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Finish...Whatever it Takes: Considering Pain and Pleasure in the Ironman Triathlon (A Socio-Cultural Analysis)

Project Summary

Stemming from my own involvement in Ironman triathlons, I became interested in ideas of *pain* and *pleasure* as social constructs. How might ideas about these things in the Ironman context relate to ideas about pain and pleasure circulating in the broader socio-cultural context? Furthermore, what might these relationships tell us about contemporary understandings of *bodies* and *identities*?

The ideas about pain and pleasure that I uncovered were significantly shaped by the importance placed on finishing. Finishing an event resulted in the acquisition of an *Ironman identity*, an identity that was suggested to provide *cultural capital* since Ironman triathletes are often represented as excellent examples of health, self-empowerment, and discipline — highly valued characteristics in a neoliberal political and social context. With the importance placed on finishing, there seems to be a mostly uncritical promotion/adoption of the “no pain, no gain” philosophy. That said, many interview participants stressed the importance of negotiating the difference between *positive* and *negative* kinds of pain. Paradoxically, despite critical awareness of the different kinds of sport-related pain, injury stories were still prevalent. Thus, the importance placed on becoming an Ironman seems to mostly trump the state of participants’ bodies and their overall health. It also shaped ideas about pleasure. Very few of my participants suggested that they found sensuous pleasure in their participation; rather, they found pleasure in the challenge of overcoming “limits,” finishing the event, and reaping the rewards that are perceived to come along with that.

Research Methods

I conducted interviews with 19 Ironman triathletes. On average, these interviews lasted two hours. I recorded the conversations and then transcribed them. I also incorporated my own Ironman experiences through the inclusion of training journals and race reports I kept when participating in the sport. Mediated representations of the Ironman — NBC broadcasts of the World Championships (1991 to 2010) and a sample of two triathlon-related magazines (1983 to 2010) — helped to contextualize the interview and autobiographical materials. I coded and analyzed the materials in Atlas.ti (qualitative research software).

Research Results

The results here are based on my own interpretations of the qualitative materials gathered. Only 19 people from a limited geographic context (Eastern Ontario) were interviewed. This group represents a very specific demographic — the professional middle class. This reflects the triathlon/endurance sport community but not the general Canadian population. That in mind, I present the following synopsis.

Sport sociology research has revealed the problematic ways that pain and injury are seen to be a “natural” part of sport and how coaches, sport administrators, and athletes themselves can contribute to this notion.

The people with whom I spoke, however, contended that getting injured would preclude the possibility of finishing an event and so they sought to carefully negotiate the different kinds of pain in order to avoid injury. At the same time, there seems to be disconnection between critical awareness and lived experience because injuries are still quite prevalent. I estimated that between the 19 participants and myself, we likely spent upwards of \$40,000 per year on sports medicine services, a number that is part of the often under-estimated costs of sports-related injuries in Canada annually (White, 2004). Some of my participants talked about the use of NSAIDs (e.g., Advil, ibuprofen) as a pain-management and/or pain-treatment strategy. This is concerning given some of the documented side effects of excessive use of NSAIDs, including alterations in kidney function, gastric bleeding, and the increased possibility of hyponatremia (Gorski, Cadore, & Santana Pinto, 2009). There were also cautionary notes about NSAIDs in the triathlon magazines analyzed, suggesting it is a concern for the community. This further emphasizes the paradoxical nature of holding up Ironman athletes as examples of good health.

Pleasure, in the materials gathered, was constructed in instrumental ways (i.e., notions of challenge, achievement, rewards, and recognition). Considering pleasure in such limited ways is prevalent in the fitness industry more generally (Smith-Maguire, 2008) so perhaps these results are not that surprising; they are, however, no less important. When focus is placed more on, for example, the achievement of finishing than how one is experiencing one's body while being physically active, there is a greater chance of becoming injured and having to deal with the related short and long-term health impacts that injury can have.

Policy Implications

There seems a need for more thoughtful discussion about sport/fitness-related pains and pleasures. In focusing more pointedly on bodily experiences in, versus outcomes of, sport participation we can initiate a conversation that does not seem to be occurring at the present time. With an increased focus on long-term athlete development (LTAD) in Canada (including ideas of being “active for life”) there needs to be, for example, more thought put into how different stakeholders in sport can talk about pain and injury (and connections to health since sport participation is being promoted as part of “healthy” lifestyle). At the moment, most reference to pain/injury assume that injury is a normal part of athletic involvement and that to deal with it, athletes should have a sport medicine strategy as part of their training plans. Official documents should include discussion of the possible costs of sport participation, rather than promoting sport as unquestionably healthy. Admittedly, incorporating these kinds of discussions will not be easy as evidenced by the many different (and sometimes competing) ways that pain was talked about in the context of my study. To ignore such discussions altogether, however, does a disservice to those who are participating in sport at any level and ignores the possibility that one can participate in sport without experiencing negative kinds of pain and injury. Finally, one of the stated objectives of LTAD is to promote “physical literacy”; it seems to me that this should include stage-appropriate discussions related to bodily experiences of pain (as above) and pleasure — with a view to move beyond pleasure being connected to achievement and rewards.

There are two places that such information could begin to be circulated: coaching certification programming (through the Coaching Association of Canada) and in Canadian sport organizations' long-term athlete development models. For example, could a discussion of sport-related pain become a part of all coach training materials developed by the CAC? Can we extend the currently limited ideas about sport-related pleasure?

Next Steps

The idea that “anyone can do an Ironman” emerged in my research. We must be cognizant of a shift in what is considered “normal” in terms of physical activity to more extreme ends of a continuum, as this will no doubt effect how people view their own bodies and the bodies of others around them. There remain bigger questions about the growth in Ironman and other “extreme” fitness practices as a form of leisure: what has been going on over the past 30 years that contributes to the continued growth of these kinds of events? It seems that people are beginning to expect more and more extreme things of their bodies, something that is readily promoted through mainstream and sport-specific media, with a focus on outcome as opposed to process. This, combined with a lack of any meaningful discussion about sport-related pain and pleasure, might result in a scenario where the costs of participation begin to outweigh the benefits, something that sport organizers and policy-makers should wish to avoid.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

At this point in time, I believe that there are three stakeholder groups who would benefit from this and future information: (1) Sport Canada’s long-term athlete development group; (2) Coaching Association of Canada; and, (3) Triathlon Canada (and potentially the provincial federations as well).

References

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