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“We’re not the same”: A composite vignette on pregnancy and motherhood for elite athlete mothers in and out of funding programmes

Massey, K., Whitehead, A.

Liverpool John Moores University - Copperas Hill

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Massey, K.L., & Whitehead, A.E

Liverpool John Moores University

Introduction

Today, pregnancy is often viewed as a temporary phase allowing a break from the physical and mental pressures of high-performance sport rather than career closure. Yet, obtaining the elite athlete mother identity is not without struggle. A cultural shift sees sporting organisations developing contracts and policies to support the success of the post-partum return. Although there is much research on elite athlete mothers within professional contracts or in receipt of funding it has yet to explore how experiences differ between elite athlete mothers with and without these financial agreements. The present study aims to provide insight into the disparity between support of elite athletes with and without National Governing Body funding in hopes of informing future policy, provisions and practices for those elite athlete mothers who fall short of funding.

Method

This study took on a qualitative approach, creating composite vignettes using extracts from the raw data of a published study containing three semi-structured interviews exploring pregnancy and postpartum experiences of a funded Paralympian and an unfunded Olympian. Bengtsson’s (2016) 4-stage content analysis was used to find disparities between the two elite athlete mothers. Stage 1 involved reading and rereading transcripts. Stage 2 removed extraneous data. Stage 3 the first author coded quotations and consulted the wider research team to group codes into topics. In stage 4 quotes were used to construct an initial composite vignette involving a conversation between the participants. Using member reflections, a co-constructed composite vignette was created.

Results

A co-constructed composite vignette involving a discussion between two elite athlete mothers, one receiving funding and the other not was presented. Topics such as views on sport as a hobby or job, competition and qualification and the relationship with the NGB highlight distinctions between being an elite athlete mother in and outside of funding structures. Further topics highlight the dichotomy of sport vs motherhood, discriminatory policies and gender of performance directors.

Discussion

This current study highlights disparity between elite athlete mothers in and outside of funding structures. Results indicate the need for further change within policy, provision and practice to encompass athlete mothers who meet the definition of elite but not the requirements for funding. Simple improvements in competition and training opportunities and in NGB communication may enhance the experiences of unfunded elite athlete mothers.

Bengtsson, M. (2016). How to plan and perform a qualitative study using content analysis.

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