak with many of them. Once they began playing games and I moved from the stage where I sat with the other spectators, to the team bench, I was able to take part in their brief conversations that were held in between shifts on the court. While I was still very much an oddity, I became less associated with parents by virtue of my ability to position myself on the bench, a freedom of movement that was not open to the parents. This repositioning allowed kids the opportunity to ask me who I was and what I was doing there<sup>4</sup>. The grade four/five boys were the chattiest and most approachable group to talk to – most of my “informal conversations” took place with boys from this group as they didn’t seem to be wary of me, nor were they afraid to ask questions. Conversely, the group of grade four-seven girls was the most difficult to talk with – they would often ignore my attempts at conversation and would squish together at one end of the bench so as not to have to sit beside me. Despite the fact that I found, in general, that the boys were much easier to engage in

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4 Individual kids tried to place me in terms of whose mom I was, as well as how old I was – “Lane” (a pseudonym, as are those of all of the participants named in this thesis), grade five, told me that I looked “a bit over college”, and that he had never heard of someone going to school to study sports. Kenzo, grade three, was a boy I spoke with regularly as he often turned up before and after his practice to watch the younger and older kids play (all identifying characteristics have been changed). Whenever we were in a group of kids and someone asked who I was or what I was doing, he would often jump in before I had a chance and explain that I was here “watching kids play sports to figure out why they did”. During one of these encounters, Frank, grade three, asked me if I was interviewing him at that moment, and if there was a camera hidden somewhere.

informal conversation with, the girls were far more willing and interested in being formally interviewed than the boys were. Indeed, of all my interview participants, only two out of thirteen were male.

When I initially embarked on this research, I did not anticipate that I would include the volunteers who were aged 14 and above as research participants. I had wanted to focus my investigation on the experiences and accounts of *children*, and I viewed teenagers as existing outside of this group because of their ability to inhabit roles, such as that of volunteer, that children are unable to occupy, as well as their increased social freedom and mobility that individuals experience as they transition from children in elementary school, to teenagers in high school. As I watched the volunteers interact with one another, with the kids and with the adult coordinators, however, I realized that limiting a definition of “kids” to those 12 and under failed to take into account the fluid and multidimensional nature of this category. These kids occupied an interesting social space, in that at times they were considered kids and at other times, young adults who were distinct from the kids that they were instructing. Age roles do not stop and start with the advent of a given age, and to limit my investigation of kids’ accounts of sport to those who fit within a specific age group failed to consider the constantly shifting and changing nature of these roles.

What struck me while watching and listening to the young volunteers express their ideas and opinions about sport was the manner in which they would usually distance themselves from the kids that they instruct, yet align themselves with them when they described their own experiences as athletes. Guided by Miller’s discussion of dialectics, in which “the centrality of contradictions in the processes” of an act is evident (2001:3), I realized a tension sometimes exists between their lived experiences and the discourses that they engage with to articulate their social position in the realm of organized sport, as well as within their families, school and social lives. When distancing themselves from younger kids, the volunteers employed seemingly “adult discourses”, for these discourses operate on the dualism between child and adult, a dualism that inscribes the authority of the adult over the child. Drawing from Miller’s definition of discourse, it seems that this type of language has become “routinized and externalized beyond the expressions of

particular individuals and become, therefore, a common location for the standard generation of normative ideals and sentiments” (Miller 2001:15).

This research is, therefore, informed by the informal conversations and structured interviews that took place between myself, parents, and kids who participated in both MoreSports activities and sports activities that were not associated with MoreSports. I conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with thirteen participants, including eleven females and two males. These interviews took place in a range of locations, from the participants’ homes to coffee shops located close to their school. All of the interviews were tape recorded and lasted from thirty minutes to one hour.

Four of the participants were kids ranging in age from 8 to 12 who participated in the basketball program, or had a sibling who did. These kids were recruited for interviews by way of informal conversations that I had with parents while watching basketball, and therefore the kids who participated in interviews were the kids of the parents who chose to engage in conversation with me. Six of the participants were volunteer coaches with the program and ranged in age from 14 to 16. These participants were approached directly and were given consent forms that their parents were required to sign before the interview took place. Three of the participants were kids aged 8 to 13 who did not take part in any MoreSport activity but were active participants in organized sport. These participants were contacted through friends of friends, and their parents signed a consent form prior to the interview.

## **Analysis**

My analysis is directed by a dialectical approach that considers the tensions between the discourses utilized by participants in terms of their accounts of sport involvement and participation, as well as those discourses known to or encountered by participants that, while they may not endorse or support them, they are familiar with and might have been affected by. Along with a consideration of these discourses is the myriad of interactions, relationships and activities that have emerged out of these experiences. My understanding of dialectics and its application within an ethnographic study is informed by the work of Miller (2001). Miller states that discourse tends to privilege language, but that a myriad

of relationships can be found *between* practices and language, or “talking” and “doing”. In some cases, what is said and what is done may be embodying one value, and in other cases, they may be entirely contradictory (2001:15).

A dialectical approach that considers the contradictions involved in “talking about” and “doing” sport, gender and childhood allows for a recognition that kids and parents are active in constructing and challenging childhood, gender and sport discourses, as well as a recognition that “doing” gender, childhood and sport activities is “constituted through interactions” that change and adapt to the situation or occasion (West & Zimmerman 1987). Furthermore, a dialectical approach considers the need to situate the discussion of sport, childhood and gender within an institutional context in order to acknowledge the structural and social influences that contribute to the social construction of these categories. The intent of situating this discussion within an institutional context, however, does not detract from the primacy of the accounts of individual participants – their reflections and discussions are attended to first and foremost within this analysis. By acknowledging that individuals operate within an institutional context, an appreciation that the manner in which they talk about and “do” sport is situational, fluid and highly social becomes quite evident, as does recognition that these experiences are neither immutable nor absolute. The manner in which participants discussed their experiences with sport speaks to the multidimensional nature of their social worlds.

For my purposes here, I am interested in the ways that kids talk about and understand dominant ideas regarding their participation in sport, their abilities as “kids”, and their understanding of gender in the context of organized sport as well as the manner that discourses are enacted by these kids in a particular situation. I am interested in the relationship found between their “talk” and their actions, that is, the “doing” that occurs during their participation and the ways that they talk about this participation. As sport is an highly social and multidimensional activity, participants’ accounts of their experiences represent a body of understandings regarding what participation in organized should, and does, entail. Their accounts and actions are situated discourses that are expressed through their talk with me in interviews, their conversations with other actors involved in the activity *as well as* their actions and behaviour at these sites. For example, when participants described to me their desire to make friends during their sport participation

they may have been expressing their opinion as well as engaging with a discourse that suggests that the social side of sport is conducive to making friends. Furthermore, their reluctance to actually talk with and engage with other members of their team at the site of their activity suggests an engagement with other discourses in terms of the social etiquette regarding the interaction of young girls with their older counterparts.

The experiences and accounts of the individual are the focal point of this research. This research is not meant to be representative of all kids' participation in sport; rather, the findings that have resulted from three months of participant observation and interviews are meant to represent a snapshot of these specific individuals' accounts of their sport participation, and the associated relationships, interactions and events that emerged during the discussion of these experiences. These findings will be presented according to dominant themes that emerged from my readings of interview transcripts and field notes. By focusing on individual experiences and accounts, I hope to illustrate the complex and multidimensional nature of children's sport and to illustrate that kids are socially active, aware and capable individuals who are adept at constructing, engaging with and challenging dominant discourses concerning sport, childhood and gender.

## **Organization of the Thesis**

The organization of this thesis is as follows: chapter two will provide a review of relevant anthropological literature on the issues of childhood, sport and specifically children's sport, and gender. Chapters three and four will offer a discussion of findings that is organized by themes that emerged during the reading of interview transcripts and field notes. This discussion will illustrate the manner in which participants drew from both their own experiences as well as dominant discourses when reflecting on particular issues. Chapter three will consider the manner in which participants' defined sport, their beliefs about how sport should be structured and organized, and their discussion of values associated with participation in sport such as teamwork, sportsmanship and a healthy lifestyle. Chapter four will consider the social dimension of participants' accounts – that is, their thoughts on the role of family members and friends in the realm of their sport participation, the role of the coach and their expectations regarding what qualities their



coaches *should* possess. Finally, I will explore the volunteers' reflections regarding their new role as a coach and their ability to juggle their school responsibilities with their involvement in sport. Chapter five will offer an analysis of the themes discussed and the conclusion of the thesis.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD, SPORT AND GENDER**

#### **Introduction**

This chapter explores relevant anthropological literature on the topics of childhood, sport and organized sport for children, and gender. The purpose of these three literature reviews is to situate my investigation of kids' accounts of their sport experiences within the pertinent anthropological literature, and to illustrate how my "talking with kids" has developed out of these three bodies of work. While there is a substantial body of social science research that explores the areas of childhood, sport and gender, from an anthropological perspective this work often focuses on adult perspectives and "expert" testimonies that rarely consider the voices of the children themselves. This literature review will focus on these three areas of study previously investigated by anthropologists, and will illustrate the need for anthropological research to seek out the voices of the kids in order to gain a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of the complex and multidimensional world of children's organized sport. I will conclude with a summary of the three sections that draws together the main points from each of these fields, and illustrate how these issues situate the ethnographic analysis that follows in chapters 3 and 4.

#### **The Anthropology of Childhood**

The study of childhood is a topic of investigation that has received the attention of scholars from a range of social science disciplines outside of anthropology, such as education, developmental psychology and family studies, to name but a few. Traditionally, the role of children within these investigations has often been that of "object", in which the behaviours and actions of the child are examined and viewed from

a position that does not recognize that children have agency and are socially active individuals. Rarely are the experiences, accounts and beliefs of individual children given centre stage. Indeed, the context and situation of the individual child is often neglected in favour of statistical and longitudinal studies that depict children in aggregate and operate in terms of percentages and averages. As a result, there has until recently been little in the way of social science research that considers the position and the reflections of the individual child as a topic worthy of study in and of itself.

Many of these studies are informed by biological and psychological understandings of development that have permeated popular and academic understandings of childhood in the West. Within these approaches, children are positioned as belonging to a category whose members are yet to be fully formed. According to this way of thinking, children must pass through specific stages of development in which the “savage” like child develops into an adult, moving (so to speak) from simple to complex, irrational to rational (James and Prout 1997). Much of traditional and contemporary child research is characterized by a focus on the perceived *future* impact or implications of an activity upon any given child, an approach that endeavours to “divine distant outcomes” (Thorne 1994:7) and consequently relegates the immediate experience of the child to the margins of analysis (Caputo 1995).

The contribution of anthropology to an understanding of childhood has been, up until fairly recently, characterized by approaches that in some respects resemble and in others depart significantly from those discussed above. In her review of childhood studies published in the *American Anthropologist* from 1898-1998, Schwartzman critiques the study of children over the last century in these terms: “...anthropologists have *used* children as a population of “others” to facilitate the investigation of a range of topics, from developing racial typologies to investigating acculturation, but they have rarely been perceived as a legitimate topic of research in their own right” (2001:1). The early 1990s witnessed the emergence within anthropology of a new approach to childhood studies that was marked by a shift in the way that children were both conceptualized and approached as research participants, a shift that has distinguished anthropological approaches to childhood from other social science approaches.

By approaching children as active social beings *and* as research participants in their own right, anthropologists have contributed to the realization that childhood is a time of life that is diverse and multidimensional, and that it is therefore not so much a biological stage as a social construction. Through ethnographic research, anthropologists have explored the interactions and relationships between children, as well as between children and adults. This investigation has led to an understanding of societal age role definitions and classifications that act as central organizing principles in society. It also speaks to concerns around issues of morality and control that are manifest in societal understandings of the dualism between child and adult. For the purposes of this thesis, I find it useful to review certain writings from the anthropology of childhood that have contributed to the understanding of childhood as a social construction and children as active social beings. I will also consider anthropological literature that considers the relationships between children and adults and the meaning of these age role classifications.

## **Childhood as a Social Construction**

Anthropologists are challenging more homogeneous constructions of childhood through ethnographic research and the publication of anthologies and journals dedicated to the broad and diverse subject of childhood and the experiences and roles of children<sup>5</sup>. The marginalization of children as subjects of study and the refusal to involve them as primary research participants is being questioned by the redevelopment of a framework through which the lives and experiences of children can be considered (Caputo 1995; James & Prout 1997; Schwartzman 2001; Stephens 1995). In the early 1990s, James and Prout contributed to this emerging paradigm by offering a set of guidelines that positions children at the centre of analysis (1997). Central to this paradigm is the recognition that childhood is a social construction, and that the experiences and beliefs of children can be

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<sup>5</sup> The American Anthropological Association published an Anthropological News series in April, 2008 on children and childhood entitled "Transforming the Anthropology of Childhood" and "Confronting Challenges in Research with Children". The series explores new ways of thinking about children's experiences and roles, as well as methodological issues associated with working with children.

expected to be diverse, multidimensional and complex and must be considered within the social contexts within which they occur (1997:8).

A focus on relationships, interactions and experiences of individual children suggests a conceptual approach that in some ways is shifting from a concentration on socially constructed categories such as race, ethnicity, gender and ability, towards a focus on the dynamic and fluid nature of identity and the social world (Amit-Talai 1995; Caputo 1995:19; Hall 1995). This is not to say that these categories and issues do not affect children. Yet by focusing upon social interactions and relationships, the manner in which social categories such as gender and race are manifest within a specific context becomes apparent, as does the manner in which kids negotiate, engage with and resist the dominant discourses that surround these categories and their experiences with them. Thorne comments on this shift, stating that “an emphasis on social context shifts analysis from fixing abstract and binary differences to examining the social relations in which multiple differences are constructed and given meaning” (Thorne 1993:109).

An examination of children’s experiences cross-culturally illustrates the diversity and complexity of this time of life. Children inhabit a range of social locations and are able to exercise varying degrees of agency and ability within the confines of their social situations. Ethnographic research that considers children’s active roles in their surroundings illustrates the importance of a situated and contextual analysis to an understanding of childhood in any specific time and place. The manner in which factors such as geographic location, class, race and ability impact childhood cannot be overlooked, and a comparison of two studies illustrates the saliency of these issues. Theis’s (2001) ethnographic research in Vietnam explores how the non-profit organization *Save the Children* attempted to conduct child-focused research amongst kids who worked in order to contribute to their families’ livelihoods. Theis describes how the aid workers were not inclined to consider the coping mechanisms of the child labourers as evidence of their social agency, an agency that allowed them to navigate their way through exploitative and often dangerous situations on a daily basis. Despite their desire to investigate the needs and experiences of the children themselves, in the end they reverted back to adult-centred logic that positioned the kids as socially inactive and in need of protection (Theis 2001:103). Gary Allen Fine’s (1987) ethnographic study of

Little League Baseball teams in the United States illustrates the complex relationships and roles involved in a kids' sporting activity, a sport that is considered by many Americans as a national icon. Embedded in the structure of each team were the roles of coach, parent, player and spectator, and Fine's analysis illustrates the ability of the kids to negotiate, engage with and resist dominant discourses concerning their ability and values such as teamwork and sportsmanship. Central to Theis's and Fine's studies was an emphasis upon talking with the kids themselves about their experiences, and positioning this talk as the centre of analysis.

The sharply differing experiences of the kids in these two studies illustrates the diversity of forms of childhood, as well as the importance of investigating seemingly concrete and "natural" social categories and roles, such as the destitute nature of child workers and the oblivious yet happy child baseball player. Ethnography as a research method is well suited for appreciating the dynamic nature of children's social realities, for not only does it allow children a more direct voice than other methods, but also it considers their actions and beliefs in the present, rather than considering what is happening now as merely a stepping stone to be read in terms of how they will likely develop in the future (Chin 2001; Dyck 2003).

### **Children are Active Social Beings**

Conducting research with children brings to the forefront what Schwartzman refers to as "ethnopsychological assumptions": that is, personal and societal assumptions that are embedded in research and analysis, such as the notion in much child research that adults are active while children are passive (2001:26). "The major result of this perspective has been to grant agency to adults, while denying it to children, as we always filter understandings of children through adult viewpoints" (Schwartzman 2001:26). The recognition that children are independent and active social beings that are not "waiting" to be socialized into adults becomes evident through research that positions their actions, experiences and perspectives as central to analysis. Research that positions children as simply a source of data fails to acknowledge the manner in which child participants engage with the research process (i.e., this is not a uni-directional flow of information,

but rather a dynamic interaction), as well as the ways that they navigate and negotiate the interactions and situations that characterize their daily life.

Institutionalized public places are obvious locations for the study of children as these not only provide for controlled and monitored interaction between the researcher and the child, but also serve as a space where relationships between those within different categories (i.e., adults and children, immigrants and natives, etc.) are transacted and reproduced (Marshall 2002:5). At the same time, however, activities that occur on the sidelines and at the peripheries of these sites should not be overlooked, for “places for children” are not necessarily “children’s places” (Fog Olwig & Gullov 2003)<sup>6</sup>. Many anthropologists interested in shifting their analysis away from a concentration on “adult-centred” perspectives have focused their investigation on the seemingly ordinary activities that structure the daily life of many kids, whether this be the route chosen on the walk home from school (Spilsbury 2005), the way they style their Barbie’s [doll] hair (Chin 2001), or how a street kid decides where to spend the night (Scheper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998). A focus on children’s places should not be limited to a focus on places that are restricted to children, for children and adults interact in a multitude of capacities and settings. “Instead of being spatially segregated, children live in spatial contiguity with adults”, even though this contiguity is supervised and directed by “strong social distancing that articulates complex patterns of authority, dependence and support” (Nieuwenhuys 2003: 100).

This shift in analysis has also occurred within the investigations of places created for children by adults by considering the discourses utilized to create and manage such spaces, as well as the manner in which kids have resisted, engaged with and challenged these same discourses. Gullov’s analysis of “forest” kindergartens in Denmark (2003),

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6 Olwig and Gullov’s discussion of children’s places illustrates the need to distinguish between those places that are constructed for children, such as schools and day cares, and places that are constructed by children for themselves, and therefore might exist quite separately and distinctly from these institutional contexts. While places such as schools “constitute important frameworks of life for children”, they do not “determine children’s lives, nor do they preclude the existence of other kinds of places that may be of central importance to children” (2003:7). Olwig and Gullov are calling for a reconsideration of the way that place is conceptualized, a consideration that acknowledges that “places are cultural constructions that emerge in the course of social life as human beings attribute meaning to their surroundings and thus turn them into places of special value” (2003:7). Therefore children’s places are constantly shifting and changing depending on their experiences, identifications and perceptions of themselves and those around them, and are not necessarily tied to the institutional structures that society has come to associate with children’s lives.

Kjorholt's (2003) examination of the "Try Yourself" project, an initiative developed by the Norwegian government in which children were given the opportunity to apply for funding to finance a project that they would develop and implement on their own, and Fleming's work with South Asian youth in middle and high schools in class stratified Britain (1995) illustrate the dynamic interaction of people, ideology and place that characterize the everyday for these particular kids.

### **Children and Adults: A Tutelary Relationship**

Sites and activities that are deemed safe or appropriate for children illustrate societal perceptions concerning how children must be treated and supervised, and the types of activities that adults in particular societies tend to believe will enable the development of active and productive citizens. In Western society, activities that are deemed beneficial to children are often activities that are supervised and organized by adults for children. This supervision not only ostensibly protects children from the dangers of the everyday world and therefore enables an experience of childhood that is rooted in security and innocence (Dyck 2003; Schepper-Hughes & Hoffman 1998; Stephens 1995), but it also provides opportunities for children to learn how to act in approved ways. Sally Anderson's research in Copenhagen at the sites of organized sport for kids illustrates the value and importance that Danish society places on civic membership (2003a; 2003b). In Denmark, participation in organized sport activities must be accompanied by formal membership in a sport association, a membership that is regarded as the ideal way for children to learn *how* to be Danish. Participation without membership registers as remaining "associationless" and is, therefore, thought not to provide for opportunities in which kids can learn from adults who are not their parents. The structure and guidance that this involvement is thought to provide, and the opportunity for adults to teach and direct children "for their own good" suggests a tutelage that has been explored in other aspects of anthropological research (Amit 2003), although it has not often been associated with childhood.



This tutelary relationship between adults and kids in different realms of society prompted Dyck to draw a correlation between the management of Aboriginal affairs by the federal government in Canada *and* the world of adult-organized sport for kids:

The ostensible goal of such systems of state tutelage has been to reshape aboriginal peoples 'for their own good'. In retrospect, it is not difficult to recognize how certain parallels in relations between federal Indian agents and the Canadian aboriginal peoples served to direct my attention somewhat uncomfortably to the tutelary purposes of parents and other adults in shaping the form of children's sport in my own suburban community (Dyck 2000b:37).

The nature of this relationship is one that is thought to be *necessary* for the proper socialization of children. Viewing themselves as possessing a comparative wealth of experience, adults occupy a prime location from which they may endeavour to instil children with important societal values and ideals. There is little research, however, that explores how kids themselves interact with these undertakings, and the manner in which they engage with, construct and resist these discourses in their daily activities. The distinction between different age roles in contemporary Western society implies the existence of concrete boundaries between children and adults that in reality seem to be far more fluid and blurred than these classifications would suggest.

### **Age Role Distinctions**

Contemporary anthropological research illustrates that "childhood" means very different things to different people in different times and places. Therefore any analysis of the experiences, activities and interactions that occur during this time of life must be situated within specific contexts. Coming to a universal definition of who should be included under the term "child" has, not surprisingly, proven to be difficult. But it is also illustrative of a particular construction of childhood that is rooted in Western, middle-class assumptions of what this time of life should entail. Sharon Stephens' anthology *Children and the Politics of Culture* (1995) presented as a collection of essays that emerged from a 1992 conference "Children at Risk" held in response to the adoption in 1989 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Stephens and other authors in the book critically examine the construction of "modern" childhood and the

consequences of the processes of globalization on this construction, as well as the implications for a universal doctrine of human rights that centres on the assumption that children are in need of protection, and are therefore passive and socially inactive beings.

Shifting analysis from a global scale to a more local level brings to the forefront societal assumptions and expectations that are embedded in differentiating children from adults. From a Western perspective, there are various labels and terms used to differentiate between the levels of temporal development amongst this group, such as “kid”, youth, adolescent, “tweenie”, teen and young adult. The variety of these terms would suggest that the boundaries between different ages of “kids” are blurred, fluid and situational. Popular understandings, however, position kids and adults as distinct and concrete categories that are in many ways antithetical to one another. Kids are constructed as socially unaware and inactive individuals on the one hand and physically active and in need of the opportunity to “run” and “play” on the other (a characterization that demonstrates the contradictory Western views of childhood). Conversely, adults are constructed as rational being that are socially active and intuitive and not in need of the same physical activity as kids. This understanding fails to consider the contiguity and flexibility of the meanings of these categories, as well as the ability of individuals to move between roles depending on the situation.

Thorne’s research with elementary school kids explores the tensions involved in the transition from “kid” to “teen” by focusing on the “temporal and bodily dimensions” and “the striking shift in kids’ gender relations and systems of meanings” that occur during these years (1994:135). Her observations illustrate the great diversity that characterizes maturation, such as the lightning speed of physical development of some girls compared to others, and the ability of girls and boys to try out different activities and ways of speaking that are associated with different levels of maturity, such as wearing make up, playing make-believe or “going-with”. Thorne states that this transition to adolescence “can be understood as a period of entry into the institution of heterosexuality”, a period that is particularly difficult for girls (1994:154).

The employment of the terms “kid”, “child” and “teenager” are entrenched in culturally specific meanings that must be situated in order to be understood. There seems, however, to be little in the way of research that explores the use of these labels and

classifications by the individuals themselves, or why certain terms are utilized in certain situations or locations over others. If the meaning of the words “child” and “childhood” are being questioned and challenged, it seems somewhat peculiar that the voices of the children themselves have not been considered.

## **The Anthropology of Sport**

In this section, I offer a review of various aspects of the anthropological literature on sport generally, and organized sport for children specifically, that are pertinent to this thesis. This review considers the recent shift within the social sciences to consider sport as a topic of inquiry that is worthy of theoretical and ethnographic investigation, and why anthropology as a discipline is well suited to studying this multidimensional and complex field. I will consider the use of the body within the realm of sport in terms of the actual body practices that constitute participation, as well as the use of the body as a site of both social control and resistance.

Concerning investigations of organized<sup>7</sup> sport for children, an anthropological approach considers the social constructions, interactions and expectations that characterize the variety of activities that fall under this heading. The involvement of parents in organized sport, when and where this occurs, allows for these activities to exist and operate, and the discourses employed by parents thus involved speak to the expectations they have regarding their child’s and their own participation in these activities. Organized sport is thought by many to be an activity that has the potential to instil wholesome and positive values and ideals necessary to enable appropriate participation in society, and the emphasis placed upon this type of social education is apparent when one considers the value-laden discourse used to describe adult-organized sport compared to that used to discuss kid-organized activities. The social construction of categories such as race, class and gender may be recognized and sometimes even challenged by kids and adults who participate in organized sport, so these sites offer a

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7 I explore the term “organized” in the following chapter. Essentially, I am referring to adult-organized, supervised and controlled activities for children, for there exists a distinct difference in the manner that kid-directed sport activities are discussed and conceptualized compared to that of adult-organized activities for children.

unique and revealing point of access to explore how these constructions may be developed, engaged with and contradicted by kids and adults alike.

Sport can be found within societies across the world – the form of government, the level of economic development, and even the state of peace or war within a society does not seem to deter the presence of informal ‘pick up’ games or even professional sports teams from occupying a prominent place within the social world of its participants. Nevertheless, anthropology has until recently largely neglected sport as an area worthy of study in and of itself, despite its near universal practice. Dyck states that while anthropology has never completely ignored sport and has, at one time or another, documented in detail ritualized games and athletic activities, the discipline has failed to approach the study of sports with the degree of vigour and importance that is warranted (Dyck 2000b:14). As the original intent of the discipline was to study the “primitive” in “his” original form, the presence of sport was viewed by some anthropologists as acknowledging the presence and influence of a certain degree of modernity that was deemed out of place in “the science of the non-modern” (Dyck 2000b:14).

MacClancy asserts that since sport is an activity intrinsically linked to the mechanics of the body, a domain deemed “natural” and “unchanging”, a critical and theoretical study was deemed unnecessary, for the hidden meanings that social analysis would attempt to get at simply were not seen to exist (MacClancy 1996:1). Sport’s characterization as centring around the physical and natural has positioned it as “having a life of its own” that, while enjoyable, evokes a “low culture” that does not lend itself to theorization (Brownell 2000:42; MacClancy 1996:1). Bourdieu also addresses this sentiment: “Thus there are, on the one hand, those who know sport very well on a practical level but do not know how to talk about it, and on the other hand, those who know sport very poorly on a practical level and could talk about it, but disdain from doing so, or do so without rhyme or reason” (Bourdieu 1988:153).

Anthropologists and other social researchers interested in investigating the complex and multidimensional nature of sport are currently challenging the characterization of sport as comprising only “low culture”. Sport cannot be singled out and studied independently of historical, political, and economic issues that are present in a particular society, for “the space of sports is not a self-contained universe” (Bourdieu

1988:155). Approaching sport as an enclosed arena fails to acknowledge the manner in which social and structural forces affect and are affected by the multitude of actors and activities involved in sport (Bourdieu 1988:156; Dyck 2000a:3; Lithman 2004:23). At the same time, however, sport and society do not enjoy a “functional relationship” that serves to protect and perpetuate the status quo; rather, sport not only reflects cultural beliefs, values and traditions, but may obscure them as well (Klein 1994:54).

### **Given Sport, Why Anthropology?**

Through ethnographic fieldwork, anthropology presents itself as a prime discipline to explore the domain of sport and how it manifests in societies across the world, as well as to investigate the complex ways in which sport reflects and obscures broader social and political arrangements. Participant observation requires the anthropologist to attend the sites of competition, and through this face-to-face contact to seek a “critical and comprehensive experience of a social setting” (Dyck 2000b: 17). Perhaps most importantly, anthropologists engage with individuals in a manner that illustrates that they are “rounded individuals with experiences, involvements and stories that reach far beyond the limited purview of any research project” (Dyck 2000b:17). When the topic of investigation is the multifaceted and complex world of organized sport in which a myriad of actors, expectations and discourses converge, then the holistic, situated and engaged methods involved in fieldwork are ideal. An anthropological approach accounts for the diverse and fluid reality of a situation, and allows for an analysis that goes beyond simplified categories and explanations. As well, an anthropological approach is well suited to examining the manner in which socially constructed categories and roles “fit” into sport, such as the power often associated with a coach, the importance of fans, and the construction of gendered discourses concerning the abilities of female and male athletes.

While anthropology as a discipline has been somewhat reluctant to embark on a serious investigation of sport, there have been some in-depth and comprehensive considerations of sport in its many forms. MacAloon’s (1981) investigation of the modern Olympic Games and his assertion that sports researchers must get out of their

armchairs and into the field in order to gain the critical perspective that an investigation of sport requires and deserves marks the beginning of a trend in engaged, critical and holistic anthropological sport studies. Brownell's (1995) ethnographic fieldwork in the People's Republic of China explores the State's investment in the bodies of its citizens, and illustrates that while the body can be used a site of control by the ruling party, it can also act as a site of resistance by the people, whether this is a resistance of age, ability or gender discourses. These ethnographic case studies illustrate that sport research has the ability to bring to light complex political and social arrangements in societies across the world and to highlight social categories and the manner in which people talk about and conceptualize these categories in the context of their sport participation. While the study of sport is important in its own right and not simply as a context to consider social relationships and arrangements, the ability of anthropologists to consider how these relationships and hierarchies are understood and discussed by those involved in sport can lead to a greater understanding of the social world in which these activities takes place.

### **Body Practices**

As ethnography focuses on the minute and mundane of the everyday, it is well positioned to study a topic in which the body practices of its performers are equally as important as the vocal declarations of the participants. The body practices of individuals play an important role in shaping the social world in which they live, and subsequently a myriad of social processes and interactions can be revealed by investigating these practices, as is illustrated through Kohn's study of Aikido, in which she focuses on the individual narrative and body practices of Aikido practitioners (2003). Lithman notes the importance of these body practices, referring to them as the basis of the "aesthetics of sport" in which the appreciation and understanding of sport illustrates the ways in which sport is able to "break through the routine surface" of the every day, and exist as an exciting and authentic reality for its supporters and participants (Lithman 2004:25).

The study of body practices is not limited to the study of the aesthetic, however, as organizations, states, and individuals also use the body as a site of control and resistance. There are a number of in-depth and sophisticated ethnographies that consider

the manner in which sport is utilized by citizens to resist dominant ideologies and practices, and by the State to enforce and constrict the movements and expressions of the citizens (Klein 1991; Lopes 1997; Richards 1997; Tuastad 1997). As sport can be utilized by opposing parties in a multitude of ways, so too can a situation be perceived by an ethnographer on the outside looking in, a position that speaks to the value of an ethnographic perspective.

Relationships and interactions between players, officials, coaches and the individuals on the sideline, as well as the manner in which these actors construct, engage with and challenge dominant discourses concerned with the social world, illustrate the rich and complex nature of this domain. Investigation of the realm of children's organized sport brings to light not only the interactions that occur between the host of actors involved, but also the expectations and discourses that shape the individual's experience of sport, as well as their own identity. The manner in which individuals discuss their sport participation, as well as perform within the context of these activities highlights particular relationships, social dimensions and activities that inform and structure the world in which they live.

### **Organized Sports for Children**

Children's participation in organized sport is widely believed to be overwhelmingly positive and beneficial for all actors involved, whether it is the children engaged in the sport, the parent spectators on the sidelines or the teenage volunteer coaches directing the activity (Dyck 2003; McGee et al. 2006:2). Despite the multidimensional nature of the activity and the host of actors involved, children's organized sport is an area of study that has, like the areas of childhood and sport more generally, been largely overlooked by anthropologists (Dyck 2003; McGee et al. 2006:2). Part of this neglect is due to the difficulty of conducting research in which children are the focus. Prevailing age roles in Western society dictate that an adult must have a formalized relationship with the child or children they are observing, for not just anyone is allowed to attend children's activities (Dyck 2000b; Fine 1987; Fleming 1995).

There are, however, a number of insightful and sophisticated ethnographic investigations of children's sport that consider children as active agents capable of articulating their thoughts on their sport participation and the discourses that influence and shape these experiences. These investigations consider what it is about participation in specific sports that kids seem to enjoy, loathe, and tolerate (Fine 1989; Fleming 1995); the motivations of parents who invest such vast amounts of time and money in these activities (Dyck 2003); the engagement by kids and coaches with discourses regarding the social construction of gender and class (Cooky and MacDonald 2005; Messner 2001); and the multifaceted meaning of the word "access", in which participation is dictated by both socio-economic means as well as cultural values concerning how time should be spent (McGee et al. 2006).

### **The Social Construction of Children's Organized Sport**

A necessary and integral component of children's organized sport in Canada is the involvement of parents in a variety of capacities, ranging from financial supporter, spectator, chauffeur, administrator and coach. Parents draw from a number of discourses to explain why they think participation in organized sport is worthy of their child's, and therefore their own, time and energy. Through ethnographic research, Dyck explores these discourses and illustrates that for many parents, "sport is not only an attractive means of augmenting family childrearing stratagems but also [for] constructing identities for themselves and their children" (2000:138). Dyck's research illustrates that even while many of these parents' expectations concerning the benefits sought through participation (for both themselves and their children) in organized sport are not met, they continue their involvement as they do not wish to challenge an institution that aims to offer seemingly necessary educational and developmental lessons to their kids (such as the value of sportsmanship, teamwork, and the development of self esteem). Furthermore, awareness that vocal criticism may lead to disapproval over one's "political behaviour" or "might elicit a difficult-to-refuse invitation to take on a time-consuming role within the club or league" seems to suppress many of these complaints and criticisms, and therefore allows for the continuation of actions and behaviours deemed unsatisfactory by parents



and kids alike (Dyck 2000c:155). By supporting their children's participation in organized sport, parents are publicly exhibiting their parenting skills and their ability to "put up" with issues for the sake of their kids.

Anthropological research has illustrated that children's participation in informal sporting activities is not viewed in the same capacity as children's participation in *adult*-organized sport, for the distinction lies in the potential of the latter to encourage the development of valuable social and individual skills. Kid-directed activities, such as skipping in the schoolyard, street hockey or "pick-up" soccer matches played during recess and lunch breaks are often regarded as somewhat quaint or even irritating activities that kids occupy their time with. Rarely is the same value laden discourse which is applied to the discussion of the presumed benefits of organized sport participation applied to a discussion of kid-directed activities. Kid-organized and -directed activities often take place outside and have little or no external supervision, a situation that might be viewed by some as failing to offer any social lessons that might further the development of a child into a social, hard working and honest adult. A western, middle-class understanding of children is one that positions them as being in constant need of protection and surveillance. Thus, public activities that take place outside of institutional settings and boundaries are considered suspect, for in the street there is no supervision, nor is there any offering of expertise as how best to "play" (Dyck 2003:63).

Anderson's consideration of organized sport activities in Denmark, a nation in which membership and participation in formalized sport activities is extremely important, illustrates the distinction made between those kids who occupy their time as members of sporting clubs or teams, and those "associationless" kids (most often immigrant kids) who prefer "drop-in" activities in which they can come and go as they please (2003). Despite the enjoyment that characterized many of these kids' experiences with the drop-in sports Anderson was observing, the program was deemed unsuccessful by the coordinators for it did not succeed in reaching the program's goal of enticing these "associationless" kids to sign up for formalized teams or clubs.

Participation in organized sport provides kids and youth the opportunity to engage with adults who are not their parents or teachers, and through this interaction, to be exposed to particular values and ideals that are prized in their society. This social

education includes a realization of age roles, in that kids and youth seem to come to an understanding by way of the structure and organization of these activities that adults are the only individuals capable of teaching and controlling groups of kids, and by virtue of their adult status, are the only individuals who can effectively direct a sport activity. Fine's look at Little League Baseball in the United States illustrates the contentious role that the coach performs, for here he (in Fine's study, the coaches were all male) is subject to the likes and dislikes of his players, as well as the opinions and judgments of parents. Fine observed the different personas assumed by coaches, such as those who tried to be friends with the kids, those who assumed a much more authoritative role, and those who were more interested in "just having fun", and the manner in which kids reacted to these different characters (1987). Furthermore, Fine's research illustrates how boys in Little League learn how to act not only like adults (by, for example, publicly controlling emotions when under pressure), but also like the men who coach them: "In examining preadolescent behaviour, one is struck with the degree to which preadolescents wish to adopt the adult male sex role; they are attempting somewhat hesitantly to be sure- to adopt the values of their male leaders" (Fine 1987:103).

Social institutions such as sports clubs, leagues or teams are invariably situated in one or another specific social context; therefore the structural and organizational components of these institutions both reflect and obscure understandings of social categories such as gender, class and race, thereby shaping the way in which kids (and the adult actors involved) experience these categories. Messner explores the manner in which gender has become an organizational tool in his four year old son's soccer league, and examines the ways in which the kids and the adults engage with gender discourses that position the behaviours of girls and boys as innately biological despite evidence to the contrary (2000). Fleming considers the construction of race and masculinity in his study of South Asian male youths in Britain. Many of the South Asian youths whom he studied, particularly those from a lower socio-economic class and who represented more traditional Indian cultural behaviours and beliefs, failed to meet the perceived stereotype of what a British male adolescent was supposed to embody. Their failure to confront the "hostility and antagonism" that was directed at them put them even more at odds with the

“working-class culture of youthful masculinity” that was embodied by other British youth (Fleming 1995:122).

The ability of kids to engage with, construct and contradict dominant discourses regarding the social organization and structure of society is an ability that is often overlooked in kids, and there has been relatively little research that explores the different ways that kids do so in the realm of organized sport. By talking with kids and observing their actions and interactions within the context of sports, the ways in which they manage and negotiate the social world in which they live is uncovered. Cooky and McDonald (2005) interviewed and observed an adolescent girl’s basketball team (ages 11 to 14) in the United States with the intent of gaining an understanding of how these middle-class, White girls articulated their participation in sport. They explored issues such as what it means to be a female athlete, the differences between boys and girls in sport, how people react to girls when they play ‘aggressive’, and how one can achieve success in sport. Cooky and MacDonald assert that these girls inhabit a contentious social position in that they are both “outsiders and insiders”. They are outsiders due to the dominant construction of binary gender and sex differences reinforced by the basketball league’s separate teams for boys and girls, and insiders due to their class position not only within their community, which grants them access to “cultural capital” such as league sports, but also within the larger American society, which positions Whiteness as the cultural norm and is therefore overwhelmingly represented in the media (Cooky & McDonald 2005:165).

Anthropological research that positions children as socially active and aware individuals has the potential to investigate the manner in which the constantly shifting identities of girls and boys who play sports are realized and negotiated when their behaviours and attitudes conflict and coincide with cultural norms associated with their age, gender, class, race and ability. Ethnographic investigations of kids’ sport participation can provide insight into the dynamic nature of identity in both a local context, such as the sports team or league in which they play, as well as in a broader social context, such as their community and society on a whole.

## **The Social Construction of Gender**

I have already discussed a few ethnographic studies that consider the manner in which gender is experienced by kids who participate in organized sport (Cooky and MacDonald 2005; Fine 1987; Fleming 1994; Messner 2001). These studies illustrate the manner in which kids make sense of gendered discourses that they encounter at specific sporting activities, as well as in the social world at large, for sport is not a contained domain but is subject to social arrangements and categories that organize the social world. How kids talk about these discourses within the context of sport allows for the consideration of how they view and manage the world in which they live. While there is a wealth of anthropological research on the subject of gender, it is not my intent to attempt a summary of this literature here. For my immediate purposes, I am interested in how gender is understood by kid participants in terms of the ways in which they talk about their sport experiences with gender discourses. In this section, I will offer a brief discussion of my understanding of gender as a social construction as it is informed by the work of West and Zimmerman (1987) and Thorne (1994).

West and Zimmerman conceptualize the social processes of “doing gender” as an accomplishment that is carried out (or achieved) by individuals within a situational context:

When we view gender as an accomplishment, an achieved property of situated conduct, our attention shifts from matters internal to the individual and focuses on interactional and, ultimately, institutional arenas. In one sense, of course, it is individuals who “do” gender. But it is a situated doing, carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production. Rather than as a property of individuals, we conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating one of the most fundamental divisions of society (1987:126).

West and Zimmerman assert that the embodiment of gender is not fully captured by the use of the word “role”. Rather, assuming the existence of a role suggests a situated identity, such as a nurse, a father, or a teacher. By approaching gender as if it is a role that one inhabits, we neglect the influence of gender on the other roles that we perform in our day-to-day lives. Rather, gender is produced and enacted in every day activities.

“Doing” gender is unavoidable, as we manage ourselves in such a way that our activities, our beliefs and our persona are gender appropriate. We exist and operate in an interactional and institutional environment and we expect others to perform in the same way that we do. We categorize individuals by virtue of what we see – if they appear to be a member of a given category (in this case, men or women), then we have no reason not to categorize them as such (West & Zimmerman 1987:134). Through these interactions and relationships, we create and manage the seemingly natural differences between men and women. Gender is therefore more than a set of actions and behaviours but is instead “constituted through interactions” that change and adapt to the situation or occasion (West & Zimmerman 1987:129). Our way of performing and doing gender becomes naturalized as the “inevitable unfolding of natural, internal differences between the sexes” (Messner 2000:770).

Messner (2000), West and Zimmerman (1987) and Thorne (1994) assert the need to situate the performance of gender within an institutional context. To ignore or exclude this institutional domain neglects the structural and social influences that contribute to constructions of these seemingly natural gender identities and behaviours. “Lacking an analysis of structural and cultural context, performances of gender can all too easily be interpreted as free agents’ acting out the inevitable surface manifestations of a natural inner essence of sex difference” (Messner 2000:770). Thorne’s ethnographic research with elementary school children illustrates the pervasiveness of an institutional setting in relaying notions of normative gender behaviours. Perhaps most importantly, however, is Thorne’s demonstration that kids are active in constructing and challenging notions of what it means to be a girl or a boy. For my purposes, the institution is that of adult-organized sport for kids. The manner in which kids interact with one another and with the other actors involved in the activity (coaches, volunteers, parents) illustrates their understanding of, engagement with or resistance to dominant discourses concerned with gender, as well as with other social constructions, such as “appropriate” age roles, and the importance of teamwork and sportsmanship.

Thorne’s approach to examining and understanding children’s experiences of gender operates on two central components. The first has to do with the fluid and situational nature of gender – one’s behaviour does not follow a set of strict rules that

regulate what is “appropriate” for a boy or a girl; rather, this behaviour is flexible and changes depending on the situation and context, as well as the company. Her ethnographic research illustrates numerous instances of kids challenging what is thought of to be typical female or male behaviour (or using the terminology of West and Zimmerman, “sex categorization”); however these examples are often regarded as exceptions to the “rule” of gendered behaviour and regularly go unreported or unnoticed by researchers, parents/teachers and coaches. Messner titles this as the “believing is seeing” phenomenon – individuals choose what they would like to believe is true rather than allowing what we see to inform our beliefs.

The second component of Thorne’s analysis is her understanding of children as active social beings who are capable of exercising their own will and negotiating their own behaviours and beliefs. Moreover, while children are influenced and learn from adults, the process goes both ways – their interactions and relationships are not characterized by a linear flow of information, but rather as a process of interaction. Kids are not simply empty vessels waiting to be molded into adults, but are active individuals whose beliefs and actions must be considered in the present and not primarily in terms of how these situations will impact their future development as adults. Thorne’s research suggests that socialization and development theories that position children as learners “who are acted upon more than acting” fail to acknowledge the diversity and vitality of children’s immediate lives. “Children’s interactions are not preparation for life; they are life itself” (Thorne 1994:3). Like West and Zimmerman, Thorne focuses not on the differences between girls and boys, but instead in the way that they come together and build social relations that create and challenge gender meanings in their everyday lives (Thorne 1994:4). Individuals do not develop an identity in an enclosed environment; rather, one’s identity is informed by relationships and interactions with those that they encounter throughout their lives.

## **Conclusions**

The aim of the above literature review is to situate my own research with kids within the pertinent anthropological research on the subjects of childhood, sport and gender. While

anthropology's interest in childhood and sport has been somewhat delayed, the discipline's attention to these issues over the past two decades has produced a significant body of insightful and diverse research.

Anthropologists' investigation of childhood has illustrated that this is a time of life that cannot be characterized as constituting anything like a natural or homogeneous form or a universal experience; rather, childhood is a social construction that is not exempt from the political, social and economic forces and categories that influence and shape the social world. Research that hopes to gain an understanding of particular experiences of childhood must therefore be situated within the social context within which these experiences occur. The manner in which kids interact with one another and with adults illustrates that they are indeed active social beings with the ability to engage with, construct and contradict dominant discourses that shape their experiences. Whether these discourses are related to the construction of gender within the realm of organized sport or the construction of appropriate age roles in Western society, the anthropological research reviewed here illustrates the ability of kids to negotiate these social expectations and constructions.

The anthropology of childhood illustrates that childhood is a social construction, and the anthropology of sport demonstrates the manner in which social constructions such as this are manifest in specific activities invested in and enacted by a multitude of social actors. Anthropology is well suited to studying both these areas as ethnography is adept at capturing the multidimensional world and identities of the individuals involved, illustrating that they are far more complex than simply research subjects and instead live complicated lives. Organized sport is an activity that involves use of the body, and as the anthropological literature illustrates, a focus on the body practices of those who participate in sport reveals and obscures dominant expectations and social arrangements in a given society. The manner in which parents talk about and position their child's and their own involvement in sport speaks to the social values and ideals that are associated with these activities. Furthermore, the distinctions that are made between adult-organized sport and kid-directed sport illustrate the importance that controlled and supervised activities have in Western society, for here children are expected to learn how to act in

particular ways that accentuate the values of being productive, successful, fair and hard working.

The social construction of gender and the ways that kids and adults talk about the differences between girls and boys is evident within the realm of organized sport, for this is an activity in which both the body practices and the social interactions of individuals are clearly evident. Investigating gender in organized sport for children must be done from a position that recognizes gender as a construction that is realized and enabled through everyday activities and interactions. Gendered identities are situational and fluid, and therefore are not assumed to encompass a concrete “role” that is inhabited automatically and unproblematically by individuals. Furthermore, kids must be approached as individuals who are not only aware of these gendered discourses, but also adept at constructing and challenging them.

In the following two chapters, I will draw from this review of the anthropology of children, sport and gender and situate my own observations, conversations and interviews with kids who participate in organized sport in terms of the themes and issues that I have discussed here.



## **CHAPTER 3**

# **“BECAUSE IT’S FUN!” KIDS’ ACCOUNTS OF THEIR SPORT EXPERIENCES**

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I focus on the accounts given by kids regarding their experiences with various sport activities, as well as their understanding of the age and gender roles that inform the structure of organized sport. While it was evident that kids desire their sport activities to be structured and organized in particular ways, they also discussed and exhibited numerous means to make these activities “their own” while still acknowledging the boundaries that govern organized sport.

Kids’ involvement in organized sport is often summed up by the assertion “because it is fun!” The word “fun” seems to capture the essence of participation – if these activities were not enjoyable, kids would not dedicate so much time, energy and thought to their involvement. Therefore asking kids about their sporting experiences often seems somewhat pointless if their participation can be so conveniently and easily summed up by one word. A parallel exists between the manner in which children are so often perceived as undeveloped social beings, with little insight into their social experiences, and the original reluctance on behalf of the social sciences to investigate the world of sport as it was thought to exemplify a “low culture” that does not productively lend itself to theorization (MacClancy 1996). A realization that children are active social beings, on the one hand, and that investigations of sport have the potential to illuminate social constructions and arrangements within a specific context, on the other, has led to the investigation of the multidimensional and complex world of children’s sport.

I was interested in exploring what kids’ assertions of fun actually involved – how do kids describe their sporting experiences? What are their expectations regarding their own involvement, as well as the roles of the others actors involved, such as the coaches, other players and their parents or guardians? My interest in exploring these questions is

directly related to my understanding of kids as socially active and able individuals who have diverse and multifaceted experiences, experiences that, when given the opportunity to do so, they might like to discuss.

Their ability to incorporate their own activities into adult-organized sports, and the manner in which they expressed an awareness of their social power and agency illustrates the social ability and power of kids, an agency that is often overlooked or disregarded. Their “talk” and their “actions” suggest an awareness and active engagement in the social world in which they live, and positions them far from being the passive and incomplete individuals envisioned in traditional Western understandings of childhood.

### **Defining Organized Sport**

My use of the term “sport” during interviews and conversations with kids and parents was never questioned – no one asked for clarification regarding which activities I was referring to when I used this term. In truth, I hadn’t given the matter much thought, and was essentially using the term to refer to athletic activities that are organized for kids by adults. It was not until I began asking participants and spectators at the basketball program which sports they liked and disliked that I became aware of a tendency to associate the word sport with *team* sports. After a bit of probing, many participants seemed to remember that they also took part in activities such as dancing, martial arts or gymnastics – activities that were indeed organized and structured, but were not team sports that one would traditionally find offered at school. As well, the presence of an adult actor appeared to be central to participants’ classification of certain activities as sport. As I will explore in this chapter, young participants in this study viewed the prospect of sport that is not directed or coached by an adult as an activity that would be

chaotic and even potentially dangerous. The presence of an adult was central to the organizational component of sport<sup>8</sup>.

While I was primarily interested in investigating activities that were organized and directed by adults for kids, I am aware that considering activities that are not organized by adults as essentially “unorganized” fails to acknowledge the ability of kids to direct and manage activities such as Double Dutch skipping, street hockey, or a lunchtime game of soccer or baseball<sup>9</sup>. Jie, 8-years-old, is an avid skipper and described in detail the songs, choreography and organization of Double Dutch skipping at her school. Despite the obvious organization and structure of activities such as this, all participants believed that sport without coaches would dissolve into chaos, and no one seemed to view their experiences with kid-directed activities as evidence of their ability to organize their own sports.

Street hockey and skipping, while thought of as sport, were categorized differently than those activities organized and structured by adults around practices and competitions. Isabella, age 9, questioned her friend’s inclusion of running and swimming in her definition of sport. When I asked her why she wouldn’t have included these activities, she exclaimed “because you just run in life and you just swim!” To Isabella and many others, sport is an activity that is separate and distinct from other activities in daily life. In this thesis, I primarily use the term “sport” and “organized sport” to refer to all types of physical activities that are organized by adults for kids.

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8 Defining sport has proven to be a difficult and controversial endeavour. Dyck and Archetti’s (2000) exploration of these efforts includes a discussion of Guttmann’s schema that differentiates “spontaneous play” from “organized play”, “intellectual contest” from “physical contests”, as well as the six characteristics that distinguish modern sports from “primitive” ones; and Blanchard’s definition which is “a game like activity having rules, a competitive element, and requiring some form of physical exertion” (cited in Dyck & Archetti 2000:19). It is Dyck and Archetti’s assertion, however, that “how we choose to define sport may be less significant than what we can learn from examining the processes by which one or another definition is championed” that I follow here, for I am interested in why kids choose to include some activities of sport and not others rather than their definition of what this word means (2000:19).

9 Dyck considers the gap that seems to exist between the realm of children’s organized sport and the “cherished ideals of pond-hockey” that so many parents fondly recall (2003).

## **The Meaning of Fun**

Sport is a social activity in which team members, coaches, opponents, and friends and family members of all these individuals intermix with one another to create the social atmosphere of the activity. Essentially, this is the dimension of kids' sport that I investigated, as participants' narratives were mainly characterized by a discussion of their experiences with other people. The manner in which participants described their relationships in the context of their sport participation was indicative of the manner in which they viewed the world of organized sport, and how they believe these activities should be structured and organized. Enjoyment and fun were, not surprisingly, on the list of nearly all participants when I asked them why they participated in sports. Further discussion illustrated, however, that this is a certain type of fun - one that is ordered, organized and structured by a capable adult. This is not to suggest that there was a disconnect between their desire for fun and their desire for organization - most were quite articulate and clear in their discussion for a need for structure. However, I was never met with a response to the question "what is it that you like about sport?" with "because I like structured activities". Rather, participants employed a particular discourse surrounding their participation in sport that drew on notions of "fun", healthy and active living, teamwork and sportsmanship.

"Fun" can be had just about anywhere and doesn't necessarily require the presence of a practice plan or uniforms. What makes the fun to be had in sport so appealing to these kids? In keeping with the assumption that the presence of an adult coach is what differentiates adult-organized sport from kid-organized sport, I asked participants what they thought sport would be like without any coaches. They unanimously declared that sport activities would essentially dissolve into chaos. Jie, 8-years-old, had a particularly bleak outlook of sport without coaches: "there would be fighting, and it would be boring 'cause the kids usually don't know some stuff so, like in the basketball games, there would be tripping and there would be all sorts of fights, like I got the ball you never got the ball." Her vision of sport without rules was equally as bleak: "people might hit you many times, and you might be bleeding, and um, if there wasn't even rules, like this whole city would be destroyed".

A breakdown in the social order was a common theme that was invoked when participants considered sport with no coaches or rules. Suki, age 9, also believed that fighting would erupt: “if there was no coach then a rule maker the guy who made the rules before, might have been like the coach , then there would be no rules and it would be very, very bad...bad in a bad way. Then people would be fighting and stuff”. Christie, age 16, believed that sport without coaches would be “out of control! People would want to have it their way, some – there is always that person who says “this is my way”, and there’s people who try and follow them. [Sport] needs structure and a coach to say what to do so that everyone will follow his or her words”. The role of the coach, however, cannot be taken on by anyone – it is an age specific role that must be assumed by an adult.

Participants did not believe that either kids or teenagers could be coaches – in their eyes, kids are not able to control or organize other kids, nor do they possess the knowledge necessary to instruct a team of players. Participants associated kids with chaos, and as having no knowledge or authority, while adults were associated with authority, knowledge and order. As someone gets older, they establish authority by virtue of their age. When Naomi, age 12, talked about her sensei, she described him as “old and grumpy”, a state she believed was inevitable after someone coaches for a long time, while Eiko, age 16, differentiated her dad from other dads who coach by clarifying that he’s not “some old, mean guy”. Isabella, age 9, directly stated that she would never listen to other kids if they tried to be the coach, and Suki, also 9, agreed, stating that “adults should be coaches and leaders and stuff ‘cause adults have, people listen to adults more”. When I asked Morna, 8-years-old, what she thought it would be like if kids were coaches, she stated that “probably very bad because if it were a kid, then another kid would want to coach, and then another and then everyone would want to coach on the team”.

According to participants, organized sport is an activity in which the roles of the different actors involved are distinct and age appropriate – adults are to be coaches, as they keep order and are knowledgeable, while kids are to be players, and therefore be directed. This gives kids the opportunity to engage with the activity as participants and not have to worry about playing fair, organizing the practices, or keeping order. This

allows for the particular form of “fun” that they have come to associate with organized sport. If these boundaries are crossed, the order of the activity breaks down.

## **A “Perfect” Coach**

Kids have developed expectations regarding their role and participation in organized sport. They want the time that they spend on these activities to be fun, organized and controlled, and they expect their coaches to provide this atmosphere. It is therefore not surprising that when I asked participants what qualities they valued in a coach, authority was cited as an essential characteristic. Christie, age 16, believes that a good coach would be stern but also able to have a good time: “hmm, a perfect coach? Well, they would be stern in a way – not stern but they have a powerful voice – I don’t know how to explain it”. When I suggested the word authority, she agreed. “Yeah, authority, but like they aren’t too harsh all the time. I like structured things, but sometimes I need a little lee way or some space, so I think that that’s really important. And um, a sense of humour always lightens the mood a little”. Jamal, age 14, commented repeatedly about the “meanness” of his basketball and rugby coaches, despite the fact that he quite liked them. Mundeep, age 16, noted that while no one on her grade eight<sup>10</sup> basketball team was friends with their coach, they learned a lot from him: “well, he was kind of intimidating, everyone thought he was ‘cause he was kind of a tough guy, but it was all right cause through his discipline we learned a lot”.

The older participants (ages 13 to 16) who I spoke with had slightly different expectations about their coaches than those of the younger participants, specifically an awareness of the notion of friendship and respect between themselves and their coaches (particularly amongst those who are involved in a sport that demands a great deal of time and commitment). Grace, age 13, is a competitive skier and puts in around eighteen hours a week in training alone, and attends competitions on the weekend that often involve travelling. When I asked her about her coaches, she told me that she “loves” them, and that having a friendship with them is “pretty important – you need to respect each other”. As well, she states that the small, close knit atmosphere of her team allows the coaches to

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10 Kids in grade eight are usually 13 turning 14 years of age.

remain in charge: “there’s not like a bunch of screaming kids all the time – the coaches have control. So the training is always fun”. Grace, like many others, sees a correlation between order and fun, and believes that it is the job of the coach to ensure that their sport was characterized by both of these components; however, Grace also expected a certain type of relationship from her coaches, one that acknowledged her position as a person who was deserving of respect and not just in need of direction.

Alanna, age 16, described how her confidence level has increased as she has gotten older and that she now feels more comfortable challenging and questioning her coaches, even if they happen to be her teacher and therefore in a position of power:

For my coaches when I was younger, I’d see them as a teacher, or like a guru, you respect them because they are adults but as you get into your teens it is more like, it depends, ‘cause off the court ... it’s like a friendly relationship and it depends on how old they are too, your coaches and how chill they are, and then like you are chill with them, and then on the court it’s like a straight coach player relationship where you listen to what they think, and if they have practice plans then you listen to them as well, but you voice your opinion. For me, when it was my teachers it was like I would still voice my opinion but it would be, actually sometimes I wouldn’t, no. But then other kids have been scared to do that cause, you know, it’s like your PE [i.e., physical education] teacher, but it’s like, it doesn’t make a difference to me ... other kids have had a problem because they say oh whatever, they are the teacher, but it’s still doesn’t matter because you can still voice your opinion.

Alanna’s discussion illustrates her sense that kids should not, or do not question the authority of adults, and that even as individuals get older, there are certain adult roles that are synonymous with authority, such as the teacher’s. As Grace’s comments demonstrate, the role of the coach is unique in that they have the ability to establish a relationship that is not confined by the same regulations as those that govern the teacher/student relationship, or a child/parent relationship. Their discussion of their relationships with their coaches illustrates an awareness that, by virtue of their age, their interactions with those in positions of authority is shifting and changing, and is no longer confined to the dualism of adult/child. At particular times, sport is a realm that is separate and distinct from other activities in life, and therefore the role of the coach may also be a distinct role that is differentiated from the roles assumed by other adults. The position of coach, however, is often assumed by individuals who hold other roles in the individual’s life,

and participants had very different thoughts on whether or not this situation was desirable, an issue that I explore in Chapter four. While many participants believed that sport is an activity that is separate and distinct from other aspects of life such as home and school, they were aware that the age roles that structure these activities also apply to the realm of sport. Even if the dynamic of the relationship between kids and adults is somewhat different in the context of sport, a kid is still a kid and remains subject to the boundaries associated with this age role.

### **The Element of Unpredictability**

Sport is in several respects uncontrollable, and for some kids this seems to produce a sense of anxiety concerning the unpredictable nature of the activity. Initially I was quite surprised to hear so many kids speak of very specific concerns regarding their fear of injuries (it was always the younger kids who spoke of injuries in this way). In hindsight, however, when I consider that kids seem to want sports to be organized, structured and therefore controlled, a concern over the unpredictable nature of many sports is not surprising. Coaches and organizing bodies can only control particular aspects of sport. They cannot control all of the *action* that characterizes sport activities. I witnessed a number of kids pleading with their coaches to remain on the bench, and after speaking with some of them, attributed this to a sense of anxiety concerning the unpredictable and risky nature of these activities.

Simon, an 8-year-old boy who plays basketball, was one of these kids. I noticed week after week that Simon sat on the bench more than any of the other kids, and seemed to avoid the ball at all costs when he was on the floor. One day while I was sitting next to him on the bench, I asked him what his favourite and least favourite sports were. He told me that he loved basketball, and that he hated baseball because he was afraid of the ball. He explained that he could not understand why the batter was the only player who was allowed to wear a helmet – shouldn't the outfielders, who are faced with catching the ball, get to wear one too? He was quite perplexed by this, and continued to talk about other sports and the potential injuries one might incur while playing them. When I asked him what it was he liked about basketball, he said hanging out with his friends and



cheering them on. For Simon, participation in sport did not necessarily mean physically participating in the activity – he was more than happy to participate as a vocal team member who sat on the bench.

Simon wants his sport activities to be controlled and organized so that he can assure himself that he will not get hurt; Simon is in many ways inconspicuously tailoring these activities to meet his own needs. By enrolling in basketball but preferring for the most part to sit on the bench, Simon is illustrating his agency as an individual and his ability to engage with the discourses and structure that govern the institution of organized sport in a way that suits his understanding of participation. I witnessed this tailoring of the structure of sports repeatedly, and these observations serve to underline the ability of kids to assert an element of control over the activities that they engage with, an aspect of participation that I explore later in this chapter<sup>11</sup>.

The nature of age specific roles was made very clear to me during my conversations with participants. As the materials presented above demonstrate, their ability to articulate exactly what qualities they desire in a coach and the type of fun that they have come to expect from organized sport illustrates an awareness and understanding of the structure and organization of these activities that is often not attributed to kids. Our discussions of the structure and organization of their sport activities was not limited to age roles, however, as we also discussed the organization of the kids themselves. Specifically, we discussed why sport activities are often organized in terms of the separation of males and females. I was interested to hear participants' thoughts on this segregation – was it a matter that they had considered? And how might they view this segregation when so many of their other physical activities (such as PE, a recess game of soccer or baseball, swimming lessons, etc.) are mixed?

Our discussion of gender, like our discussion of the role of the coach and the involvement of their parents, took two forms. The discussion was either overt, in that I

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11 Thorne's research with families illustrates the complex interactions and networks that are established in the process of picking up kids after school (2001). As more and more families become either dual income earners where both parents are often out of the home, or single parent families, going home for lunch and going home directly after school is becoming less common for elementary school aged kids. She illustrates that far from being passive individuals in these processes, kids are very active in shaping these practices and experiences, as well as directing how these practices are carried out.

directed the conversation or interview to the issue of gender by asking participants why they thought that boys and girls were separated during many sport activities and if they saw or experienced a difference with the ways the boys played versus the way the girls played; or it was discussed by the participants as a component of a particular experience or issue that they had chosen to talk about.

Many of the participants' responses suggest a view of gender segregation as a necessary organizational tool, a tool that is related to a belief that males are *naturally* more skilled and more aggressive than females. As a result of these innate differences, sports should be separated in order for these activities to be kept safe and fair. At the same time, however, when participants reflected on *specific* experiences, their accounts suggest that mixed gender sports and activities are not necessarily dangerous, imbalanced or socially awkward. Furthermore, many participants expressed an uncertain awareness that associating gender segregated sports with biological understandings of aggression and ability is somewhat problematic; however, many were unsure as to why this was so since their own preferences may support the separation along gender lines.

### **Because They Are Different!**

As I was sitting in the bleachers at the gymnasium watching the grade two and three<sup>12</sup> boys “play” basketball, I was struck by the contrast in behaviour and sheer silliness that was enacted before me compared with that of a few hours earlier when this same age group of girls was playing basketball. These boys were physical in every sense of the word – they run, jump, wiggle and dance in one place, they hug each other, pull each other around by the arm or the neck, and “high five” and clap whenever someone makes a basket. The girls, in contrast, were far quieter – while they also dance and jump around, there is far less touching between them than between the boys, and far less talking and interaction. It would be easy to say that these differences are in fact natural, that they are rooted in biology rather than developed and constructed through their social surroundings and interactions. I commented on this difference to a parent sitting next to me whose son

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12 Kids in grade two are usually 7 going on 8 years old, while kids in grade three are usually 8 going on 9 years old.

is very quiet and very small. She stated, rather authoritatively, that boys and girls ARE different, and that this is why girls tend to do better in school – they are able to sit still for longer and are better listeners than boys. I suggested that perhaps it has to do with the fact that many of these boys seem to know each other and that the girls may be coming from a variety of different schools. Unconvinced, she simply shakes her head and repeats her claim – that boys and girls are fundamentally different, and their behaviour is proof that all one needs to do is watch girls and boys at play.

Separating kids along gendered lines in sport is an issue to which I had not initially given much thought, despite my experience as a swim coach with kids ranging in age from 5 to 18. Unlike most organized sports, during training sessions in swimming swimmers are usually divided into groups according to ability and age (this is not to say that within each group kids are not organized by gender for specific activities, such as games or relays). Competitions are organized by gender and age specific categories. As a coach, I do not recall thinking about the marked differences between girls and boys, nor do I recall noticing the similarities, as gender was not a salient issue to them while they were in the water, nor to me when deciding which group each kid should go in. Swimming is a non-contact and extremely technical sport – the size or level of aggression of an individual does not have as great an impact on one’s ability to swim as it might have on one’s ability to play basketball, or even soccer. Based on the comments from participants concerning the differences in ability, size and levels of aggression that differentiate girls from boys, the non-contact nature of sports such as swimming “allows” them to remain in mixed gender groups (at least during times of training). The desire to segregate girls and boys in sport appears to be linked to a *fear* of what might happen if aggressive, large, skilled boys played with or against meek, small and unskilled girls.

Indeed, when I asked participants why they thought that boys and girls were separated in many sports, such as soccer, basketball or baseball, the reasoning that boys were bigger, stronger, more aggressive and more skilled was repeatedly called upon. Mundeep and Christie, two volunteer coaches who are both 16 years old, believe that there are marked differences in aggression and skill level between girls and boys. Christie asserts that she sees a substantial difference in players as young as 8-years old:

I do see a difference, I do. For the boys – the two/three boys and the two/three girls, there’s a lot of difference. Some of the boys are pretty good for that level, and I don’t think that girls are at that level yet, and I guess, it’s just how girls and guys are built like that- guys are just naturally good at sports, some of them, and girls are not yet like that, so I think there would be a difference, so I don’t think they should be together yet. And for grades 4-7<sup>13</sup>, it’s kind of iffy – I still think that they should play separately because there are some guys in the 6-7 are pretty good and I don’t think that – well, some of the girls actually are about the same level, I don’t know, they can get kind of physical so...

Jie, age 9, stated that she liked playing basketball with just girls “because boys are trickier because they are bigger than us and if we want to shoot then they can block us right away”. Morna, age 8, believed that girls and boys are separated when playing soccer because boys are at a “higher level” of play than the girls, and that boys are physically more developed than girls: “the boys can be a bit more aggressive and stronger and bigger than the girls so they could hurt the girls really badly, so that’s why”. When I asked her if she liked having separate teams for boys and girls, she said that she did: “yeah ‘cause I don’t want any of my best friends to get really injured ‘cause at the end of soccer last year my friend Lisa, she used to be on our team but she went to a higher level or team, she broke her collarbone and Elie, she sprained her ankle”. Despite the fact that these injuries had nothing to do with playing against boys, Morna drew a connection between injuries and mixed gender sports.

While both Jie and Morna asserted their belief that the difference in size, strength and aggression of boys and girls was pronounced enough that they should not be allowed to play on the same team or in the same league, at different points in their interviews each asserted a desire to play against, or with, the boys. Morna recalls how she asked her dad if they could play against the boys’ team: “I asked my dad if we could play the boys because boys and girls don’t normally play against each other because the boys can be really strong and like aggressive...cause I would like to beat them! [Laughs] I would like to see if we could beat them”. When I asked Jie what she thought it would be like if girls and boys played sports together, she said that “it would be fun, but the girls might not be able to pass to the boys because the girls like to be on one team and the boys like to be on

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13 When in grade four, kids are usually 9 going on 10 years old, while in grade seven, they are 12 going on 13 years old.

one”. As well, both girls participated in PE class and lunch time activities, such as the game “grounders<sup>14</sup>”, where boys and girls played together. Despite the fact that these experiences were not marked by instances of aggression or injuries, the girls did not draw a connection between their ability to play in mixed gender situations here, and their uncertainty towards playing mixed gender sports.

Like Morna and Jie, 16-year-old Alanna’s reflections on why girls and boys should be separated were somewhat disconnected from her experiences of actually playing sports with boys. Alanna recalled her experience of playing basketball on a mixed gender team when she was 11. She was as tall, if not taller, than the boys in her group, and she said that playing with them made her “tougher”. Despite this experience, Alanna draws on a biological understanding of gender to explain the organization of basketball along gender lines:

Now the guys are way bigger, like in grade seven, once they are in grade six or seven they are much bigger. It’s like high school – I was looking at pictures when we were in grade eight and we looked like we were in grade six, like comparing them. And there is a big difference in elementary schools now, and as well, I don’t know why, but in basketball, there were tall guys and stuff but it didn’t matter to me. As well, now sports...they have to split the girls and guys up for like numbers and stuff, ‘cause they have so many kids show up, and like girls its 4-7 cause they don’t have enough girls showing up to break it up into 2/4, 4/5, yeah, so they don’t get enough girls coming so that’s why they break it up like that. It would be nicer if they did it according to levels of basketball, or years played of basketball...

Alanna’s comments illustrate her recognition that the argument that males and females are substantially physically different in elementary school does not fit with her own experience when she was this age. Despite this, she continues to draw on a biological discourse to justify the segregation of kids along gender lines, and it is only when she begins to articulate her reasons that she begins to see the inconsistencies between these two perspectives.

The reflections of these participants illustrates what Miller (2001:3) calls the “centrality of contradictions” inherent in social activities -- in this case, sports. In order

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14 The game grounders is a playground game that was explained to me on a number of occasions by kids who attended different schools. It is a tag-like game played on the jungle gym.

to make sense of our own and others' experiences, we call upon and engage with several discourses that allow us to position these experiences into a framework of meaning that makes sense not only to ourselves, but also to those who we are speaking and interacting with. Because gender is something that we "do" within situated contexts, the tension that exists between our explanations of gender differences and similarities, and our specific experiences as individuals, is at times contradictory (West and Zimmerman 1987:126). While kids may have had many experiences in which males and females participated in an activity together and there was no marked difference between levels of aggression or ability, the framework of meaning that we construct to understand gender segregation in sport informs our collective understanding of the need to organize certain activities in this way. Messner notes that the inability to see the *similarities* that exist between boys and girls in everyday situations speaks to the notion of "believing is seeing": "we selectively see aspects of social reality that tell us a truth that we prefer to believe, such as the belief in categorical sex difference. No matter that our eyes do not see evidence of this truth most of the rest of the time" (2000:771).

Not all participants regarded sport segregation along gender lines as unproblematic. Layla, 11-years-old, is very involved in softball – she plays on a league team and attends a pitching clinic once a week. When I asked her if she liked playing on a team that was all girls, she said she wasn't sure: "I'm not sure, 'cause the guys, their coaches teach them a lot more 'cause ours are just parents and stuff, the other one is like experienced coaches". When I asked her why she thought they separated girls and boys on teams, she said it had to do with the aspirations of the guys: "I don't know, I think they think that the guys are a lot tougher and all of the guys want to go to rep<sup>15</sup>, and the girls don't really do rep – that's why they only have one team, but the guys have triple A, double A, major<sup>16</sup>...". When I remarked that it was interesting that the issue of "toughness" was relevant in a non-contact sport like baseball, she replied that "its non-

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15 "Rep" is the short form for "representative" and refers to an elite team to which the best players in a club or organization are assigned. A "rep" team represents the larger club or organization in competitions with the "rep" teams from other clubs or organizations.

16 The designation of teams as being Single A, Double A, or Triple A facilitates the assignment of players to teams within a larger club or organization according to their competitive abilities. Weaker players are placed on teams at the Single A level, while stronger players are assigned to teams at the Triple A level. Other systems of classification according to athletic ability include "gold, silver, and bronze" levels.

contact, they just teach them how to throw the ball harder and they teach them different methods, like a knuckle ball and change ups and the girls just don't learn that till grade seven. And my brother has already learned that and he's in grade four". She also said that she would like to learn these different styles of pitching, and that her coaches at the pitching clinic have started teaching them as they think it is unfair to make them wait until grade seven.

Grace, 13, was also conflicted about gender segregation. At her high school, PE is organized by gender for grades nine and above. Males and females play different sports – girls play soccer and softball and the guys learn wrestling and rugby. When I asked her how she felt about that, she was unsure: "I don't know – I'd probably prefer not to do rugby and wrestling and stuff, but it's kind of unfair that the guys do stuff that the girls don't, and that the girls do stuff that the guys don't".

Two participants, Isabella and Suki, both 9-years-old, reflected on the nature of male/female interactions at this age rather than any perceived differences in ability or size. Suki commented that girls and boys playing together would be "awkward": "because we are at an age where being around boys is a little uncomfortable, like gross". Isabella believed that playing against boys would also be awkward, unless they were "cute", in which case she would love to play against or with them. Suki seemed to be acutely aware of the issue of sexism in sport, and recalled an incident when she believed she was ignored because she was a girl:

Suki - 'cause I go to this after school care where usually we choose team captains for the games we play, and one time I was chosen to be a team captain and I was the only girl on my team, and I was telling everybody what to do and stuff, like kids and stuff, they weren't listening, they were listening to another guy.

Kirsten - and why do you think that was?

Suki- because the boys in my day-care are kind of sexist, so I would think that

Isabella- what does that mean?

Suki - it means that they don't like other genders. And so I'm thinking that they didn't think that a girl could play sports".

Naomi, age 12, does not enjoy team sports, and instead prefers classes such as Hip Hop dancing. She believes that sports should be gender mixed, and remarked that the only game she played at school that was divided along gender lines was “capture the flag”, and this was determined by the students themselves: “The only thing that we don’t play together is “capture the flag” where we make alliances, and most of the girls go to the other girls because, well, we trust them more than we trust the guys because more of our friends are girls than guys”.

Naomi, Suki and Isabella are acknowledging that sometimes they prefer to do activities with other girls. The fostering of same-gendered relationships is important - kids’ choices should be respected in terms of who they want to spend time with or “make alliances” with. Thorne reflects on this issue, stating that, “In my emphasis on promoting cooperative relations between girls and boys, I don’t want to neglect the value of same-gendered relationships and of kids having some autonomy to structure their own activities” (1994:163). At the same time, however, adult intervention is sometimes required: “freedom from adult intervention does not open a realm of unlimited choice, and the dynamics of kids’ social relations, such as patterns of teasing, may actually foreclose possibilities” (Thorne 1994:163). In the realm of organized sport, adult intervention is already established, and through the structure of the sports organization, “provides a context that variously constrains and enables the children’s interactions” (Messner 2000:767). Adult intervention is therefore embodied by the organizing principles of the sport activity, and therefore the institutional structure that kids experience sport and gender in is directly related to their understanding of gender differences.

While not all participants believed that sport separated along gender lines is unproblematic, many seemed aware but unsure as to why it might be problematic to organize sports in this way. The girls liked playing sports with girls, and many enjoyed the sports that were targeted towards females and not those targeted to males. So why shouldn’t we segregate sport? The problem lies not in encouraging same gender activities, but in the biological reasoning that is employed to justify this separation. By separating kids along gendered lines, they are learning that the categories of “girl” and



“boy” are important and meaningful organizational tools that serve to reinforce a “naturalized” and hierarchal order (Cooky & Macdonald 2005; Thorne 1994)<sup>17</sup>.

Kids demonstrated an awareness of and ability to articulate the type of fun that they have come to expect from their sport activities, as well as the organizational and structural issues that create the institution of sport that they are familiar with. Their insights into why adults assume the directional role of the coach, and why girls and boys are often segregated during sport activities suggests a social awareness that is often overlooked by many adults who assume that kids play sport simply because they enjoy them, and that their understanding of the organization of these activities is limited.

### **Understanding Age Roles**

My conversations with participants regarding their involvement in sport often evolved into a discussion of what activities they like to do during lunch, recess and after school. These times are also adult structured and monitored; however they were far more open and free in terms of the specific activities that they were allowed to do. Participants explained how they would talk with their friends in the cafeteria, play “grounders”, rehearse for school plays and dance performances, practice for school teams, and simply run around. Complex and involved games such as “fairies” and “teenagers<sup>18</sup>” were explained to me by 8-year-old Morna, and the style of skipping that 9 year olds Isabella and Suki enjoyed was performed for me on the spot. Not surprisingly, the kids that I spoke with (age 8-12) enjoyed “playing” and “running around”, in whatever form this took, during these times away from their desks.

12-year-old Naomi, however, expressed to me her awareness of the socially expected behaviours that were associated with being a 12-year-old: “Some days I’ll go outside and run around. I sort of, I feel a bit too old for those little make believe games

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17 Cooky and McDonald conducted an ethnographic study with a girl’s basketball league in the United States. They state that “...the league chooses to make gender (and age) the salient category of difference, thereby producing sexed bodies imagined to be more biologically different than similar and thus naturalizing a hierarchical gender order and the presumption of heterosexuality” (Cooky and McDonald 2005:161).

18 From the descriptions that Morna gave, “fairies” and “teenagers” seemed to be make-believe and role playing games that she and her female friends engaged with.

where I used to ride horses and stuff, because I love horses and I used to pretend that I was horseback riding, even though I never had one, but I feel that people start staring at me now, so sometimes I'll just run around". Conversely, 11-year-old Layla explained to me how she wasn't acting like *enough* of a kid. Her mom had to encourage her to go out and play with her friends as she was totally consumed by the pressure to do her homework: "at the beginning of the year I thought that homework was everything 'cause I didn't want any "lates" or anything, so I would always do homework and my mom wanted me to hang out with friends more, 'cause every week I would be doing homework and I would hang out with friends once, and so now I am into it more and I see friends everyday".

Morna, age 8, described to me a situation in which her age prevented her from being aware of decisions being made around her (at the time of the incident referred to she was 7). While in grade one, her school decided to build a new playground. This new playground, while fun, is not nearly as useful as the old playground because there exists no place that is covered from the rain – it is made of plastic with little holes that the water drips through. When I suggested that perhaps they should have asked the kids what kind of playground they wanted, she explained, "I didn't really hear [about the new playground] 'cause I was in grade 1 when this happened, so I wasn't really listening so I didn't know what was going on". A year later, however, Morna feels that she is much more aware of the social issues going on around her at school.

Alanna, age 16, expressed her awareness about her own social agency as an individual in a manner that suggests she is very aware of moving from the child-like state of a 12-year old to the more mature and articulate state of a 16-year old. She explains that her parents did not feel comfortable with her performing in traditional Indian dance as she became older. She stopped dancing when she was 12, but decided to return to performing a few years later: "my parents didn't like the whole idea of me dancing on stage so, yeah, I was like, I couldn't really voice my opinion on it at that age, I was like, 'OK mom', but then when I got older I was like 'yeah I really like, I really enjoy dancing, so I wanted to take it up again and finish it up'". Alanna regards her position as a 12-year old as being too young to have the ability to voice her concerns, but with age comes

confidence and independence, a sentiment that Alanna expressed frequently throughout our discussion.

This awareness that certain activities are “age appropriate” suggests an understanding of age roles in which young kids are allowed to be silly and play make believe while older kids must act in a way that differentiates them from the frivolous world of childhood. At the same time, this understanding of age roles implies that kids *should* be playing with their friends and acting in a social way, and that time spent on solitary activities such as homework is something that one will *eventually* get to as they get older. Additionally, participants illustrated an awareness of the social power that comes with age when they described instances in which, as a young kid, they were simply not aware or not able to articulate their concerns, but now that they are older, they have the ability to do so.

This understanding of childhood as a time of life in which children develop along a linear mode of development and pass through specific, universal “stages” illustrates an engagement with developmental discourse that is linked to the tendency of childhood studies to focus on the perceived future impact of an activity. This approach endeavours to “divine distant outcomes” (Thorne 1994:7) and consequently relegates the immediate experience of the child to the margins of analysis, rendering the point of view of the child or youth insignificant (Caputo 1995). Development and socialization theory supports the understanding of childhood as a biological stage of life in which the “savage” like child develops into an adult, from simple to complex, irrational to rationale (James and Prout 1997:10), and fails to consider the agency of the individual. Furthermore, socialization theory operates on the assumption that people choose “to maintain existing customs”, an assumption that fails to consider the social forces that contribute to one’s lived reality as an individual (West & Zimmerman 1987:141).

While participants described to me a desire for their sporting activities to be organized and structured by an adult, they also seemed to create ample space for incorporating their own activities into the well established rules and boundaries of their

sport. How participants described the manner in which they make activities “their own”<sup>19</sup> changed markedly depending on their age – there was an awareness that as someone ages, their position of power also becomes more pronounced. While certain activities or decisions were OK when one was 11 (or 7 or 15), a year later these same activities and decisions were no longer appropriate for their older age.

### **Playing with Structure: Making it Their Own**

Kids expect their sport activities to be organized, structured and managed by an adult in order to allow themselves the opportunity to “play” and have “fun”. Within these adult structured activities, however, there exists ample opportunity for kids to make the activity “their own” through subtle yet meaningful ways. The grade two-three boys would wiggle, dance, sing and jump up and down for no other reason than the fact that they felt like it. Conversations about how to make dry ice bombs and darts were enthusiastically held on the bench, as were discussions about the cool new milkshake that one boy had made for his entire class. The bathroom was a site of interest for many of the girls – moving in groups of four or five, they would run in together, laugh and scream, and then one would run out followed by the rest.

The bringing of junk food to the gym was always cause for excitement – I even witnessed the 14-year-old volunteer boys taking an interest in the giggling 12-year-old girls who were laden with slurpees and bags of chips while watching their cousins play. There were also those kids, such as Simon, who didn’t appear to enjoy *playing* basketball – to them, the most enjoyable thing was being on the bench, cheering on their teammates. I encountered three boys like this, who, whenever it was their turn to sub on<sup>20</sup> pleaded “no!” with the coach and were more than happy to sit back and talk with the other kids who were off. The manner in which kids can engage with these adult structured and organized activities illustrates their capacity to engage with discourses about what is

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19 Fine examines the “alternate worlds” of meaning that exist outside of the actual game of Little League Baseball – for example, eating candy, throwing dirt and chasing one another around the diamond (Fine 1987:57).

20 “Subbing on” refers to the substitution process where one player who is on the court comes off and is replaced by a player who is sitting on the bench.

appropriate or tolerable behaviour within the confines of practices, games or performance. Their actions and their discussions illustrate that discourses operate as both talk and action, and the tension that exists between these two illuminates a relationship that directs and constrains the manner that an individual operates within their social world.

## **Conclusions**

As this chapter has illustrated, “kids” understanding of organized sport and their expectations regarding participation are far from simple or uniform. Participants’ accounts suggest that their experiences and thoughts on sport are as diverse, multidimensional and complex as they are, and that while many of them might find sport “fun” (in one way or another), the use of this word to describe their sport participation encapsulates a plethora of opinions and experiences that are rarely considered by the adult actors who organize their sporting activities. The positioning of children as individuals capable of engaging with and discussing their activities and relationships, and the positioning of sport as an activity worthy of investigation establishes a site of inquiry in which social, political and economic arrangements and relationships can be explored.

The portrait painted by participants concerning the manner in which they want their sports to be organized and who they want running these activities suggests a desire for adults to be in charge and to allow them, as kids, to “play” and have the particular type of fun that they have come to expect from organized sport. Coaches need to be authoritative and have control, and therefore must be adults. Kids, by virtue of their age, are unable to direct other kids and therefore cannot be coaches. Furthermore, girls and boys must be separated during sport activities because of the reputedly more aggressive nature of boys, and their advanced skill in athletics. These assertions illustrate an understanding of age and gender roles that are linked to dominant discourses regarding the (limited) abilities of kids. Interestingly, the assertions put forth in these discourses were often not supported by their accounts of specific experiences in which they organized and directed sports on their own and participated in mixed gender activities without any negative consequences.

This desire for structure and adult directed activities, however, did not stop kids from incorporating their own interests and behaviours into the structure of organized sport. Whether these activities were conversations held on the bench, dance moves performed on the field or an understanding of participation that suggested no need to partake in the action on the court, kids exerted their social agency during their time participating in these adult-organized and highly structured activities.

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **INTERACTIONS AND EXPECTATIONS: SPORT AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY**

### **Introduction**

The social interactions and relationships that characterize participation in organized sport interconnect a myriad of characters – coaches, officials, kids, and parents, including both one’s own and the parents of other participants. These social relationships inform one’s participation, for sport is, above all else, a social activity. Parents’ involvement in their kids’ organized sports is a commitment that manifests in varying degrees of intensity and practical forms: it might involve dropping kids off at practice, sharing in a car pool, paying the registration fee, sitting in the bleachers or acting as a coach. This involvement allows kids’ organized sport to exist and operate. My conversations with participants regarding their families’ involvement in their sport activities evoked a diversity of opinions and beliefs regarding the role that parents should assume in relation to their kid’s participation in sport.

The expectation that sport is an activity that is not only enjoyable, but also beneficial to the development of kids was something that I encountered during conversations with young participants. There was an engagement by kids with discourses surrounding the notion of teamwork, sportsmanship and the health benefits of sport that was somewhat unexpected, for this characterization of sport as being beneficial to individual development is often assumed to be the discourse of adults (parents, teachers, coaches, government officials). Participants of all ages engaged with these discourses to illustrate their awareness of these values as well as the “rewarding” feeling associated with working with kids that was expressed by the teenaged volunteers. The social location that the volunteers inhabit is unique, for they remain kids in that they participate in adult-organized activities (such as sport) but also are moving away from this category and differentiating themselves by becoming volunteers with a formalized position of

authority over younger kids. The manner in which participants were able to move between a discussion of their own specific experiences and the dominant discourses associated with the benefits and rewards of being involved in sports illustrates their social awareness and intuition regarding what are desired behaviours and activities, and what are not.

## **The Role of the Parent: Spectator and Coach**

While watching hours upon hours of kids playing basketball, I had ample opportunity to talk with parents and grandparents about why they thought sport was a worthwhile activity for their kids. The usual reasons were articulated – that sport was a good way to encourage their son or daughter to make friends, gain confidence, learn teamwork and sportsmanship, try out some new skills and acquire some coordination and strength in their preadolescent limbs<sup>21</sup>. Most parents seemed mildly entertained by their kids' attempts to pass, dribble and shoot the ball, and would sporadically clap and cheer enthusiastically during games and tournaments. When the basketball program switched over from practices to games, many parents adorned with video cameras came out to watch and record the action. There was a real sense of excitement and even anticipation when a team from a different neighbourhood showed up to play. There was also sense of disappointment, however, when not enough kids were in attendance and instead of the highly anticipated game, a practice ensued. One dad commented that they shouldn't tell the kids that they were going to play a game if they were just going to practice – he seemed more annoyed than his daughter that the element of competition had been removed from the game.

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21 Considering organized sport as an activity that is worthy of kids' time speaks to the desire for kids to be occupied in an environment that is controlled and well supervised. Olwig and Gullov examine the meaning of place, for place "both reflects and signifies social divisions and variations in influence and power" (Olwig & Gullov 2003:8). The regulation of where children can and cannot go offers insight into power relationships and social opportunities within a particular society. As well, this restriction on movement into specific areas illustrates social meanings of what is appropriate and what is dangerous, and therefore illustrates how children come to relate to social division and social hierarchies within their society (Olwig & Gullov 2003:8). The site in which organized sport is experienced offers a place that in many ways educates kids to a social hierarchy of adults as the supervisor and kids as the supervised, and girls in need of separation from boys in order to ensure safety and fairness.



One enthusiastic and opinionated mom who continually cheered on and shouted directions to her son was met with complete disregard by him – he seemed to not hear her shouting and continued to run in whichever general direction the ball headed. At one point, perhaps to ensure that her son did in fact hear her, she jumped down from the stage where all the parents were sitting, took her son by the hand and marched him up to the coach. “He doesn’t know how to dribble!” she exclaimed. There was also one group of parents who came each Saturday to watch their sons play. They chatted and joked with one another and were extremely vocal and enthusiastic about the game. They were not afraid to laugh loudly when someone missed a basket or a pass, nor were they afraid to heckle the other team. I didn’t notice any of the other parents reacting to their display of fanfare, however I did notice many kids looking up with confusion when a botched pass was met with loud laughing and cheering. Despite these sometimes embarrassed and confused looks from the kids on the court, nearly all participants commented that they enjoyed having their parents come out to watch them play, compete or perform, even if at times they were embarrassed by their behaviour, or if they make them a bit nervous and add a little more pressure to perform.

The involvement of parents in their kids’ sports enables these activities to operate – without their financing<sup>22</sup>, time and energy, kids organized sport would cease to exist. Parents who show up to long and disjointed basketball games, stand in the rain at the soccer field or huddle by the poolside at 6 a.m. are in many ways displaying their parenting skills – they are “good” parents because, while they may not want to be standing out here in the rain, they are doing it for the benefit of their child<sup>23</sup>. This discourse around “proper” parenting was expressed to me by a mother who was the sole

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22 Only a few participants commented that their parents did not watch their games. One girl stated that her parents did not support her involvement in sport because they found sports simply too expensive, and that rather than spending time practicing basketball, this time would be better spent studying. While the MoreSports organization offers sport activities for a low registration fee (\$25 for three months of basketball), most other organized sports activities carry with them a substantial registration fee, as well as costs associated with travel and/or equipment.

23 Dyck explores the experiences of parents that support their kids’ participation in organized sport. He considers why parents “buy into” these expensive and time consuming activities when the wished for outcome of their child’s involvement is often not met. Dyck concludes that parents continue their support as they are somewhat “fearful of the costs of disputing and resisting the arrangements that are offered to them and the conditions of participation required of them by sport organizations” (2000c:156).

parent watching a group of grades 2 and 3<sup>24</sup> boys play basketball. After confirming that I was not a parent, she expressed dismay that she was the only parent watching. I sensed that this was a comment about the lack of interest she believes parents seem to have regarding what kids do with their time. About a half hour later, however, she loudly proclaimed that this was “a huge waste of time”, and told me that she was going to run some errands. Upon returning, she called her son over and told him she would pick him up when the practice was over. This mother was expressing her belief that a good parent is one who takes the time to come out and watch what their kids are doing; however as soon as she realized that I was not a parent, and that watching 8 and 9-year old boys play basketball was perhaps a bit boring, she had no problem joining the ranks of the other “uninterested” parents and use her time more productively.

The role of spectator is not the only role assumed by parents in the realm of organized sport, and many participants spoke of the experience (real or imagined) of having a parent coach their team. Many of these reflections were characterized by a sense of uncertainty or discomfort at having their parents participate in an activity that was *supposed* to be experienced without them. The merging of the parent role with the coach role seemed to threaten independence and suggest a disclosure of information that was not meant for their parents’ ears, or conversely, in that certain information should remain private and was not for public consumption. Others seemed to relish the thought or the reality of having a parent act as their coach, for there was a sense of power and prestige in being related to someone in this position.

Eiko is a 16-year-old volunteer with the basketball program. She enjoys being both a volunteer and being an athlete – she plays on the senior basketball team at her high school where her father is the assistant coach. I asked her if she liked having her dad coach her team and she responded that she did, despite the fact that some people might think it strange. “My dad, he helps coach sometimes actually, it’s, some people probably think it’s really weird ‘cause it’s my dad who is coaching me, and they are probably like, oh does she get sick of him? so, but I don’t really mind ‘cause it’s my dad, and he’s cool so he’s not like old um, mean guy or anything, so he likes to help out”. Eiko seemed to quite enjoy her dad’s involvement in her sport, and she went on to comment how her

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24 Kids in grade two are usually 7 turning 8 years old, kids in grade three or usually 8 turning 9 years old.

parents were very supportive and would come out to watch her games whenever they could.

Alanna, also 16, had quite a different perspective on the issue of parents coaching their kids. A father of one of her teammates coaches her soccer team, and Alanna believes that his presence makes for an awkward environment for the daughter of the coach, as well as for the teammates.

I don't really recommend a dad going and coaching their daughter's team because it just creates a lot of tension between the teammates and stuff, and it's really awkward for the teammates too. It depends what relationship you have with the girls, but it really gets dramatic after a while, because like, the dad, it's like the parent gets to know things that they shouldn't know, and it gets like, it gets awkward for the kids, and stuff...Also you have to factor in that the daughter or the son is pushed so hard by the coach because it is the dad involved, the mom could even be a coach too ...

For Alanna, time spent participating in sport is time spent in a specific activity that should have little or no overlap with one's role as a daughter, a son or a student. Sport is a social activity, and individuals should be allowed the opportunity to express and act in a way that may not coincide with the ways their family members perceive them. Alanna believes that a parental presence detracts from the opportunity to gain independence, and "find oneself" through sport.

I think that playing sport makes you more independent, and like having your parents or any family member with you, it just makes it, I think you just lose the purpose of it... 'Cause you really find yourself during sport, it's not just an activity where you go and work on your health or fitness or something, it really like changes you as a person, you learn more, but I think it just defeats the whole purpose when someone is there that you, that has a lot of power over you, they are telling you what to do and what decision to make.

Alanna explains that her parents are very supportive of her sport activities, but they show their support by attending her games, recitals and competitions as spectators, and by allowing her to enrol in these activities in the first place. The notion of independence and separating one's home and family life from their social life was also commented on by Isabella, age 9, who, while never having had the experience of having a parent coach one of her own teams, drew from a TV show in which the parent/coach embarrassed his son

in front of the team by asking him about his “clean pink underwear” and things that should only be discussed in the privacy of one’s home.

There were also participants who believed that having a parent as a coach is, or might be, a great thing. 8-year-old Morna plays on a soccer team that her dad coaches, an arrangement that she was very excited about (in fact, until she knew that her dad was going to be the coach, Morna did not want to join the team). She spoke of how she often got to “choose” who played what position on the team, and that sometimes she got to run the practices because she is the “head coach’s daughter”. While I am not entirely sure that I believe this, her claim illustrates her belief that as the coach’s daughter, she is (or at least should be) entitled to a certain privilege with the team. Suki, age 9, also commented on the power and prestige that a parent as a coach might bring her (as neither of her parents had ever coached her team): “I think, um, it would pretty good if my, one of my parents was the coach, because then if my parent was away and nobody could volunteer then the kids on the team would probably listen to me better”. The social power that having a parent as a coach brings, seems, at this age, to be fairly important, while as kids get older and some seek independence from the watchful eyes of their parents, this parental presence becomes more of a burden than a boost.

### **The Elusive Understanding of Friendship**

Social interactions between kids revolve around a dynamic that is difficult to know, for these relationships (like most relationships) are constantly shifting, evolving and disintegrating depending on a host of circumstances and factors that are often not obvious to an outsider looking “in”. While one can ask an individual about their thoughts on having friends around when participating on a team, or watch a group of kids play a specific sport, the subtleties that characterize these personal relationships (who have recently become best friends, who is being teased in the change room, or what is being whispered about while waiting on the sidelines) are often shielded from adult eyes and ears. Kids are adept at employing language that they understand to be socially acceptable to the adult that they are speaking with. “I enjoy sports because it is a good chance to

make friends” is a comment that I heard quite often, even from kids who would later state that they were afraid to talk to the other girls in their group for fear of being teased.

My own experience as a swim coach opened my eyes not only to the intensities of these relationships, but also to the ability of kids to shield certain aspects of these relationships from adults. I can recall an incident in which one swimmer was being teased to the extent that her family decided to drive an extra forty-five minutes in order to join a neighbouring community team. I was dumbfounded when I was told that this teasing had been carried out in the pool during practice time, during stretching on the lawn, and in the change rooms before and after practice. I refer to this incident not to suggest that all kids are secretly bullying and manipulating one another, but rather to suggest that gaining insight into the relationships of kids is an extremely difficult insight to gain. The subtleties that characterize social interactions can rarely be realized after three months of conversations and observations, and therefore my discussion of the role of friendship in sport is somewhat shallow. With that being said, it was a topic of discussion in all of my interviews, and it would therefore be somewhat misleading if I did not include it here.

I had anticipated that the subject of friendship would garner a lot of responses from participants. Was it important for them to be surrounded by existing friends when they embarked on a new sport activity? Did they regard participation in sport as a way to meet new friends? A realization that the type of sport that one participates in greatly affects the social nature of the activity emerged when I spoke with Naomi, a 12-year old who does not enjoy team sports but prefers individual classes, such as Hip Hop or karate. Naomi states that participating in individual sports such as these that are not associated with school or a club/league can make it difficult to make friends, as there is rarely enough time to establish a camaraderie with those taking the class – you show up, you do the class, you leave. In the same vein, I learned that school sports are a very different world than club or league sports from my conversations with Jamal and Ian, both 14, who play on their high school basketball teams as well as city league teams. In school sports, your teammates are often your friends, and there is little opportunity to establish friendships with members of other teams who do not live in the same vicinity as you. Conversely, in club sports there are individuals from different areas in the city, and there

seem to be more social activities planned for the team, as well as travel to and from tournaments and games than there is in school sports.

Having friends around while participating in sports seemed to be fairly important to all participants, however some put more emphasis on the social aspect of sport than others who seemed to relish the competition and development of skills as the primary reason for their involvement. For Jamal, age 14, friends are extremely important and seem to be his primary reason for participation in sport, both in the capacity of a volunteer and an athlete. Jamal was described to me by one of the coordinators of the basketball program as one of the top ten high school ball players in BC. Surprisingly, Jamal told me that he didn't think he was going to play senior basketball because it was too much pressure and didn't seem like it was that much fun. Eiko, 16, is also involved in school team sports (basketball and volleyball). While she enjoys the idea of meeting new people while playing sports, having friends around her is important: "I guess it is sort of important to me 'cause it, it keeps it interesting. I don't know, I'm a lot for winning and competition, but ultimately it's the people who make or break the team". Eiko also talked about the closeness of the people in her grade at school, and that she felt that they were very "open" to all types of people.

Grace, age 13, is a competitive ski racer. She described her teammates as her close friends, differentiating between those that go to her school and those who do not, but nonetheless emphasizing that they are all "still friends". I asked Grace if it was ever awkward competing against her close friends, and she explained that it wasn't as they all have their own skills: "mostly it is just like our own events – like I'll do better in GS [giant slalom] and some of them will do better in Slalom 'cause they are more into the faster, quick stuff". For 11-year-old Layla, making it on to the school volleyball team that her best friend plays on is more important to her than making the 'A' level team<sup>25</sup>.

Isabella, age 9, and Jie, age 8, viewed the issue of friendship in a slightly different light – Isabella thought that having friends around can make sports complicated: "at this age of 9, it's like, you have troubles with friends and you are really nice to them, and then you have troubles, nice, troubles, nice, and then you eventually go OK fine, can someone just do it [pass the ball]?" Jie stated that one thing she did not like about sports was how

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25 There are three teams ranked by ability, the 'A' team being the highest.

some people “hog the ball, and only pass the ball to their friends”. Indeed, I noticed this while watching basketball – while Jie was probably one of the more skilled players on the court, the other girls very much focused their attention on individuals who appeared to be their close friends.

The social element of sport participation was discussed by participants who described how they want their sports activities to be structured and organized, who they want these activities to be led by and what qualities make an adult successful in this role. Further to this, participants discussed the role that their parent(s) should or do assume in terms of their sport participation, as well as the presence of friends at sport activities. The element of learning how to socialize with other actors involved in sport is often touted as one of the benefits of participation, and through their discussion of the various social roles and interactions that characterize their sporting activities, participants illustrated an awareness and engagement with this discourse.

Along with the development of social skills through the myriad of social interactions involved in participation in organized sport is the conviction that values such as sportsmanship, teamwork and the importance of a healthy lifestyle will also be realized. Kids are well aware of the personal benefits that they are *supposed* to gain through their participation in organized sport, and many were quite articulate about their awareness of these benefits and their desire to achieve them. At the same time, however, a discussion of actions and beliefs that did not directly support these values suggests a tension between the actual experiences of sport on the one hand, and the dominant discourses concerning the imagined benefits of participation on the other.

### **The Benefit of Sports: Discourses of Teamwork, Sportsmanship and Health**

A federally commissioned study on amateur sport produced a report that portrays sport as an overwhelmingly positive and valuable activity for all Canadians. The conclusions reached by the Task Force assert that sport can assist society on a number of different levels, serving as “a basis for social interaction” and bringing communities together, as well as helping Canadians “face the reality of globalization” (cited in Dyck 2006:11).

Further, the report states that children's sport has the capacity to accept a leadership role "in instilling values and ethics in Canadian youth" (cited in Dyck 2006:12). Dyck states that, "[clearly], sport participation is here envisioned as much or more as an all-purpose, virtually "magical" solution to all manner of individual concerns and national problems than as a source of leisure and fun" (2006:11).

Those who engage with discourses such as those expressed by the Task Force expect, in some way or another, that sport participation will be beneficial to them as individuals, or to their children. Further to this is the expectation that those values associated with organized sport and athleticism - dedication, hard work, the ability to work with others and confidence will be realized and developed (Anderson 2003a; Dyck 2003:57). Indeed, my conversations with kids appeared, for the most part, to support these expectations. Very few participants recounted any negative social experiences, and all believed that participating in sport in one capacity or another was important for kids and adults alike. This is not to say that negative experiences are uncommon – there exists substantial research that uncovers the often toxic environment that sporting activities can foster (Andrews 1997; Grey 1992; Fleming 1995). As well, the kids whom I was speaking with had chosen to participate in organized sport, and by virtue of this choice are suggesting that they consider sports a worthwhile activity to engage in.

When I asked participants what it was that they liked about sports, most drew on notions of teamwork to illustrate their awareness of what was *truly* important. While winning was fun, making friends and learning to work together was what made sports meaningful. Most participants preferred team sports to individual sports primarily because of the social aspect involved – "having chemistry", "being friendly" and "working it out together" were cited as reasons for this preference. Layla, age 11, told me that she simply does not like being alone, and so playing team sports ensures that she is always surrounded by friends. Suki, age 9, stated that she enjoyed playing basketball because it was a good way to make new friends. She also explained, however, that she did not like to talk to many of the girls on her basketball team because they were quite a bit older than her and she feared that they would tease her.

Morna, age 8, described to me in great detail the process of scoring a goal in soccer – which players occupied which positions, the order that they would get the ball as



it made its way up the field, and the importance of supporting the goalie. She believed that teamwork was a principle element of soccer. At the same time, however, Morna played with the notion of sportsmanship, fair play and competitiveness by recounting stories that portrayed her taking on many roles: a player who thinks sportsmanship is really important since she would cheer on an opposing team if they were losing really badly; a player who thinks that fair play is extremely important, observing that a friend's team lost because the ref didn't call an "illegal" move; and, as a competitive and aggressive player who once pushed out of the way a girl who was a faster runner than she in order to get to the ball first. The notions of sportsmanship, fair play and competitiveness are all regarded as important components of athleticism, and it is somewhat remarkable to see a girl age 8 draw from each of these discourses and apply them to her own experiences with sport.

Participants were also aware of the much discussed health benefits associated with an active lifestyle. A toned and tight body has immense cultural capital in Western society, and the possession of such a physique suggests a great amount of will power and determination, qualities that are highly prized in the West. Andrews et al. (1997) assert that a fit and healthy body has become synonymous with a middle-class lifestyle in which the values of self-motivation, discipline and dedication are highly regarded<sup>26</sup>. Despite the high profile nature of issues such as eating disorders and childhood obesity, I was quite surprised to hear kids engage with discourses espousing the health benefits of sport participation. It was not uncommon for a boy or girl of 10 or 11 to tell me that they liked participating in sport because "it was a fun way to be active". Lane, a slightly chubby boy of 11, told me that he enjoyed playing basketball because it was a "fun way to lose weight", but that his favourite part of sport was when it was over and he was allowed to go home and sit on the couch and do nothing.

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26 Andrews et al. suggest that the embracement of soccer by White, middle-class families is linked to the perception of the sport as gender neutral and non-violent, and that this embracement by the middle-class is linked to a "symbolic construction of whiteness" that occurred after World War II in response to the stereotyping of black, urban groups (Andrews et.al 1997:27). This "search for distinction" is inherently related to consumption practices that serve to define socio-economic status that in turn serves to further differentiate the suburban middle-class from the urban poor (Andrews et.al 1997:270).

Grace, age 13, explained to me that her high school has the option for those who participate in fifteen hours or more of organized physical activity to opt out of PE classes. While she trains for eighteen hours a week on the ski hill, she said that she did not opt out of PE because “it is always good to be active”. Popular discourses surrounding the importance of a healthy and active lifestyle are prevalent in a diversity of mediums in society - on television in the form of government campaigns to promote exercise and healthy living, in the schools where vending machines full of junk food are banned and cafeterias are required to offer a low sodium, low calorie and high fibre menu, and in the Western societal idealization of fat free, toned and tight female and male bodies. These discourses have been effectively incorporated into the rationale for why sport is a positive activity for all kids and adults to participate in.

The older female participants were very aware of the health benefits associated with being active, and many listed this as one of the primary reasons for their involvement in sport. Rarely, however, was the word “health” clarified – it was used as an umbrella term to refer to all of the activities associated with a healthy lifestyle, such as losing weight and relieving stress. Eiko, 16, explained that being healthy was extremely important to her, particularly as she was a chubby kid and is now “working it off”. She believes that sport should be an important activity for all kids, as “it makes for an active lifestyle, otherwise you are going to be one of those couch potatoes when you are older, and that’s not fun!” Alanna, age 16, also expressed the importance of a healthy lifestyle to her personally, and believes that kids should be encouraged to be active as society is “becoming fat”. Interestingly, however, was her dismay at her school’s monitoring of the food offered in the cafeteria and even in bake sales (the graduating class traditionally sells Krispy Kreme doughnuts as a fundraiser, a practice that is now banned because of the health concerns of eating junk food). Alanna does not see a connection between teaching the importance of being physically active and teaching the importance of healthy eating, and while she draws from the discourse of “being healthy” to assert the importance of school directed physical activity, she questions its validity when some of her social activities are negatively impacted by this discourse.

Discussion of the health benefits of sport was not limited to the physical body, as the older participants also commented on the benefits of sport in dealing with stress. Naomi, age 12, stated that she regards being physically active as a form of meditation:

I think what happens when I do sports is that I often have a lot on my mind that I don't even trust [in] a diary, 'cause people can open it, or lock pick it, so um...what I find, especially skipping, is just the beat, so I just focus on breathing. It's sort of like meditation almost. I think that the seriousness of it can take away from that sort of stuff, but um, I guess maybe that the tranquillity for some sports, people can prosper from.

Ian, age 14, also sees the benefits of sport as both physical and mental: "to get active so they don't get like, you know, fat, and I think it relaxes people too".

Kids' familiarity with discourses propounding the benefits of sport participation illustrates an awareness that one can develop *into* a particular type of person – one who is hard working, dedicated, and able to work with others. An understanding of childhood activities as activities that will aid in the development of kids into adults is an understanding that has traditionally positioned the immediate experiences of the child in the foreground in favour of a focus on how certain experiences will aid in the development of kids into successful and well adjusted adults (Caputo 1995; Thorne 1994). This awareness was, not surprisingly, more pronounced in the older participants. These kids inhabit a peculiar social position that is located somewhere between the dualism of child and adult. In terms of sport, they are considered in many ways to be kids, for they participate in adult-organized sport as a group in need of (and with the desire to have) direction and supervision. Yet in their role as volunteers, they are differentiated from kids in that they possess an element of formalized authority and control. Like all roles and social positions, the roles of adult and child are both fluid and situational, and the experiences of these volunteers embody this fluidity. These positions are not static, nor are they uniform, and kids exhibit a skilled ability in meeting the expectations expected of them as a member of this group, as well as challenging these definitions to show that this time of life is complex and multidimensional and cannot be reduced to an understanding of development that is characterized by socialization.

## Trying on Authority

The volunteer participants are involved in sport in the capacity of both an athlete and an instructor. These high schools students are required to complete a certain number of volunteering hours before graduation – volunteering is therefore a requirement of their school programs. Despite the fact that volunteering in some capacity is mandatory, all spoke of volunteering because they enjoyed it and got to hang out with their friends while doing it (indeed, many had acquired more than enough hours to meet their school's requirement but continued to do so). All spoke of how much fun they had working with kids, despite their sometimes unruly nature and inability to listen. Eiko, 16, said that her favourite part of coaching was “mostly the kids. The kids are so much fun - it brings up your day sometimes”. Others expressed similar sentiments, stating that while the kids can “get in your face sometimes”, for the most part they keep it fun. The manner in which many of the volunteers (particularly the girls) described their experiences with the kids suggests awareness that they no longer inhabit the same social location, and are therefore moving beyond the activities that characterize this time of life. Eiko distanced herself from the kids that she coached, telling a story about how she saw a few of them setting off fire crackers: “I saw some of the kids that I am coaching this year, I saw them lighting firecrackers today and I was like ahhh, stop it, it's bad for you!” In her new role as an authority figure, Eiko expresses her awareness of the expectation that she will assert this authority, much in the same way that the adults who coach her basketball and volleyball teams do.

Many of these volunteers seem to relish being in the role of authority, even if when expected to run the practices and direct the kids they didn't seem 100% confident in their abilities. Their own experiences with sport in the capacity of an athlete and the relationships that they built with their own coaches seems, for the most part, to encourage a perception of coaching that is both admirable and socially respected. Alanna, age 16, spoke not only about the fun of coaching, but also the “stress” involved in organizing kids, a comment that seemed to suggest there is far more to coaching than just playing basketball with kids. As volunteers, these individuals are trying on a new social role, one in which they are positioned apart from and somewhat above “kids”, closer to the category of adult but not quite there. While not yet fully an adult or a coach, the

volunteers are experiencing aspects of what it is like to have authority over others, and it was interesting to see them play with this power in a way that suggested most were not quite sure what to do with it, or what was expected of them.

A few of the volunteers spoke about not feeling entirely comfortable directing the older kids, particularly when they were coaching a sport that they had not played themselves. This wariness suggests a desire to be taken seriously as an instructor, rather than disregarded as a “kid” with little knowledge or authority. Kids associate adults with order and knowledge, and other kids with chaos and ignorance. This perception appeared to emerge personally for some of the volunteers whose confidence in their coaching abilities was somewhat low. Christie, age 16, described a negative experience coaching in which she found herself the subject of criticism.

I didn't have much experience in [soccer] and so it was kind of different for me, I wasn't as confident to teach it, and the parents would constantly be watching the practice and they would constantly be making comments to us for not doing stuff right. It was really discouraging – sometimes I was coaching with my friend and sometimes she got really angry, really discouraged, and we just don't know what to do 'cause we were young back then – we were in grade<sup>27</sup> nine and teaching them. Like, if you want really good coaching and really good skills then maybe – this is an inner city program. I think they expected a little too much.

Christie was the only participant who categorized the program as “inner city”. This classification suggests that as it is a program that does not cost a lot and because it is essentially “really young” people who are coaching, parents do not have the right to suggest that they are doing an inadequate job. Adults should not criticize kids for trying something new, so why were they criticizing her?

The two 14-year-old male volunteers seemed quite content to occupy a role that appeared more like a kid with perks, rather than an adult. Jamal commented that he liked volunteering because the head coach would buy him food and drinks, and Ian said that hanging out with the older guys (the coordinators and head coaches) while volunteering was fun as they allowed them to “relax”, an interesting choice of word to describe volunteering with kids. Ian was really the only volunteer who said he enjoyed coaching because he liked seeing the improvement in the kids, and that he hoped that some of them

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27 Kids in grade nine are usually 14 turning 15 years old.

would keep up with basketball so that when they got to high school they might win the championship.

Enjoyment was not the only reason for involvement, and the four female volunteers were acutely aware of the social benefits associated with donating one's time to any formal activity, and in particular to sports, a socially respected activity for kids and adults alike. Furthermore, volunteering aids in the establishment of adult contacts who are not teachers or parents, an important network to begin building as they get older and begin to look for part time jobs or require references for post-secondary school applications.

16-year-old Christie told me how her mother enrolled her in a different sport each day at YMCA when she was in elementary school. Eventually this sport participation turned into volunteer opportunities, despite the fact that she was only 9-years-old and often younger than the kids she was helping organize. When I asked her if she thought that volunteering was beneficial, she agreed: "yeah definitely, it opens a lot of doors like, 'cause you never know what they [the adults] can do for you". She believed that this social networking was one of the reasons her parents supported her sport involvement.

Alanna, age 16, came to her job at the community centre through her relationships with her previous coaches. She raved about working at the centre, saying that she loves dealing with and talking to kids, and commented on how developing these relationships as very "rewarding". Some of the "kids" that Alanna worked with were often the same age or sometimes older than she was, and while many of them had "anger problems", she had no problem working with them. She talked about the feelings of accomplishment that result when you influence, or positively "change" someone's life through working with them. She declared that she would never want to work in an office or as a waitress because of the social restrictions involved – that is, pretending to be "chipper" all the time and presenting a certain type of demeanour to customers. Working or volunteering with kids is regarded as a far more engaging and honest endeavour than making coffee or answering telephones. Furthermore, volunteering one's time illustrates a commitment to improving oneself in a socially beneficial manner, as well as occupying oneself with productive activities.

Being busy and productive suggests a sense of agency in terms of directing one's "free time" – rather than watching TV or hanging out with friends, these kids are using their time productively in that they are gaining experience to put on their resume (in the form of volunteering or employment in a part-time job), making some adult contacts that may help them later on when in need of references, and are living a healthy lifestyle by participating in organized sport. At the same time, however, participants explained how their involvement in a multitude of activities allowed them to fit in socializing and homework, but in an environment removed from home and school. Eiko, age 16, gave me a detailed description of her after school activities, explaining that while it was somewhat draining to be constantly on the move and to not get home until eight or nine at night, there was always a bit of spare time in between practices or events that allowed her to "go out for dinner, or hang out with my friends, or do homework at school. I get a lot of spare time that way".

The engagement by these older participants with this time management discourse suggests a moving away from the parent-directed world of childhood into the self-directed world of adulthood. Many of them commented that they found it somewhat difficult to juggle all of their responsibilities and activities. Indeed, when I approached the volunteers to see if they might be interested in participating in an interview, one of the first questions they asked was "how much time will it take?" In between attending school and sports practices, part-time jobs, volunteering, and doing homework, they did not seem to have much in the way of "free time" to schedule in an interview.

Christie, 16, who attends a private school quite far from the location of her volunteering, was particularly wary of scheduling an interview into her busy agenda. After receiving my assurances that the interview could be as quick as half an hour, she agreed to meet and we scheduled an interview close to her school. Christie does not play on any school teams, and enjoys playing tennis in the summer. When I asked her what she does at lunch and after school, she seemed to almost confess that she has a lot of "down time". I sensed that she thought I might be somewhat judgmental of the fact that she had free time and did not participate in some form of organized sport: "After school? Go home and do my homework – well actually I kill a lot of time, like two days a week I tutor a girl". Christie suggested that her part-time job of tutoring was "killing time". I had

a feeling that this was for my benefit, and that if she was practicing for a school team, she might not have presented it in the same way.

## **Conclusions**

The social interactions that occur in the realm of organized sport occur between an assortment of individuals who occupy a diversity of roles. Participants' reflections were diverse and distinct concerning the importance of these interactions, as well as under what circumstances these interactions should occur. While parents' involvement in their kid's organized sport activities is seen as being necessary in some capacity or another, participants had very different ideas as to what role this involvement should take. Having a parent as a coach (real or imagined) brought forth very different opinions about what role sport plays in one's social life, and how the notion of independence can be realized or stifled by the presence of a parent. Less forthcoming was the role of friendship in sport. While nearly all participants expressed a desire to have their friends around, the nature and dynamics of these relationships were difficult to uncover.

The manner in which kids discuss and conceptualize their participation in sport suggests that they regard this participation as a worthy and beneficial activity. Indeed, their ability to engage with popular discourses surrounding issues such as teamwork, competitiveness and healthy living illustrate a social awareness that these qualities are important to the society in which they live. Many also challenged these discourses by drawing from experiences that did not coincide with these values, an ability that illustrates their proficiency in engaging with and challenging popular discourses regarding what they *should* be doing, or the benefits they *should* be reaping from a particular activity. The role of organized sport in the lives of kids is far from simple. There exist numerous discourses that are drawn upon and challenged regarding the donation of their time to these activities, and kids illustrated a proficiency in both engaging with and rejecting these ideas.



## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

This ethnographic research is guided by a desire to gain an understanding of kids' experiences with sport from their own point of view. Through participant observation and ethnographic interviewing, I have emerged with an understanding of kids' perspectives on sport that reflects the diverse and multidimensional nature of these activities, as well as the ability of kids to articulate their accounts and to engage with and challenge dominant discourses regarding childhood, sport and gender.

The anthropology of sport is an area of investigation that is growing in scope and analysis, for while sport was once considered the domain of "low culture" and therefore unworthy of theoretical investigation, anthropologists have argued that sport is not only complex and multidimensional, but it both reflects and obscures dominant social values and arrangements in a particular society. Similarly, the anthropology of childhood has experienced somewhat of an analogous awakening, for children have traditionally been constructed as a group whose members are unaware of the social processes and arrangements in their lives, and incapable of articulating their thoughts and perspectives on these arrangements. While sport and children move to the centre of analysis in their respective fields of study, anthropological investigations of organized sport for children remain limited, and more limited are investigations that position children as the focus of analysis. The literature on organized sport for children often takes for granted the experiences of children who engage in organized sport in favour of the perspectives and views of the adult actors involved (parents, coaches, teachers). While these views are important and integral to an understanding of these activities, the relegation of the perspectives of the children themselves to the margins of analysis (if they are to be there at all) suggests that children continue to be constructed as a passive, innocent and oblivious group who are unaware of the social world around them.

This investigation was guided by a series of questions and concerns that I hoped would elicit a further understanding of these particular kids' experiences with organized

sport, questions such as how do kids describe their experiences with sport while participating within a sport organization, how do kids discuss the relationships and interactions that characterize their experiences, and whether building relationships through their participation in sport was important for their involvement. This scope was considerably broadened after three months of observation at the site of a community basketball program, and thirteen open-ended interviews with kids ranging in age from 8 to 16 (ten of whom were involved in the basketball program in the capacity of a participant or a volunteer, and three who participated in sport activities unassociated with the program).

The inclusion of the volunteers (aged 14-16) in the interview process was something that I had not anticipated, for I was operating with a definition of "child" that was constrained by age. This definition failed to acknowledge the fluid and situational nature of identity, as well as the constantly shifting dynamic of age roles and responsibilities that characterizes this time of life. The volunteer participants inhabited a unique social place, for while they were considered "kids" by both themselves and adults in that they participated in activities that were organized and supervised by adults, they were also trying on a new role that positioned them somewhat above and apart from younger kids who did not have the freedom to move between these roles. The manner in which they engaged with these roles illustrates that the categories of "kid" and "adult" are not concrete and fixed, but rather are constantly shifting and dependent on the situation and context.

The issues and themes that I have included in this thesis are those that were spoken about at length by participants, either of their own accord or in response to my questioning. These themes include: the manner in which participants defined sport according to their own experiences; their ideas about how sport activities should be organized and structured; their thoughts on the values of teamwork, sportsmanship and the health benefits associated with sport; the social relationships with family, friends and coaches who take part in their sport activities, and the expectations of coaches; and finally, the manner in which youth volunteers expressed their experiences of coaching.

## **Summary of Issues and Themes**

Kids' experiences with organized sport are at once complex and multidimensional; however much of the current literature on organized sport for children disregards the diversity and subtleties of kids' individual experiences. Kids themselves summed up their experience with the word "fun", however further discussion illustrated that this was a particular type of fun, one that was well-organized, controlled and supervised by an authoritative (yet fun!) adult coach. Participants were adamant that sport activities must be organized by a capable adult, and that kids were therefore unable to direct or coach sports without chaos ensuing. Despite their call for the need of adult supervision, participants described many kid-directed activities, such as skipping, soccer or street hockey that were not organized and controlled by adults, but rather by themselves. Regardless of their experiences directing and organizing themselves, these participants did not see a connection between their ability to engage in these "unorganized" activities and their assumed inability to direct "organized" sport.

Kids associated other kids with chaos, ignorance and disorder, and adults with order, knowledge and authority. The kids that I spoke with and observed adopted popular discourses on childhood that constructs them as naïve, innocent and inactive, despite their discussion of experiences in which they are highly engaged, active and aware. The tension between discourse and experience is apparent here, and illustrates the power of the constructed dualism between child and adult that serves as a central organizing tool in Western society.

The inclusion of the volunteer participants brought to light the fluidity of these age roles, and kids illustrated a facility in negotiating their status as kids or as (soon to be) adults, as well as their relationships with other kids and adults in the realm of organized sport. All participants described their ideal coach as exhibiting a degree of authority; however there was a difference in the way that the younger kids described this role as being inhabited by someone who can control the group but who is able to keep things fun, compared to the older kids, who offered a similar description but added the importance of respect and friendship. The notion of respect also emerged in their assertion that kids should have the right to question or challenge their coaches, a claim that was not made by the younger participants. The situational nature of the volunteers'

position as “sometimes kid, sometimes adult” was also made evident in their reflections on coaching, for through this position they were handed a formalized authority over younger kids. While most seemed to enjoy this new position, this enjoyment was characterized by an element of uncertainty concerning how to act in this role of authority.

Kids’ articulated need for their sporting activities to be controlled and monitored by a capable adult illustrated an engagement with gendered discourses in which girls and boys have to be separated in organized sport activities due to the innate differences between males and females, differences that position males as naturally more athletically skilled and aggressive than females. Kids demonstrated a diverse understanding of gender, as well as diverse opinions regarding the need to segregate sports along gender lines (which most believed was necessary), to questioning this segregation but being somewhat unsure as to why organizing sports along gender lines might be problematic. At the same time, a discussion of specific experiences in which kids participated in mixed gender sport activities, such as in PE at school or during a lunchtime game of soccer or baseball, no concerns emerged regarding the danger or unfair nature of these activities. It was not until I asked them specifically what their thoughts were on gender segregation in sport that they turned to these discourses. Once again a tension emerged between the actual experiences that kids reflected upon, and the discourses they used to discuss issues at a more general level, such as the need for an adult to organize and control activities, and the need for sports to be segregated along gendered lines.

In reflecting on their experiences with sport, participants emphasized social interactions and relationships. I observed the roles of parents in organized sport during basketball games and practices, in which parents assumed the role of spectator, a role that was diverse in terms of its enthusiasm, attendance and attention. Kids’ perspectives on their parents’ involvement were also varied, particularly regarding the involvement of a parent as a coach. While some believed (based on imagined or actual experience) that having a parent act as a coach would be a great thing for the power and prestige that this might bring to themselves as an athlete on that team, others were wary of this involvement, and believed that the role of coach and the role of parent should remain separate in order to foster an independence that can only be achieved through sport participation when one’s parents’ involvement is restricted to support from the sidelines.

Apart from participants' reflections on the involvement of their parents in their sport activities, kids also spoke about their experiences with friends while participating in sport. While I had anticipated that this would be a significant topic of discussion, after reading through the interviews and my notes, I came away with a somewhat shallow understanding of this role. While all participants commented on the fact that having friends around during participation was important and often made these activities more enjoyable, I did not gain any further insight into these relationships. I attribute this to the skilled ability of kids to shield certain behaviours and situations from adult eyes. The subtleties that characterize any relationship are difficult to observe and realize, and three months of observations and interviews is simply not enough time to gain the necessary context and knowledge to further understand these interactions. As well, kids are aware of the social benefits that many adults assume accompany participation in organized sport, one of these benefits being the ability to meet and make new friends. At times I sensed that participants were simply stating that they enjoy sports because it allows them to make friends because they had learned that this was an appropriate and expected outcome of their participation, and that this was likely something that I, being an adult, would appreciate and perhaps expect to hear.

Kids illustrated an awareness and engagement with various discourses concerning the social and individual benefits that are thought by many to be associated with participation in organized sport. I was somewhat surprised to observe and listen to their musings on why they thought participation was important, for I had considered the discourses related to the health benefits and social networking associated with sport, as well as the importance of learning how to be sportsmanlike and learn to work as a team, to be primarily adult discourses. At the same time, however, there existed a definite disconnect between these assumed benefits of sport participation and the actual experiences of playing sport. While at one point a participant would talk about the health benefits of being active and fit, they would also voice their distain over the recent overhaul of the cafeterias menu by the school in an effort to make the meals more nutritional.

## Discussion

Through my observations and discussion with kids, parents and coaches, I have become aware of the multidimensional and diverse experiences that are associated with participation in organized sport. While I was pleasantly surprised at the candor of my discussions with kids of all ages, an issue that I had not anticipated was their ability to draw on what I consider to be “adult discourses” to discuss their experiences with sport. During our discussions, kids drew consistently from these discourses in order to explain why they enjoyed participation in sport and what components of sport they liked and disliked, their thoughts on the organizational structure of their sporting activities and who should and should not be a part of these experiences. At times I felt that they were simply telling me what they thought I, as an adult, wanted to hear, such as when they explained that sports was a good way to meet new friends, or that being active, healthy and fit were the primary reasons for their involvement. At other times I sensed that they truly agreed with these discourses and have been sold on their “truths”, and therefore have in part assimilated them into their rationale for why sports is an enjoyable and worthwhile activity.

The benefits and values associated with an active lifestyle and participation in organized sport are espoused by a multitude of social institutions and actors (such as the media, the government, and the school system), and as active social agents, kids are adept at engaging with these discourses in the same manner as adults. While kids illustrate a skilled ability in utilizing these discourses, a discussion of their specific experiences illustrates that these discourses do not represent their full scope of experiences, and that participation in sport is not the same for everyone despite a common tendency to pass it off as simply being “fun” and “good for you”.

Miller’s discussion of dialectics and discourse is particularly useful here, for his approach considers the tensions that exist between the “talking” and the “doing” in a given situation. This approach allows for the consideration of the discourses that are known to, encountered and utilized by participants, as well as the manner in which participants engage with and challenge these discourses when discussing their own experiences, interactions and relationships. While discourse tends to privilege language, the relationships and connections that exist *between* practices and language speak to the

tensions between what the ideal is on the one hand, and the reality on the other. In some cases, what is said and what is done may be embodying one value, and in other cases, they may be entirely contradictory (Miller 2001:15). Just as “doing” gender, childhood and sport activities is “constituted through interactions” that change and adapt to the situation or occasion, so too is the engagement with these discourses (West & Zimmerman 1987).

A focus on the relationships, interactions and experiences of individual kids allows the analysis to shift from an understanding of social categories such as childhood and gender as concrete and fixed, towards a focus on the dynamic nature of the social world and the ways in which kids give meaning to and make sense of these structures (Amit-Talai 1995; Caputo 1995:19; Hall 1995; Thorne 1994). Actions and relationships emerge from the specific context of each individual’s sporting experience, and therefore their ideas and views about organized sport, gender and childhood are apt to change and shift depending on the context. It was in participants’ discussions of their specific interactions and experiences that a more comprehensive understanding of these issues emerged, and a realization of the diversity of these experiences became evident.

Understandings of gender, while influenced by a biological reasoning in which differences in ability and aggression were regarded as natural, were also diverse and at times contradictory when located in specific accounts of mixed gendered games in PE or swimming lessons. Similarly, discussions of the ability of kids to control and organize sporting activities suggested a lack of acknowledgement of the abilities of kids to direct themselves and their actions. And while sport was discussed generally in an overwhelmingly positive light, discussions of particular events illustrated that while these kids may enjoy their time enough to come back for more, this enjoyment must be contextualized in order to be properly understood.

The challenge in “getting at” kids’ views of organized sport lies in the difficulty in separating their own views from the popular adult discourses that they are so heavily inundated with at school, at home and in the media. An approach that acknowledges that kids have the ability to engage with these discourses, as well as challenge them recognizes their social ability and awareness. At the same time, the focus cannot be restricted to this “talk”, for often the “doing” offers a quite different perspective on a

given issue. Perhaps the issue lies with the lack of meaningful opportunities that kids are given to reflect on their own experiences with sport, gender and being children. If children are not given the time and opportunity to reflect on and discuss their experiences and what it is that they like or dislike about them, their reliance on popular, seemingly “adult discourses” to explain their experiences should be somewhat unsurprising. Due, however, to the manner in which children are constructed as socially unaware and ignorant, their use of these discourses to describe their experiences is thought to represent the extent of these experiences, an assumption that I have illustrated does not recognize the scope of kids’ experiences or their ability to articulate them. Exploring the contradictions and intersections in their discussions and actions will bring about a greater understanding of kids’ experiences with organized activity, as well as their understandings and interpretations of the discourses that govern them.

### **Possibilities for Future Research**

As there are relatively few anthropological studies that consider children’s experiences of sport and their understandings and engagement with the gendered discourses that inform these activities, more research that positions children as the primary research participants is needed. While institutional settings, such as school or sports team and clubs are important, so too are settings that kids are responsible for creating, such as activities that occur on the playground at lunch or after school. Investigations of these activities and the positioning of kids at the centre of analysis has the potential to lead to a greater understanding not only of the way that kids prefer to spend their time, but also of the manner in which categories such as childhood, gender, race and class (to name a few) are realized and experienced by kids in a specific context.

Research that explores the perspectives of kids who do not like to participate in organized sport is also necessary. What is it about these activities that some kids do not enjoy? What do these kids think about the discourses that position participation in organized sport as being overwhelmingly positive and beneficial? All kids’ reflections on their own experiences are important, and it is necessary that research explore the diversity



of these experiences in order to demonstrate that childhood is a time of life that is not universal but is specific to the social context in which each individual child lives.

As sport is an activity that is not separate or distinct from other aspects of life, an exploration of children's individual experiences with particular activities has the potential to bring a greater understanding of particular situations and arrangements in a given society. By virtue of its holistic approach to understanding a particular topic or issue, anthropology stands to offer a well rounded and comprehensive approach to understanding the ways in which people create, negotiate and challenge the discourses that influence their lives. "This holism infuses the spirit of ethnography, which holds out the possibility that its topic of inquiry...might turn out to be about anything and everything" (Miller 2001:2). This investigation of organized sport for children has brought to light not only the diversity of kids' experiences with sport, but also these particular kids' understanding and engagement with childhood, gender and age role discourses. The reflections of the kids who participated in this study demonstrate that they are from the passive and innocent individuals that Western society constructs them to be, and instead are socially aware and active individuals who are engaged with the people and institutional structures in their lives.

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## APPENDIX

*The following is a list of questions that I drew from during my interviews with kids of all ages. These questions were not asked in a rigid order or manner, but rather were developed and drawn from as suited the flow of each interview.*

What is your favorite sport? What do you like about this sport?

What is your least favorite sport? What don't you like about it?

What sports, if any, do you play at school? Outside of school? Are there any that you would like to try?

What do you like to do at recess and lunch? What about after school?

What kind of activities do you guys do in P.E.? Do girls and boys participate together?

Do your friends play sports? Are any of your friends involved in the same sports as you?

Do you enjoy having your friends on the same team/in the same activity as you?

How would you define sport?

What do you think sports would be like without any coaches? Without any rules?

Do you think that teamwork is an important part of sport?

Do you prefer games/performances over practices? Why or why not?

Why do you think that certain sports (such as basketball, soccer, baseball, etc.) separate girls and boys? What do you think it would be like if they were allowed to play together on the same teams, or to compete against each other?

Tell me about your coaches/instructors.

What qualities make a "good" coach?

Do either of your parents/guardians coach? Do you have any friends whose parents coach?

Do your parents/guardian enjoy watching or participating in sports?

Do you like it when your family comes out to watch you play/perform?

Do you think sport participation is important for kids? For adults?



***For those participants who were also volunteers***

When did you first begin volunteering? Tell me about where you have/do volunteer.

How did you get involved in volunteering?

What aspects of volunteering do you enjoy? Do you dislike?

Do you enjoy working with kids?

Do you think that you would like to be a coach?