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Continued Participation in Adolescent Male Rugby Union: Stakeholders’ Perspectives

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Abstract

This study explored stakeholders’ perceptions of Welsh adolescent rugby union participation. A Straussian grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was adopted and data collection was conducted via semi-structured interviews with 15 individuals involved in Welsh adolescent rugby union. Data were analyzed through open and axial coding procedures, and theoretical integration. Stakeholders perceived that continued rugby participation resulted from a positive evaluation of one’s participation in the sport, and one’s ability to cope with the demands experienced throughout transitions during adolescence. Overall, the findings provide a substantive grounded theory of stakeholders’ perceptions of continued participation in adolescent Welsh rugby union, and applied implications, in an aim to promote continued sport participation.
Within the United Kingdom, substantial dropout from sport, particularly team sport, is a continuing problem, warranting a call for strategies to enhance sport retention (Department for Culture, Media, and Sport, 2010). An age group that continues to be of particular concern for sport participation is that of adolescence (Stambulova, 2012). Reflecting these concerns, rugby union in Wales has experienced reduced levels of participation among adolescent age groups (cf. Welsh Rugby Union, 2014). The importance of rugby to Wales as a nation is ever present, and therefore continued participation and future success in the sport is paramount (Welsh Rugby Union, 2016). To enhance the opportunities for success and potential peak performances in the sport, continued participation is vital as individuals develop at varied rates (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008).

In seeking to understand continued participation in adolescent sport, researchers have investigated both reasons for dropout, and sport participation motives. Dropout from adolescent sport has been linked to: having other things to do, not liking the coach, the team lacking spirit, poor teamwork, lack of perceived competence, early peak performances, limited one-on-one coaching, pressuring parents, lack of sport-specific peers, and sibling rivalries (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008; Moliner, Salguero, Tuero, Alvarez, & Márquez, 2006). Additionally, external pressures such as school demands, employment, non-sport activities, and wanting to spend time with friends, have also been highlighted as factors contributing to adolescents’ dropout from sport (Enocksen, 2011).

In contrast, the most frequently cited reason for continued participation in adolescent sport is enjoyment and fun (e.g., Gould, Lauer, Rolo, James, & Pennisi, 2008; Seefelt, Ewing, & Walk, 1992). Similar to enjoyment, the importance of athletic satisfaction, defined as how happy or content athletes are with their athletic experience, has been linked to participation (Hodge, Lonsdale, & Jackson, 2009). Research has also highlighted other motives for sport
participation such as, perception of competence, parental influences, learning new skills, and
friends and peers (Bailey, Cope, & Pearce, 2013).

Extending the descriptive studies of dropout and participation motives, theoretical approaches have been offered to explain adolescent sport participation. One of the most prevalent theories is the Sport Commitment Model (SCM; Scanlan, Carpenter, Schmidt, Simons, & Keeler 1993). Scanlan and colleagues proposed five antecedents to sport commitment: enjoyment, involvement opportunities, involvement alternatives, personal investments, and social constraints. Applying the SCM to recreational and collegiate tennis, Casper and Andrew (2008) found that advanced tennis players reported higher levels of sport commitment than intermediate and beginner players. Greater commitment was influenced by the personal investment the players had made to reach an advanced skill level. An assessment of the SCM in relation to female athlete commitment in elite netball reported enjoyment as the most influential factor upon commitment, together with social support (e.g., feeling encouraged and supported; Scanlan, Russell, Magyar, & Scanlan, 2009).

To better understand participation in sport, researchers have also sought advances from outside of the domain. One such framework, originating from migration research, is that of the push, pull, anti-push, and anti-pull (see Mullet, Dej, Lemaire, Raiff, & Barthorpe, 2000) which has been used to explain decisions to continue in, or move on from, a current situation or circumstance. Push factors relate to undesirable circumstances; pull factors to benefits; anti-push factors to reasons for attachment; and, anti-pull factors relate to the costs and risks of change. In a sport context, the framework has been used to explain the decisions made by competitive athletes during career termination (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006). Athletes associated push factors to negative aspects of their present life; pull factors to positive characteristics of post-career life; anti-push factors to the attachment towards their sport career; and, anti-pull factors to the overall risk and cost of a post sport-career life. In
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Fernandez et al. suggested that career termination decisions involved interactions between push, pull, anti-push, and anti-pull factors. Recently, researchers have emphasized the importance of investigating sport participation from a holistic lifespan perspective, central to which are transitions (cf. Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007; Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015; Stambulova, 2012).

Transitions are continuous processes, whereby individuals use effective coping to overcome a set of specific demands. Individuals experience transitions in their careers, education, sport, and everyday life that challenge sport continuation. Based upon the predictability of their occurrence, transitions can be described as normative (predictable) or non-normative (less predictable). Examples of normative transitions include, the beginning of sport specialization or the transition from junior to senior competitive sport. Non-normative transitions include events such as, sporting injuries or a change in coach.

Combined, sport participation research has emphasized the importance of understanding the notion of continued sport participation and the factors that influence it. Central to this process are the sport providers (i.e., coaches, managerial staff, development officers) who make available sport opportunities and experiences to performers. For example, sport dropout rates are influenced by coaches neglecting social aspects of the sport (Molinero et al., 2006), poor social support (Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008.), coach player conflicts, and participants receiving a lack of playing time (Weiss & Williams, 2004). In contrast, sport providers can positively influence sport continuation through, raising participants’ levels of enjoyment (Seefelt et al., 1992), enhancing athletic identity (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006) and increasing overall levels of satisfaction with the sport (Hodge et al., 2009).

Sport providers have a particularly important role in adolescents’ continued sport participation as, during this period, adolescents place more emphasis on relationships with coaches, while parents transition away from primary providers and supporters of sport (Côté
& Hay, 2002). Therefore, sport providers must understand their role and influence upon adolescent sport participation. By understanding developmental milestones, sport providers can offer individualized and effective services to adolescents (Knight & Holt, 2012). As such, it is important that sport providers understand the reasons for, and their personal influence upon, continued sport participation in order to sustain participation.

In addition to the importance of understanding sport providers’ perceptions of adolescent sport participation, questions have been raised regarding the utility of examining reasons for dropout and continued participation in isolation (cf. Vella, Cliff, & Okley, 2014). Vella and colleagues suggested that reasons for continued participation should be investigated in conjunction with reasons for dropout, in order to maximize organized sport participation. Furthermore, the sport participation process is complex and multifaceted, and as such to fully understand decisions made by individuals the unique context in which an individual is involved in must be understood (Samuel & Tenenbaum, 2011).

Based on the existing conceptual and empirical research there is a need for a greater collective understanding of sport providers and participants’ perceptions of the combined influence of dropout and continuation motives upon adolescent sport participation. Rugby union in Wales is a sport which has recently experienced reduced levels of adolescent participation, and therefore requires a greater collective understanding to support future involvement in the sport. As such, the current study investigated stakeholders’ (sport providers and participants) perceptions of adolescent rugby union participation in Wales, focusing upon reasons for continued sport participation and dropout. Specifically, we sought to explore three research questions: (1) Why do stakeholders believe individuals post 15 years of age continue to participate in rugby union? (2) What do stakeholders perceive are the reasons for dropout in adolescent rugby union? (3) How do stakeholders consider adolescent rugby union players could be encouraged to remain involved in the sport?
Method

Methodology and epistemological assumptions

A Straussian grounded theory approach (cf. Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was adopted for the current study. Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology that builds theory from data, and is characterized by the continual interplay between data collection and analysis to produce a theory. The grounded theory approach is particularly useful to develop insights into social processes and can provide guidance of future actions. Additionally, a grounded theory approach is beneficial when there is a lack of a pre-existing theory in an area of study. A grounded theory approach was therefore viewed as a suitable approach for the current study of stakeholders’ perceptions of continued participation in adolescent rugby union, because there is a lack of previous research investigating sport provider perspectives, the approach enables specific contextual and social aspects to be investigated, and future actions to be created in an aim to enhance continued participation in rugby union.

Straussian grounded theory is founded upon pragmatism, which emphasizes that individuals gain knowledge from actions and interactions, knowledge is collective, and individuals’ environments influence their knowledge (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Therefore, a pragmatic view of knowledge indicates that there are multiple realities and truths. In the current study a pragmatic paradigm satisfied this philosophical perspective as we explored multiple realities and perspectives of adolescent rugby union continuation and the influence an individual’s environment had upon participation. The philosophical paradigm also matched that of the research team, ensuring methodological coherence.

Sampling and participants

Participants comprised 15 males ranging in age from 17 to 66 years ($M = 34.47$ years, $SD = 14.50$) whom were involved in adolescent rugby union within Wales, UK: local club...
and college coaches \(n = 2\), regional managerial staff \(n = 4\), development officers \(n = 6\), and players \(n = 3\). Individuals involved in the provision of adolescent rugby union held roles ranging from the organization of regional structures through to the provision of one-to-one skills sessions to players. The three players in the study all had at least eight years of playing the sport, providing experiences from different levels of participation. All played college and club level, two were involved in representative squads, one of whom was part of a regional representative team, and the other part of a regional development squad.

Sampling took place via a combination of purposive and theoretical strategies. Initially purposive sampling identified individuals with an encompassing knowledge and experience of adolescent rugby union in Wales. The criterion for purposeful selection was that an individual had to be involved in the provision of adolescent rugby union in Wales, and be in direct contact with coaching staff and players. Purposive techniques resulted in a sample of four regional managerial staff members. Theoretical sampling subsequently took place to identify individuals who could provide further pertinent information and insight (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Initially, theoretical sampling resulted in local club and college coaches and national governing body regional staff (development officers) being identified and interviewed. These individuals were identified as having high levels of experience in adolescent rugby union. Finally, current players were identified for interview so that their views and experiences could be compared to those of the sport providers, with specific experiences of their participation in adolescent rugby union being highlighted.

Data collection

Following University Research Ethics Board approval, the research team identified potential participants based upon the initial criteria or emerging concepts. Potential participants were then contacted regarding their interest and availability in participating in the current study. An information letter outlining the study was provided requesting completion
of informed consent. Participants under the age of 18 were required to provide written assent along with written informed consent from their parent/guardian. Data collection occurred through semi-structured interviews. Interviews were conducted at a time and location of the participants’ choice. Prior to data collection three pilot interviews were carried out to assess the effectiveness of the interview guide and provide an opportunity to establish familiarity with the questions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

**Semi-structured interviews.** All interviews were conducted in a quiet, private room on a university campus or sporting facility and lasted between 35 and 70 minutes ($M = 46.93; SD = 9.16$). Interviews were recorded in their entirety and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Initial interviews were conducted using an interview guide based on an extensive review of relevant research (e.g., Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007; Fraser-Thomas et al., 2008; Weiss & Williams, 2004). Over the course of data collection, the interview guide was continually revised in line with the data (see Appendix A for the final interview guide). In total, five iterations of the interview guide were developed. All the interview guides used a structure consistent with the recommendations of Rubin and Rubin (2012). For example, introductory questions related to demographic information and an individual’s background; main questions focused upon retention and dropout; and, summary questions clarified the reasons for retention and dropout.

**Data analysis**

Data collection and analysis followed an iterative process (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After each interview the lead researcher recorded memos regarding concepts and relationships. Post transcription, analysis occurred through a process of open coding, axial coding, and theoretical integration. Open coding involved the breaking apart of data and the allocation of concepts to raw data blocks. This process led to the initial development of concepts relating to participation within rugby union (e.g., enjoyment and
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Next, axial coding comprised highlighting relationships between concepts and grouping concepts that related to the same phenomenon to create categories. For example, links between the concepts relating to identifying as a rugby union player, enjoyment and satisfaction with rugby, and opportunities to participate and progress in the sport led to these concepts being grouped together in a category entitled ‘perceived value towards, and ease of, participating in rugby union’. Finally, the process of theoretical integration linked categories around a core category and refined the findings.

Methodological rigor. Rigor was evaluated through the extent to which the study fulfilled the specific characterizing traits of Straussian grounded theory rather than using an absolute set of criteria for assessing the quality of the research. To enhance rigor an iterative process and theoretical sampling were used (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Specifically, rigor was enhanced via multiple contact time with participants and within the environment prior to data collection, constant comparisons of data for similarities and differences; and continual questioning of the data and concepts (cf. Smith & McGannon, 2017). Questioning took place via individual reflections and external experts proposing challenging questions requiring justifications and explanations. The recording of memos and the development of diagrams were also used to enable conceptual and abstract thinking pertaining to the data and to highlight possible relationships between concepts.

Results

Following data collection and analysis, findings were categorized and presented (see Figure 1). The key finding presented is an overarching core category termed, positively evaluate one’s participation in rugby union, and one’s ability to cope with demands experienced throughout transitions during adolescence. The core category is underpinned by two key categories: perceived value towards, and ease of, participating in rugby union; and, attractiveness of, and importance placed upon, competing demands to participation in rugby
union. The key categories are further underpinned by concepts and influencing factors. The following results section provides explanations of the categories, concepts, influencing factors, and concludes with a substantive grounded theory.

**Core category: Positively evaluate one’s participation in rugby union, and one’s ability to cope with demands experienced throughout transitions during adolescence.**

Participation in adolescent rugby union is a complex process in which an individual evaluates their continued participation at transitions throughout their life. This involves a cognitive process of weighing up different factors relevant to that individual’s involvement in the sport. A positive evaluation is achieved if the factors relevant to participation are viewed as more favorable than those that oppose continuation, combined with a positive perception of an ability to cope with the demands experienced throughout transitions.

A key aspect of the results is the evaluation of participation at transitions during adolescence, and includes: the move from junior to youth rugby, following selection for matches or attainment of representative honors, being injured, time away from rugby, a forced change in club, change in school/college or beginning university, and times of high education demands. For example, the move from junior to youth rugby is an important transition due to the structure of youth age group rugby, which includes players aged 16 to 19 years rather than a single year age group. Player 1 highlighted the concern:

… Like last year for instance, because it’s under 16s you’re playing the same people your own age aren’t you. And then when you go up to youth you start playing 19 year olds and stuff then and people they’re a bit scared aren’t they so they stop playing.

That’s when I usually see them stop [playing].

This presents potential concerns with an individual’s perceived ability to cope when transitioning into youth rugby, due to playing against, and training with, older, more physically developed individuals.
Similarly, the selection for matches or attainment of representative honors is also a transition within adolescent rugby union. An individual who experiences successful selection will be likely to make a positive evaluation of their future participation. A non-selected individual who values rugby highly and perceives their future rugby opportunities positively will accept the selection decision and continue to participate at their current level. However, dropout will occur if an individual perceives their aspirations can no longer be achieved and continuing to participate at their current level is not valued. The influence of selection decisions was highlighted by one of the managerial staff:

It’s a test of character if you don’t get selected, sometimes that character shows through and they [players] persist and come back… But for every kid that does that, how many kids have not done that?

Transitions are also experienced outside of a sporting environment due to external demands such as, change in educational circumstance (new school/college or beginning university) and commitments (e.g., exam periods). For example, one participant explained:

Academic years… in terms of GCSE qualifications at 16 and A levels at 18 I think they are a possible drop off with kids, certainly at A level with kids having to focus on their careers. And then when they go off to universities it’s keeping in touch with them then, I don’t think we do a great job of keeping in touch. (Managerial Staff 4)

If an individual decides that their educational aspirations can be achieved while participating in rugby union, then the individual will choose to continue. However, if coping with education requirements and rugby aspirations is deemed unachievable then dropout can occur.

Key categories

The core category is underpinned by two key categories: perceived value towards, and ease of, participating in rugby union; and, attractiveness of, and importance placed upon, competing demands to participation in rugby union. The key categories interact and positively
or negatively influence an individual’s overall evaluation of continued participation in the sport depending upon the weighting of each category. These categories are further underpinned by different concepts.

Category 1: Perceived value towards, and ease of, participating in rugby union.

The value placed upon rugby by adolescent players comprises: enjoyment and satisfaction with participation in rugby union; number of opportunities to participate in rugby union and progress in the sport; and, identifying as a rugby union player and being part of a rugby union community. Development Officer 1 described some of these aspects, “I think, you know, it’s one of those things if you really enjoy it, then it’s in your blood and you know, it’s a family thing and also sometimes it’s a tradition in villages”.

When an adolescent individual perceives that rugby is easy to participate in, and readily available, then throughout transitions it is more likely that the individual will perceive positive evaluations of coping with demands and participation in the sport.

Identifying as a rugby union player and being part of a rugby union community.

This concept represents the extent to which an individual identifies as a rugby player and feels connected to the rugby community, which influences both the value placed on the sport and the perceptions of coping with demands. Managerial staff 2 explained:

I suppose most people would go like ‘I would love to be associated’; people are like that, especially youngsters, your own identity and your inclusion in a group because we all like to be included. Then you’re representing that badge that team whatever it is, I think that’s important.

This concept comprises three factors, the first of which is the perceived strength of the rugby union community. Specifically, an individual who is part of a community that expresses high levels of rugby involvement will be more inclined to place value upon their own participation.

Second, the stronger the social ties within the sport the more an individual can feel part of
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...their club or team, and the more value an individual will place upon participation as part of their life. Lastly, a family history of involvement leads to perceptions of high value towards rugby participation. For example, Player 2 described how a teammate travelled large distances to play rugby due to his father’s history at the club, and how his own father’s involvement in the sport had influenced his participation:

He [teammate] just really enjoyed rugby and his father used to play for [the club] as well. So, that’s an influence there… Because my father played rugby as well … and just watching him as a young boy, it’s just like you want to be on the pitch one day. So as soon as you can get involved at a young age that’s what you do, you get there.

In sum, the greater the perception of each of these factors, the more likely an individual is to identify as a rugby player and feel part of their rugby community, and want to remain in the sport.

**Enjoyment and satisfaction with participation in rugby union.** Value is placed upon continued participation when an individual enjoys and is satisfied with their rugby experiences, as described by Development Officer 3:

… just enjoyment of the game, if they play it once and they have a good experience, and that’s kind of our job, then they’ll want to come back and do it again the same as anything if you enjoy something you are going to want to do it again.

Enjoyment and satisfaction with participation in the sport includes five factors: strength of social ties to the club or team (friendships and social experiences); coaching quality, varied practice, and relationships with players; perceived level of success achieved in relation to aspirations and previous accomplishments in rugby union; perceptions of opportunities to progress in rugby union; and, amount of playing time an individual has during matches, and number of opportunities to participate in matches.
An individual who does not experience enjoyment from rugby and is not satisfied will question the value of the sport and the ease of participation, and therefore evaluate their participation and ability to cope with the demands throughout transitions. For example, “… why should I bother, why should I train if I’m not going to be successful, if I’m not going to make any money out of it, if I’m not going to win things…” (Coach 2). Additionally, all players highlighted the potential for a lack of satisfaction due to repetition in the way training sessions were structured or delivered at a club or team from season to season. I think some boys get bored, they’ve been doing it for ages and they can’t be bothered. And it’s mainly the same thing over and over again in local clubs. So if, my local club now will do training every week and nothing really changes, it’s the same place, the same time, I think they just get bored of it. (Player 3)

**Number of opportunities to participate in rugby union and progress in the sport.**

The more opportunities available to play, the easier an individual perceives their ability to participate, leading to a positive evaluation of involvement in the sport and ability to cope with demands throughout transitions. Additionally, the number of opportunities to participate and progress in rugby union can affect enjoyment and satisfaction with the sport due to players being unable to achieve desired goals and aspirations, or not perceiving benefits from the time invested. For example:

… If they [players] are training week in week out but they’re not playing on a regular basis then that’s going to start airing frustrations and, ultimately, with the other interests that are going on for them then you will start to get, ‘Actually it’s not for me I’m going to go do this or something else’. (Managerial Staff 4)

Opportunities for participation are underpinned by: perceptions of opportunities to progress in rugby union; playing time and consistency of match fixtures; and, access to facilities, teams, and coaching. Future opportunities for development and selection to a higher
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level of standard can lead an individual to place greater value upon their participation and ability to cope with demands at transitions, due to the possibility of advancing in the sport and achieving aspirations. Similarly, a lack of opportunities to participate and progress due to unavailability of facilities, teams, coaching, consistent matches, and game time, may lead to negative evaluations of participation and coping with demands throughout transitions.

**Category 2: Attractiveness of, and importance placed upon, competing demands to participation in rugby union.** This category refers to the competing demands to rugby union that an individual can choose, or is required, to participate in (e.g., competing in other sports). This decision is influenced by the perceived importance and attractiveness of these demands relative to rugby. Player 3 commented upon the variety of demands that might compete with participation in rugby union:

> Sometimes… like for example with football, if you play football and rugby at like 15 or 16, they try to say, ‘come and play football, it’s pointless playing rugby’, stuff like that. So, you definitely get drawn by other sports and other people.

In addition, the competing demands from societal views and perceived norms highlighted an increased importance placed upon having money than compared with previous generations. For example, Development Officer 2 highlighted societal changes in relation to employment:

> … kids can now get Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon jobs where they are at MacDonald’s, where they are at Tesco stacking shelves and part time jobs and they need the money and that can adversely affect the game. Similarly, at senior level there seems to be far more shift work that goes on with weekend commitments than there was 20 years ago. So I think society has changed in many ways and it’s really really difficult in some of the clubs to get players to play the game.
**Educational commitments.** An adolescent rugby union player may experience situations in which evaluations are made concerning whether coping with educational commitments and sport participation is possible. For example:

One of the biggest ones [competing demands] I hear is that, ‘I’ve got to concentrate on my education’. They don’t, a lot, a lot of boys don’t seem to believe that they can marry the two together, it’s either they seem to have preconceived ideas that they’re either sporty or academic. They don’t seem to see that they can fit the two together.

(Development Officer 1)

Player 1, described a consequence of players missing training due to educational demands:

… If they’ve got a load of work then they’re missing training and all that, they don’t see them [teammates] enough, and we only see them once a Saturday. They don’t really know the team that well, so they’re like shy in the corner and just on their own.

The greater demands from education, such as assignments and exam periods, influence overall educational commitments and the amount of time players have to participate in rugby.

**Participation in other sports and activities.** Other sports are often a competing demand to rugby union participation because sports frequently take place at the same time, leading players to choose which to attend. Choice of sport and other activities is further emphasized with age, as peers become influential, as Development Officer 6 highlighted, “At 16 maybe they have got to make a choice, do you play your football or do you play rugby? And maybe just people going out enjoying being that age.” Activities outside of sport (e.g., spending time with friends who do not participate in rugby) can also be viewed as attractive. Therefore, if other activities are perceived as more attractive than rugby, and coping with the demands of both is perceived detrimentally, this may also lead to dropout.

**Need to engage in employment.** If an individual perceives the need to be employed to be of greater importance than playing rugby, and perceives coping with the demands of
both employment and rugby participation is unachievable, then dropout can occur. Regional
Managerial Staff 1 highlighted the choice:

Every player aged 15, 16, 17, or 18 they are looking for employment they are looking
to earn money for themselves… if they are still in education, they have to go for a
Saturday job and that is when rugby is played so I think the knock-on effect of kids
growing up and wanting to live the lifestyle that that they see as the social norm then
they have to earn the money and that then takes away from their ability to play rugby.

Security of employment is also threatened by the physical nature of the sport, for example, “I
think the bumps and bruises that guys get is a big threat to them losing work and certainly at
16 to 19 [years old] … when numerous people are working it does cause problems”
(Development Officer 2). As such, throughout transitions an individual may feel forced to
choose between rugby participation and employment for fear of injury preventing them from
working.

**A substantive grounded theory of stakeholders’ perceptions of continued participation in adolescent rugby**

In sum, continued participation in adolescent rugby union occurs if an individual holds
a positive evaluation of participation in rugby, and their ability to cope with the demands
experienced throughout transitions during their adolescence (see Figure 1). This evaluation is
influenced by an athlete’s perception of the value towards, and ease of, rugby participation;
and, the attractiveness of and importance placed upon competing demands to participation in
rugby union. Continued participation is apparent when, throughout transitions in their
adolescence, an individual places value on participation in rugby union, and perceives access
to rugby opportunities easily. An individual who perceives value and ease of participating in
rugby union is suggested to identify as a rugby player and feel part of a rugby community,
enjoy and be satisfied with participation, and perceive opportunities to participate and
progress in the sport. The greater the level of enjoyment and satisfaction experienced, the
more an individual identifies with the sport. Similarly, the more an individual identifies as a
rugby player, and as being part of the community, the greater levels of enjoyment and
satisfaction experienced. Additionally, an individual is more satisfied with their rugby
participation when greater numbers of opportunities to participate and progress in the sport
are apparent.

**Discussion**

Stakeholders’ perceptions of adolescent Welsh rugby union participation, focusing
upon reasons for continued sport participation and dropout was investigated, and explored
through three research questions: (1) Why do stakeholders believe individuals post 15 years
of age continue to participate in rugby union? (2) What do stakeholders perceive are the
reasons for dropout in adolescent rugby union? (3) How do stakeholders consider adolescent
rugby union players could be encouraged to remain involved in the sport? Continued
participation in adolescent rugby union was reported to occur if an individual held a positive
evaluation of their participation in rugby union, and their ability to cope with the demands
experienced throughout the transitions experienced during their adolescence.

Our study adds to current literature by providing a new perspective of adolescent
rugby participation, and, to the authors’ knowledge, is the first to combine adolescent rugby
providers’ and participants’ perspectives of continued participation. Furthermore, in line with
Vella et al.’s (2014) suggestions, our study includes both participation motives and reasons
for dropout. Through the use of a grounded theory methodology, a context-specific overview
of stakeholders’ perspectives and evaluations of adolescent rugby participation within Wales
is provided. Specifically, the findings illustrate links and potential differences between rugby
providers and participants’ perspectives; demonstrate the ongoing evaluative process of
Collectively, our study highlights the complexity of continued sport involvement and the range of potential factors affecting participation. Of particular importance is the contribution of an individual’s evaluation of their involvement in the sport and coping with demands at distinct transitions during adolescence. Our findings support the suggestion that transitions disrupt the athletic engagement status quo and challenge athletes to respond by using coping strategies and making decisions (Samuel & Tenebaum 2011; Stambulova, 2012).

Additionally, during transitions it was reported that an individual evaluated their rugby participation against any competing demands. By understanding this evaluative process and its influencing factors, sport providers have the opportunity to promote positive factors of rugby participation (e.g., enjoyment, satisfaction, identification with the sport), and provide coping strategies to support participants with the competing demands they may face. This evaluation is comparable with the push pull anti-push anti-pull framework (e.g., Fernandez et al., 2006) and the SCM (Scanlan et al., 1993). For example, when viewing dropout as the outcome, the push factors, would be negative considerations of current rugby participation (i.e., evaluation of value and ease of rugby participation). The pull factors would be the perceived benefits of dropping out from rugby union (i.e., attractiveness and importance placed upon competing demands to the sport). The anti-push factors would relate to the current attachment to rugby participation; and, the anti-pull factors would be the overall risk and cost aspects related to no longer participating in rugby union.

Although continued rugby participation may be viewed as optional, certain competing demands can be obligatory. For example, education or employment can be viewed as demands that are inevitable and unchangeable, and therefore detrimental to involvement in
the sport, as these competing demands take up time and resources, which prevent participation. The current study findings also highlight a concern for continued rugby participation as a preconception existed that sport participation and education demands were incompatible and would lead to dropout. This apparent conflict is evident in dual career literature (e.g., European Commission, 2012), and highlights the need for further provision of support to help adolescents combine their education commitments and sport participation. The current findings also emphasize the importance of understanding the competing demands to sport participation, which vary depending upon individual circumstances. Sport providers should therefore recognize the specific competing demands to participation and provide appropriate support to aid continuation.

Despite the threat from competing demands, participation may continue if adolescents place value on their involvement in the sport, and have opportunities to participate. The current research combines the adolescents’ perceived value of rugby to the individual, with their perceptions of the relative ease of participation. Consistent with previous literature, our findings emphasize the importance of enjoyment (e.g., Seefelt et al., 1992) and satisfaction (Hodge et al., 2009) upon sporting participation and retention respectively. However, limited research has explored how satisfaction influences sport participation (Burns, Jasinski, Dunn, & Fletcher, 2012). Our findings highlight that an adolescent player’s enjoyment and satisfaction with rugby union is influenced by the participation opportunities available. Specifically, in order to be satisfied with the sport, an individual must be afforded with opportunities to participate in competitive matches, and be able to justify the amount of time and resources invested. The enjoyment and satisfaction a player experiences are also influenced by the level of coaching expertise and the appropriateness of practice provided. Indeed, Baker, Yardley, and Côté (2003) noted the importance of satisfaction with the coach
in both team and individual sports, and the demonstration of positive coach behaviors (e.g., goal setting, personal rapport) to avoid negative personal rapport with athletes.

Similar to Anderson, Mâsse, Zhang, Coleman and Chang (2009), the current findings highlight the importance of social experiences during involvement in rugby union, through enhanced enjoyment and identification with the sport. Social experiences with teammates during practice sessions and away from competitive rugby (e.g., socializing in the club house) are examples of sources of enjoyment. Positive social experiences promote a sense of belonging within a rugby community and influence the level to which an adolescent may identify as a rugby player. A greater identification with rugby is linked to retention due to greater value being placed upon the sport. This positive influence upon sport participation in our study is consistent with the findings of Lamont-Mills and Christensen (2006), who observed that individuals with stronger athletic identities were more likely to participate in sport. However, in our study a challenge to these positive rugby experiences were participants’ societal views and perceived norms. Specifically, adolescent rugby players placed value upon having disposable income from employment and experiencing instant gratification through activities. As such, sport providers should endeavor to understand participants’ desires and, where possible, allow these desires to be satisfied, be that during or alongside rugby participation.

**Applied Implications**

From the findings, strategies can subsequently be developed and implemented to enhance players’ ability to cope with the demands experienced throughout transitions in their adolescence, and to enhance the opportunities for positive evaluations of rugby participation and subsequent sport continuation. One way to enhance coping during such transitions is through the development of players’ life skills. Life skills training adds to athletes’ coping resources in transitions, and is suggested to support other future demands (Stambulova, 2012).
Specifically, Gould and Carson (2008) suggested a life skills set for young athletes, which included: time and stress management skills, character development and decision making skills, communication skills, leadership skills, links to positive adult and peer role models, and general confidence and self-efficacy. To further develop coping ability, the incorporation of reflective practice is suggested via prompting athletes to think about their experiences and which sport skills could be used in other life domains (Jones, 2012).

In addition to life skills training, support should also focus upon fostering participants’ positive appraisals of the demands faced in transition. If a positive appraisal of demands at transitions is made, then there will be a greater opportunity for coping with demands at transitions and thus a greater opportunity for continued participation. One concept which can influence an individual’s appraisals of situations is their level of resilience, characterized by the influence on appraisals and protective impact against the negative effect of stressors (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2014). Sport providers should therefore aim to promote psychological factors associated with resilience including motivation, confidence, and focus.

A particularly prevalent competing demand identified in the current study was that of the educational commitments faced by the adolescents. In line with the recent dual career literature (e.g., Gledhill & Harwood, 2015), it is suggested that there is a need for further collaborations between national governing bodies and education providers, with an aim to support adolescents combine both their sport participation and education commitments. As such, enhanced communication between clubs and schools is suggested in order to predict and prepare for transitions related to educational commitments (e.g., exam periods).

A final implication relates to enhancing players perceptions of the opportunities available through rugby, and increasing the level of satisfaction and enjoyment when participating in the sport. This may include: increasing opportunities for social experiences for players, in both competitive and non-competitive environments; offering flexible times for
training, and creating training plans to allow individuals to complete in their spare time;

coaching review sessions in which coaches discuss training techniques and embark in reflective practice; and, assessments of players’ expectations, desires, and levels of satisfaction, via reviews, at specific points during the season.

Study limitations and future research directions

Firstly, it is important to consider that the current model represents an initial grounded theory model of continued participation in Welsh adolescent rugby union. As such, further data collection is required to substantiate the current theory across different contexts and populations. Regarding the current investigation, a group of potential participants that we did not sample were the parents of the players themselves. Given their influence upon adolescent sporting participation (cf. Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009), parents’ perspectives would have further enhanced understanding of the influence of parental roles on adolescent sport continuation. Similar to parents, those individuals involved with a player’s education (e.g., teachers, welfare officers) may have also influenced evaluations of participation. As such, investigating the nature and degree of communication between educational and sports providers in rugby union therefore warrants further investigation.

Future research should also explore perceptions of continued participation across different developmental stages within rugby union, as research in other sports has shown that participations demands differ as a function of age (cf. Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). The potential transferability of the findings to additional sporting populations, such as other adolescent team sports (e.g., soccer, hockey) would also be of interest. Further, in the current study only male continued participation was explored. Female rugby participants were not included in the current study as prior to data collection it was viewed that the two sports were distinctly different, with female rugby perceived as a newer sport, operating in a different
context. Research is therefore warranted into continued participation regarding the female version of the game, particularly from a cultural-specific stance.
References


continued participation in rugby union

Figure 1: Continued participation in adolescent male rugby union: Stakeholders’ perspectives

Positively evaluate one’s participation in rugby union, and one’s ability to cope with demands experienced throughout transitions during adolescence.

Attractiveness of, and importance placed upon, competing demands to participation in rugby union

Perceived value towards, and ease of, participating in rugby union

Education commitments
1 Exam periods; Number of assignments

Participation in other sports and activities
2 Other sports; Activities outside of competitive sport

Need to engage in employment
3 Importance placed on expendable income; Job security

Identifying as a rugby union player and being part of a rugby union community
4 Perceived strength of rugby union community; Strength of social ties to the club or team; Family history of involvement in rugby

Enjoyment and satisfaction with participation in rugby union
5 Perceptions of opportunities to progress in rugby union; Amount of playing time an individual has during matches, and number of opportunities to participate in matches

Perceptions of opportunities to progress in rugby union
6 Perceptions of opportunities to progress in rugby union; Playing time and consistency of match fixtures; Access to facilities, teams, and coaching