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Understanding the Perceived Attributes and Consequences of Participation in Youth “Rep” Hockey

An Analysis from the Parental Perspective

Chris Chard
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Abstract

Participation in youth sport has been recognized for myriad developmental benefits. When one considers sport participation, there are a number of different delivery models. Participation can be recreational in nature or competitively driven. Regardless of competitive level, it is important for sport managers to understand the drivers that influence sport participation. Thus, the purpose of the current investigation was to achieve a better understanding of the perceived attributes and consequences of youth representative (rep) sport participation from the perspective of the elite athletes' parents. Parents' perceptions are important given that these individuals are the ultimate decision makers for their children's sport participation. To investigate this purpose, a laddering interview technique was employed. Findings indicate that attributes of youth rep sport participation include structure, competition/challenge, and team environment. Perceived consequences or benefits include learning life lessons (leading to productive citizens), skill development (leading to confidence), discipline/accountability, work ethic, and friendships. The attributes and benefits could be used to develop policies, procedures, and rules/regulations that deliver maximum satisfaction at the youth rep level.

Keywords: *laddering interviews, youth sports, sport participation, hockey*

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Numerous studies recognize the benefits of sport participation for youth development, both on and off the field of play (Barnett, 2008; Coakley, 2011; Danish & Nellen, 1997; Jones & Lavallee, 2009; Ogden & Warneke, 2010). Coakley (2011) suggests that “sport and development is grounded in the dual assumption that sport, unlike other activities, has a fundamentally positive and pure essence that transcends time and place so that positive changes befall individuals and groups that engage in or consume sport” (p. 307). Other scholars who have considered sport participation have drawn similar conclusions (e.g., Barnett, 2008; Berger, O’Reilly, Parent, Seguin, & Hernandez, 2008; Coakley, 2011; Meisterjahn, & Diefenbach, 2008; Perks, 2007). These positive changes that befall upon an individual or group often begin with youth sport participation.

When one considers youth sport participation, there are a number of different development systems or delivery models that fit under this umbrella of involvement (e.g., Green, 2005; Sotiriadou, Shilbury, & Quick, 2008). Participation might entail a sociable game each Saturday with a group of friends. Or, participation could mean active involvement in organized leagues of a recreational nature, such as a house league-based program, where enjoyment rather than competition is promoted (Podilchak, 1983). However, membership in organizations where elite travel teams are formed to compete with similar organizations of representative (rep) athletes also describes a form of participation (i.e., youth rep ice hockey in Canada). This type of elite level system helps to “...identify, develop, and prepare athletes for international sporting success” (Böhlke & Robinson, 2009, p. 67). Thus, while sport participation, generally, has been explored (e.g., Alexandris, Tsorbatzoudis, & Grouios, 2002; Barnett, 2008; Berger et. al, 2008; Hurtes, Allen, Stevens, & Lee, 2000) and the benefits of such programming (i.e., promoting sportsmanship) has also been investigated (i.e., Wells, Arthur-Banning, Paisley, Ellis, Roark, & Fisher, 2008), there has been a lack of research conducted in the area of elite youth sport and elite youth rep hockey, specifically. While the design of Canada’s rep hockey system is to allow for “players to advance through the developmental process and compete at the highest possible level appropriate to their ability” (Hockey Canada [HC], 2012, p. 7), most will never enjoy a career playing the sport (Campbell & Parcels, 2013). Further, by its very nature, rep hockey when compared to House League is understood to have substantial time demands (Edwards & Washington, 2013), significant travel requirements (Chard & Mallen, 2012), and sizeable financial costs up to \$20,000 per year (Campbell & Parcels, 2013). The question must be asked then: to what end?

In youth sport, one of the major factors that contribute to sport participation is the decision making of parents to enroll their children into the sport. Schwab, Wells, and Arthur-Banning (2010) indicate that “in youth sports, both parents and children are the customers, and administrators need to satisfy both groups to ensure customer loyalty” (p. 41). Satisfying both groups not only encourages customer loyalty (i.e., retention), but can also be used by management in shaping the recruitment message to attract youth athletes and their parents.

Building on Schwab et al. (2010), a gap exists in our understanding of the antecedent influences or drivers motivating “parents to enroll their child in different types of programs” (Barnett, 2008, p. 28). Previous research on consumer decision making has predominantly taken the perspective of an individual purchasing a specific product or service for their own consumption (e.g., Apostolopoulou, Papadimitriou, & Vasia, 2010; Verhoef, 2003; Zhu, Won, & Pastore, 2005). As Mitchell (2012) notes, however, there is now more interest in the roles family members play in decision-making processes. Specifically, a gap exists in the sport management literature in that limited research has explored influences on consumption decisions made on behalf of an individual, for example, parents’ decision making for their children. Here, parents become a proxy for their children’s involvement in a particular sport or specific participatory level of competition. Green and Chalip (1998) acknowledge the importance of this proxy status, noting, “although children are the users of youth sport services, it is their parents who are the purchasers” (p. 95). Green and Chalip (1998) indicate that an understanding of “the antecedents and consequences of parents’ decisions when purchasing a sport experience for their children are not well understood” (p. 95). Therefore, the purpose of the current investigation was to achieve a better understanding of parents’ perceived attributes and resultant consequences or benefits of rep hockey participation. Schawb et al. (2010) indicate that “understanding parents’ antecedent and ongoing expectations of youth sport programs can help administrators attempt to meet expectations, secure parents’ loyalty, and ensure the further support of programs” (p. 41). The empirical context of the investigation was youth hockey in Ontario, Canada. To guide the investigation, three research questions were put forward:

- (RQ 1): What perceived attributes do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey?
- (RQ 2): What perceived consequences or benefits do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey?
- (RQ3): How do the attributes and consequences or benefits relate to one another?

Klenosky, Templin, and Troutman (2001) define attributes as the “relatively concrete characteristics” (p. 99) of a brand, product or service (i.e., colour, size, weight, taste, etc.). Alternatively, consequences are the more abstract viewpoints about the benefits derived from “selecting, using, or experiencing” (p. 99) a brand, product, or service (i.e., happiness, comfort, savings, etc.).

Guided by the research questions above, we present an empirical investigation to ascertain perceived attributes and resultant consequences influencing parental decisions to enroll their child into rep hockey. The development of our research questions were influenced, in part, by expectancy-value theories of behavior such as the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)/Theory of Reasoned Action (TRA),

and the health belief model (e.g., Ajzen, 1991; Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010; Ajzen & Madden, 1988; Sheppard & Taylor, 1999). These theories and models suggest that much human behavior is goal directed and people tend to make decisions because of the consequences (benefits) they believe will result from them. Thus, we expected that parents' decisions to enroll their children in youth "rep" hockey might be informed by particular attributes and consequences or benefits they perceive to be associated with participation. That said, our study is exploratory and inductive in nature; we do not intend to confirm the utility of any particular expectancy-value theory. Moreover, our aim is not to test or examine specific constructs associated with any of these theories (e.g., attitudes, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, intention, etc.). Rather, we present a discussion of these theories in an effort to be transparent with readers about what we considered sensitizing concepts, which informed the development of our study and how we might interpret its findings. Specifically, we discuss these theories to reinforce the importance of exploring attributes and consequences in the context of our study and to help position our findings in relation to extant theory and literature.

Literature Review

Extant Literature

An extensive amount of literature has explored proxy decision making in such areas as education, persons with disabilities, sport psychology, and palliative medicine (e.g., Commendador, 2010; Coyne, 2008; Jackson, Cheater, & Reid, 2008; Holt, Tamminen, Black, Mandigo, & Fox, 2009; Mitchell, 2012; Tilse, Wilson, Rosenman, Morrison, & Mccawley, 2011; Yoshioka, 1984). However, limited research has explored proxy decision making in elite youth sport generally and hockey specifically. Here, understanding the parental perspective of youth rep hockey enrollment is important as parents ultimately make the decision and commitment (financial, time, energy) to enable their children to play (Barnett, 2008). Indeed, these commitments are intensified at the rep level compared to other youth participation commitments (Campbell, 2013; Chard & Mallen, 2012; Edwards & Washington, 2013).

Expectancy-Value Theories of Behavior. One way to understand proxy decision making is to draw on expectancy-value theories of behavior. There have been several expectancy-value cognitive theories developed within the field of social psychology (e.g., expectancy-value of achievement motivation, behavioural decision theory, subjective expected utility theory). Indeed, Conner and Armitage (1998) state that the TRA and the TPB are "widely applied expectancy-value models of attitude-behavior relationships" (p. 1429). The core assumption of TRA/TPB is that most human behaviour is goal-directed (Ajzen & Madden, 1986; Sheppard & Taylor, 1999). In particular, expectancy-value cognitive theories such as the TRA/TPB view behaviour and/or behavioural intentions as a function of expectancy (or belief). Specifically, the TRA/TPB perspectives posit that an object/

product/service possesses attributes that will produce particular consequences or benefits (Rayburn & Palmgreen, 1984).

More specifically, within the TPB, people's attitude toward a behaviour (i.e., their overall evaluation of the behaviour as "good" or "bad") is determined by behavioural beliefs and evaluation of behavioural outcomes. TPB was founded on the principles of Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) expectancy-value theory of attitude formation, which suggests that attitudes develop from the beliefs people hold about the object of attitude (e.g., a behaviour, person, issue, or event). Moreover, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) argue that individuals form beliefs about an object of attitude by associating it with certain attributes. In the case of attitude toward behaviour, for example, each belief links the behaviour to a particular outcome (Ajzen, 1991). As Ajzen notes, because outcomes that come to be linked to behaviours are already evaluated positively or negatively by the individual, people "automatically and simultaneously acquire an attitude toward the behaviour" (p. 191). Thus, individuals learn to favour behaviours they believe have, or will produce, desirable consequences and form unfavourable attitudes toward behaviours they associate with undesirable consequences (Ajzen, 1991).

Simply put, expectancy-value theories suggest that people are motivated by particular items (i.e., attributes) which they expect will help them attain a desired outcome (i.e., consequence). For example, an individual might exercise (i.e., attribute) if the expectancy or outcome is that they will lose weight (i.e., consequence). Another example might be an athlete playing on an elite rep level team that practices frequently (i.e., attribute), the expectancy or outcome might be that he or she will develop skills to help them transition to higher levels of competition (i.e., consequence).

The idea that a person will perform behaviours to attain a valued outcome is evident in much of the sport consumer motivation literature. Researchers (e.g., Donnelly & Young, 1988; Schoham, Rose, & Kahle, 1998), for example, have argued that decisions to follow a sports team, via live attendance and/or other media outlets, indicates the formation of an attitude based on the degree of positive affect towards potential outcomes. For instance, numerous sport scholars (e.g., Funk & James, 2004; Kahle, Kambara, & Rose, 1996; Trail & James, 2001; Stewart, Smith, & Nicholson, 2003; Wann, 1995) have cited factors such as escape (from daily life), stress reduction, entertainment, social interaction, bonding with family, and acquisition of knowledge as benefits derived from the choice to become both spectators and participants of sport. Likewise, decisions to volunteer at major sport events are often associated with expectations that the behaviour will afford opportunities to develop transferable skills, gain practical experience, and get close to the sporting action (Andrew, 1996; Elstad, 1996; Ralston, Downward, & Lumsdon, 2004). Again, for the purpose of the current research, we draw from this theoretical perspective (i.e., expectancy-value theories) to justify the importance of attributes and benefits parents associate with the decision to enroll their child in elite rep hockey programs.

Method

Empirical Setting

Hockey is one of the most popular sports in Canada, as evidenced by the 625,125 participants reported by the sport's governing body (Hockey Canada, 2013). The province of Ontario has the highest participation rate with 267,000 registered participants (Hockey Canada, 2013). Here, elite youth rep players comprise one segment of participants. Rep hockey organizations include teams that compete at a variety of levels: AAA, AA, A, AE. Here, AAA is considered to be the highest level of competition; next would be AA, and so on. These competitive levels exist at the Tyke (6-year-olds), Novice (7-8 years old), Atom (9-10 years old), Peewee (11-12 years old), Bantam (13-14 years old), and Midget (15-18 years old) age categories. For the purpose of this study, we focused on the Tyke and Novice age categories given that these typically represent the point of initiation for rep hockey. Here, participation is largely determined by parents, thereby providing an ideal context for the present investigation.

Data Collection

A series of in-depth, one-on-one laddering interviews were conducted with parents. Essentially, laddering is a probing technique that moves people from concrete attributes to more abstract consequences or benefits. Laddering forces individuals to look beyond the easily identifiable attributes of a brand, service, or product (i.e., colour, size, weight, taste, etc.) and focus on benefits achieved from these attributes (i.e., happiness, comfort, savings, etc.). Fundamentally, laddering guides individuals to articulate "why and how product attributes are important" (Klenosky, Gengler, & Mulvey, 1993, p. 364). Often, laddering is used in social scientific investigations to understand personal values associated with consumer decision making through means-end analyses (Reynolds & Gutman, 1988). For the purpose of the current investigation, however, where proxy decision making was a central tenet, parents' personal values when enrolling their children in youth rep hockey were less central to our investigation. Indeed, values are why we want something for ourselves; however, a proxy decision, by its very nature, involves making a decision for a third party. We believe the laddering approach was an effective way of attaining insights into the salient attributes and consequences parents associate with enrolling their child in elite level rep hockey.

Interviews were established through a two-stage contact process. First, contact information for every coach of a Tyke or Novice rep hockey team in the Golden Horseshoe area of Ontario, Canada was obtained. Only coaches whose information could be found on team websites were included in the sampling frame ($N = 41$). Second, each coach was sent an introductory e-mail outlining the purpose of the current investigation. Coaches were asked if they would be willing to serve a gatekeeper role (Patton, 2002) by sharing information on the study with their parent group. Those coaches who were agreeable to do so ($N = 8$) were then con-

tacted directly by the primary researcher to establish a time when the laddering interviews could take place. A total sample of 28 respondents was achieved. To ensure interviewee anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym name.

Typically, interviews occurred during a practice when the minor hockey team was playing and parents were in attendance. At each practice, individuals who had identified a willingness to participate in the study were introduced to the researcher by the team’s coach/manager and an explanation of the interview was given. Those individuals who agreed to participate in the study were then taken, individually, to a quiet room in the arena where interviews were conducted. Next, each respondent was asked, “Why do you enroll your child in rep hockey?” Following this initial question, respondents were probed with recurring questions such as “Why is this important?” or “What makes this important?” The rationale for enrollment might refer to health, competition, structure and team benefits (amongst others). This process of probing was conducted for each attribute mentioned to determine the perceived consequence(s) or benefit(s) derived from the attribute. Probing ceased when no more benefits were associated with a stated attribute. Typically, interviews lasted between 15 and 30 minutes, and all interviews were audio recorded.

Upon completion of each interview, the dialogue was transcribed verbatim. Next, each of the researchers individually coded the data, specifically considering the linkages between noted attributes and consequences or benefits (see Table 1). Second, content codes (Goldenberg, Klenosky, O’Leary, & Templin, 2000) were identified such as tournaments, structure, and discipline. After coding individually, the researchers held discussions to compare codes. Similar codes such as “structure” and “format” or “weekend road trips” and “tournaments” were discussed and given one consistent label. Finally, each code was identified as being an attribute or consequence (Klenosky, Gengler, & Mulvey, 1993). After each researcher conducted his own Attribute-Consequence identification process, discussions were held to compare the results. Joint discussion and debate ensued to alleviate any divergent interpretations.

Data triangulation, or the use of “different data sources...within the same study” (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011, p. 51), helped promote trustworthiness of the research findings. Here, in-depth interviews with similar respondents (i.e., parents of a rep hockey player) who were still distinct (i.e., demographically, geographically, socio-economically) promoted such triangulation, thereby building trustworthiness into the research. Further, as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1994), detailed field notes were recorded after each interview to promote dependability and confirmability, while rich descriptions drawn from the interview transcripts aided transferability of findings. Each of these steps helped promote the trustworthiness of the current investigation (Lincoln & Guba, 1994).

Table 1*Sample of Respondents' Ladders and Coding Assignments (Attributes-Consequences)*

The whole team thing is great (Attribute – Team environment)
They see each other so much they become great friends (Consequence - Friendships)

Well, the way rep is set up is great (Attribute – Structure)
The accountability associated with playing rep is good (Consequence – Accountability/Discipline)
It forces them to be disciplined which is a really big one (Consequence – Accountability/Discipline)
Discipline teaches them life skills ... it is the 8-year-old version of commitment (Consequence – Life lessons/skills)

Just the whole structure of rep (Attribute – structure)
It's just better than house league, the level of competition (Attribute – competition/challenge)
They develop more as hockey players (Consequence – Skill development)

Findings

Of the 28 respondents who participated in the study, 22 were male (78.6%) and six were female (21.4%). Respondents' ages ranged from 37 to 63 with the majority between 37 and 45 ($n = 21$, 75%). None of the six female respondents played hockey when they were younger, however, four of their spouses did. Of these four individuals, three of them played at the rep level. Of the 22 male respondents, five did not play hockey at all when they were younger, five played hockey at the house league level, and 12 played rep hockey. Thus, in total, 15 of the families (53.6%) had at least one parent play rep hockey in their youth and 23 of the families (82.1%) had at least one parent play hockey at any level. These parental experiences in hockey align with Palomo-Nieto, Ruiz-Perez, Sanchez-Sanchez, and Garcia-Coll's (2011) assertion that "children with parents who have taken an active part in sports are more likely to participate in sports activities and are also more likely to reach high performance levels if their parents have also competed at a highly competitive level in the past" (p. 143).

Each respondent indicated a significant time obligation to enable their child to play rep hockey. The mean commitment level was noted to be 13.39 hours per week. Further, 12 of the respondents had at least one other child playing rep hockey in a different age group. For the majority of respondents ($n = 16$, 57.1%), this was their child's fourth year playing hockey, at any level, and typically their first or second year participating in rep.

The findings revealed that the attributes parents most associated with rep hockey were *structure*, *competition/challenge*, and *team environment*. The ultimate consequence or benefit perceived from these attributes was learning valuable *life lessons/skills*. Specifically, *life lessons/skills* were seen to be drawn from a number of subsidiary benefits including enhanced *skill development* (leading to improved *confidence*), *friendship* development, learned *discipline/accountability*, and increased *work ethic*. Further, *life lessons/skills* were viewed as a source to create the foundation for *productive citizens* later in life. The attributes, consequences, or benefits, and their perceived linkages can be seen in Figure 1. The perceived attributes are represented by the white boxes at the base of the model, while the consequences or benefits associated with each attribute are symbolised by the grey boxes. Here, the size of the individual boxes is reflective of the frequency of mentions by interviewees; similarly, the weight of each arrow is representative of the strength of perceived linkages between attributes and consequences (determined by number of mentions).

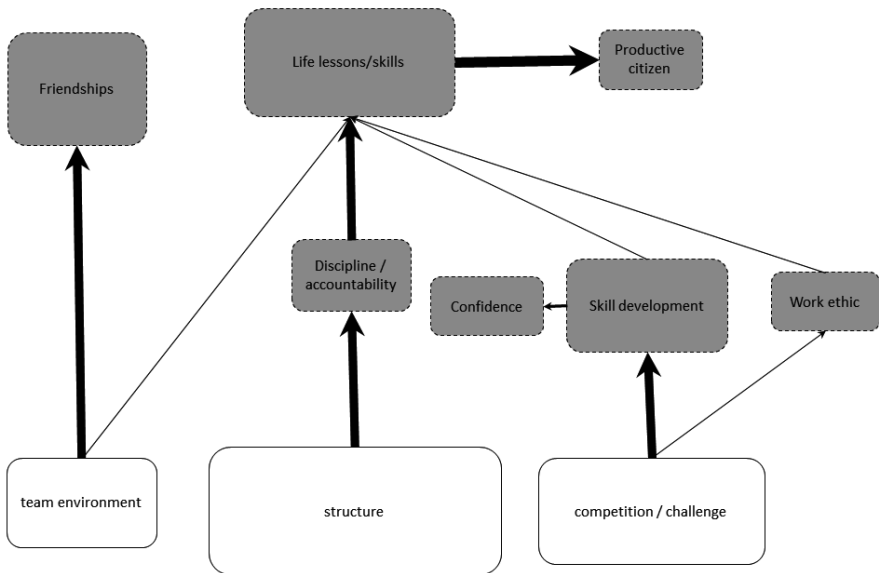


Figure 1. Attribute-Consequence Model of Parents’ Perceptions of Youth Rep Hockey Participation

Structure was often voiced as a catch-all to the initial question: “Why do you put your child in rep hockey?” Respondent Kirby noted, “We like the structure ... having that structure where you’re expected to be somewhere, and on time, in your uniform, that kind of thing; it gives the kids some focus.” Similarly, Erin noted, “for the same reason they have to show up for practice on time and they have to revolve around some of the structure of a demanding rep schedule, this applies to other areas of life ... showing up for work, getting assignments done, going to school, doing other things.” Katlyn echoed these sentiments: “I think structure is very important ... I think they need structure to develop a healthy scheme of the world and to go on later and be well-adjusted.”

This perception of structure in rep hockey was often articulated as a precursor to the consequence of learning *discipline/accountability*. For example, Russ said, “It’s the sort of foundational thing we need in our life. Everything we do and all of our actions, we need to be accountable for them, so, playing rep hockey you have that.” Erin said, “rep hockey will provide a building block to other facets of their life that will help them work with other people and be accountable. I think if they’re accountable to the other people on their team, this is one piece of the puzzle.” Here the terms discipline and accountability were used somewhat interchangeably. For example, Berry said, “I think hockey is really good in terms of the discipline; we practice at 6:30 in the morning ... It teaches your kid about commitment and discipline, about getting up.” This benefit of rep hockey is further explained by Shawn, who noted, “He learns discipline and he learns to work well in a group; it might transfer in later life. He won’t have to learn that discipline because it’s been established at an earlier age.”

Competition/challenge was the second attribute of rep hockey participation that was mentioned frequently by interviewees. Often, parents felt their children’s hockey skills were beyond the house league level and thus a move to rep was seen as a practical step to provide the appropriate competition. Allen, for example, provided a comparison between less competitive “house league” hockey and rep hockey by stating that, “Any kid that’s a good player won’t be challenged at lower competitive leagues. So typically, the higher league you play in, the more challenging it’s going to be ... I don’t want my child to go through life without being challenged.” Kellen spoke in similar terms when he said, “I wanted to push them ... having kids at their level or higher makes them push themselves; this is something I wanted.” This is further explained by Russ who stated, “Just making a rep hockey team is a competition because the trial process is so grueling, even at this young age. So, this enhanced competition and accountability that I talked about, I think this is so important to these kids in life.” Christine spoke of similar competitive issues in life: “It’s going to help them in their future because everything is so competitive, like in the work force and school and everything.” Joe said matter-of-factly, “The main reason for me doing it right from the very beginning [entering son into rep hockey at the youngest age] is to put him into a competitive environment.”

Parents felt the *competition/challenge* attribute led to two perceived consequences for players: *skill development* and *work ethic*. First, considering *skill development*, Allen explained, “I want him to be better at the sport. I think he wants to be better at the sport. You are not going to get better if you don’t develop your skills.” Here, skill development was viewed as a result of enhanced competition and ice-time enjoyed at the rep level. Christine said:

In house league hockey, if the kid is lucky they get a practice a week or every other week and a game a week ... With the rep hockey they are on the ice a couple of times per week; they also have power skating, which really improves their skating. It is a little bit more money but it just builds their hand eye coordination, skating, everything is just a big improvement.

Of interest, a benefit perceived to be associated with enhanced skill development was increased *confidence*. Here, Kelly noted that the importance of confidence, “to feel good about yourself ... to go higher and do a lot more, and know that you can do it ... they can be cool because they have the jacket and all that stuff.” Rosanne also acknowledged the confidence accompanying the rep apparel: “There’s just a whole different attitude ... there is pride in him, he gets to wear his jacket and has pride in that too.” She continued, “I think it [being good] transfers not just for sport, but in all areas ... it builds confidence.” Marty captured this sentiment nicely noting, “It circles back to the fact I want him to be challenged ... if he doesn’t have the ice time and doesn’t develop, he’ll struggle. If he isn’t competitive then discouragement will settle in. If he does get the ice time and develop he’ll be in a position to be competitive and feel good.”

The second notable benefit derived from enhanced competition associated with rep hockey was nurturing a strong *work ethic*. Damon explained, “We want our kids to have max effort on everything that they do, whether it’s their homework, being a friend, being a good son, or playing hockey ... rep encourages that.” Sara held a similar view:

I think it is important to instill a drive and instill a level of competition if you are able to do that. I think that most people left to their own devices will coast and just, you know just follow the status quo. I don’t want my kids to do that, I want them to learn and challenge themselves to that next level. I think that’s why, if they can play a rep sport it’s important because I do not think they are going to get it in house league.

Fraser summarised the desire for his son to learn a solid worth ethic, and the ability to achieve this through rep hockey, given its competitiveness: “Life is not fair. Nobody’s going to give you anything in life, so you have to work at it ... with rep hockey everyone is competitive”.

The final attribute of rep hockey participation that emerged from the data was the perceived value of kids being in a team environment. Often, respondents

would simply state, as Allen did, that “being a part of a team” was a key attribute. The benefits of the rep team environment, however, predominantly focused on forging relationships. For example, Luke said, “I think the rep system teaches these kids more of that kind of bonding, team atmosphere, and the relationships that they can build.” He continued later,

I just noticed the house league, it was not a big build up, it's one day. We had a practice during the week and it was early in the morning, and kids never really got close. It was never really any closeness; we spent the whole season on a team, but the kids only saw each other twice a week, there is just one game. It just never felt like this [rep system].

Kellen held a similar perspective: “What I have seen in the house league system is that there are small relationships with teammates, but it quickly changes; you don't do the tournaments; not as many practices. They seem to form a better bond here [in rep].” Doug acknowledged the same challenges with house league and further noted, “The thing with rep, too, is that you continue to move on together; it becomes a close-knit little community.” These friendships were viewed as important for today, as Katharine explained, “friendships help keep them out of trouble. They are busy and active doing things with kids that have like-minded interests and goals; similar goals and friendships that last.” Respondents also acknowledged the importance of friendships for their children's future well-being. Here, Kristen said, “Connections, to be successful in life I think you need connections. If you don't have those relationships it's tough to build that network of friends.” In sum, Russ said, “the team is a kind of metaphor for life. In everything you do in life you have to work with other people.” This sense of the team experience aiding in teaching life lessons was prevalent.

Overall, parents seemed to view the benefits of rep hockey participation strategically. The ultimate benefit of enrollment often focused on learning *life lessons/skills*. Joe indicated that, “teaching a child how to be successful just builds those life skills that they can carry through with everything, with everything they're going to need to do in life.” Further, Fred explained that in rep hockey, “You are learning to respect each other, respect the coaches, respect the other teams, other facilities; trying to give these life lessons to kids early is very important.” Damon said, “Teaching that hard work equals rewards and success, that's not a hockey lesson that's a life lesson.” Damon later spoke of the incredible highs that can be experienced in rep sport, but also, “some of the biggest disappointments. But I think that teaches you about life ... I think there are things that we [parents] can teach him and others that life has to teach him; rep sport is the best arena to do that.” To this point, Doug offered that, “in rep they know their wins and they know their losses and they know how to suck them both up; you can celebrate both.”

The utility of grounding these *life lessons/skills* in their children through rep hockey at a young age was viewed as a foundation for developing productive citi-

zens in the future. Jacob explained that in rep hockey players learn “things that are associated with sportsmanship, being a good citizen if you will, being a contributing member of society.” Damon further explained that, “for my wife and I the goal is to raise our kids as productive citizens and expose them to different circumstances and different situations and teach them how we believe is the appropriate way to react to them.” Here, Erin echoed these sentiments noting, “they can get so much from playing rep hockey, like responsibility ... it’s [responsibility] something that is part of being a high-functioning adult later in life.”

Discussion and Conclusion

Understanding the parental perceptions of attributes and consequences of competing in rep hockey is important for managers of youth rep sport organizations. Here, initial and ongoing participation could be contingent upon these perceptions. Thus, the purpose of this study was to achieve a better understanding of the perceived attributes and consequences or benefits of youth rep hockey participation from the perspective of the elite athletes’ parents. The study began by posing three research questions: (RQ 1) What perceived attributes do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey?; (RQ 2) What perceived consequences or psychosocial benefits do parents associate with enrolling their child in rep level youth hockey?; and finally, (RQ3) How do the attributes and consequences relate to one another?

Our findings support expectancy-value theories of behavior. Specifically, through the linking of attributes to particular consequences via the laddering interview technique, important insights into the nature of parental decision-making about youth sport participation are uncovered. For example, parent respondents’ decision to enroll their child into youth rep hockey seems tied to the attainment of benefits in the form of learning life lessons/skills (to become productive citizens), enhanced hockey skill development (leading to improved confidence), friendship development, learned discipline/accountability and increased work ethic.

One of the overriding sentiments among respondents was that the *life lessons/skills* resulting from rep hockey might benefit the player throughout their life. This finding seems to be aligned with a functionalist theoretical lens in terms of the role of sport in society. Within this social theory, sport is seen to contribute to positive youth development and is necessary for the efficient operation of society (Coakley, 2011). Functionalist perspectives have been criticized for over stating the benefits of sport in society and for failing to engage a more critical viewpoint of sport. Nevertheless, parent respondents in our study seemed to believe in a kind of “guardian angel effect,” where sport participation “will guide young people in success-oriented and civic-centered directions throughout their lives” (Coakley, 2011, p. 308). Whether such an effect is more prevalent in rep sports versus recreational pursuits cannot be determined here, and warrants further investigation in a future research study.

What did become evident from the current study's data, however, was respondents' perception of rep hockey as a vehicle to promote the skills, ideals and character to assist in the development of socially secure individuals later in life. These findings are consistent with previous research (Coakley, 2006; Hutchinson, Baldwin, & Caldwell, 2003; Schwab et al., 2010). Teaching this ethos at a young age, in a sporting environment, was recognized from a macro *life lesson/skills* perspective. Indeed, the importance of sport delivering life lessons is acknowledged by Green and Chalip (1998): "When parents choose a particular program for their child, they are not merely selecting from among the alternatives in a single activity; they are selecting from among a range of activities" (p.106).

This strategic perspective on the benefits of sport participation led sociologist, Richard Giulianotti (2004), to coin the term sport evangelists. Sport evangelists are the supporters of youth sport participation who view sport in "essential terms" and as a positive "developmental" tool (Coakley, 2011, p.307). Specifically, Coalter (2007) noted benefits of youth sport participation to include personal character development and fostering of social capital leading to future vocational accomplishments. Coakley, (2011) described these benefits in terms of a fertilizer effect, whereby sport experiences shape "character and potential will grow in a socially desirable way" (p. 308). Ogden and Warneke's (2010) study of elite baseball players is consistent with Recours, Souville, and Griffet (2004) who note that sport "allows participants to become members of a social world to be linked by shared perspectives ... that go beyond a desire to compete" (p. 4). In the current study, parents of the youth rep hockey players seemed to embrace the idea of rep hockey nourishing their child to achieve and fulfill potential in the future.

If rep hockey is viewed as a vehicle to teach life skills it is important to make sure the "right" lessons are being taught. For example, research on experiences in sport officiating have identified fear of physical harm as a stressor faced by those managing the games (Dorsch & Paskevicij, 2007). Similarly, verbal abuse was noted by Goldsmith and Williams (1992) as an impediment to role satisfaction. Given that coaches and other individuals associated with a youth team must assume leadership and teaching roles (Misener & Danylchuk, 2009), the behaviors of these stakeholders are going to contribute to the life lessons learned by youth rep hockey participants. The need for constructive role models to deal with both positive (i.e., winning, community contributions), and negative (i.e., losing, poor officiating calls) sporting situations to teach valued life lessons is paramount. Researchers (e.g., Joessar, Hein, & Hagger, 2012; Ntoumanis, Taylor, & Thøgersen, 2012) have identified the important role coaches play in facilitating positive youth sport experiences and long-term personal development.

A fundamental challenge that exists for managers operating within a youth sporting system is to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders (e.g., consumers, sponsors, volunteer coaches, and executive board members) (Schwab et al., 2010). Furthermore, Schwab et al. stated that "meeting customer expectations with re-

gard to youth sport services is important because it can increase stakeholder satisfaction, which leads to increased loyalty to a recreation agency [or sport agency]” (p. 44). We suggest a similar sentiment to that of Schawb et al. (2010), where management could focus on enhancing parents’ youth sport experience, as “they are the ones who will make the final decisions about their children’s future participation” (p. 47).

The findings provide a baseline for future studies designed to assess parental motivation when enrolling children into high level youth sports, specifically rep hockey. The body of knowledge in this area is currently limited. Studies that have been conducted on parental roles in promoting youth sport participation typically consider sport in general rather than elite level competition. To our knowledge, no studies could be found that consider the drivers for parents to enroll their children into rep hockey. Further, existing research on sport participation, in general, tends to focus on development, motivation, and attrition. Again, there is limited inquiry around the meanings of rep level sport to parents, who ultimately are the decision-makers in this consumption choice.

An interesting future study would be to reproduce the current investigation on parents of house league hockey players. Understanding similarities and differences sought by the parents of rep and non-rep hockey players could be significant. Further, replicating the study with parents of youth rep participants in other team sports such as soccer, baseball and basketball could be of interest. Finally, conducting a similar investigation with parents of elite youth athletes competing in individual sports such as tennis, golf and swimming might provide interesting revelations of different drivers for these two (team vs. individual sport) parental groups.

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