

Opting out of youth sports: how can we understand the social processes involved?

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Opting out of youth sports: how can we understand the social processes involved?

Sports researchers often examine the subject of youth quitting sports through quantitative surveys using fixed-choice questionnaires. In this paper, we analyze 1,248 descriptions offered by youth in the survey Young in Oslo 2018 when asked to explain why they had left organized sports. We examine their reasons for opting out of sports and how different reasons may interact. Similar to studies with fixed-choice questions, we found both sports-internal and sports-external reasons for quitting. Our main finding concerns how sports-internal and sports-external processes appear together and reinforce the challenges some youth experience in their day-to-day lives in terms of their sports participation.

Keywords: youth sports; participation rates; sports dropout; sports attrition; sports withdrawal; exclusion; belonging

Introduction

This paper examines the reasons that youth offer for opting out of *organized* sports and how we can understand the social processes involved, both relating to sports and to other arenas in youths' lives. In this sense, our analysis aims for a holistic understanding of opting out processes. With a few exceptions (e.g., Gatouillat, Griffet, & Travert, 2019), most studies regarding organized sports to date have concentrated on social mechanisms within sports clubs (e.g., Quedsted et al., 2013) and/or have applied a methodology in which youth respond to reasons that researchers have predefined (e.g., Butcher, Lindner, & Johns, 2002; Rottensteiner, Laakso, Pihlaja, & Kontinen, 2013). In contrast to previous research, we analyze the reasons youth offer when asked to describe why they have left organized sports in their own words. We see their answers as representing reasons that can be understood within a culture (in this case, that of Norway) that highly values sports and physical activity (Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2016).

To avoid the normative concern that accompanies the dropout concept, we have chosen to discuss "opting-out" of sports, which accentuates that youth have reasons for leaving and a form of agency that will always be part of the process of opting out; "agency" in this context refers to the will to affect their own lives through the means available in their

particular social context (White & Wyn, 1998). Our research question is as follows: how do youth describe their reasons for opting out of organized sports, and how do different reasons interact and relate to social processes in youths' everyday lives?

As part of a comprehensive youth survey, youth who no longer participated in organized sports but had previously participated during their teens were asked via an open-ended question to describe why they quit. A major advantage of open-ended questions is the respondents' opportunity to answer with their own choice of words instead of limiting them to a fixed manner of thinking (Wankel & Kreisel, 1985). The answers in our material were typically short (one to three sentences) and, in some cases, consisted of only a single word. As qualitative data, their answers were "thin" and only offered glimpses into the processes and negotiations behind the youths' stated reasons. Because the answers are drawn from a large-scale representative survey, we see them as representing a range of possible reasons for the youth population. Other researchers have used similar data to examine social phenomena and processes (e.g., Stefansen & Smette, 2006; Krange & Pedersen, 1999; Stefansen, Smette, & Bossy, 2014; Thoresen & Øverlien, 2009), and we share the view with these studies that while the data are limited in depth, they still offer possibilities for grasping width and complexity (Stefansen, in press); as such, they may further understanding of the social processes that are involved in youths' opting out of sports' decisions and how these processes may be linked. Accordingly, our analysis aims to further the knowledge of how youth understand processes related to opting out of sports.

Background

Sports Participation in Norway

Our empirical context is Norway, a country with high participation rates in child and youth sports (van Tuyckom, 2016). A recent representative study found that 93% of Norwegian teenagers aged 13-18 were or had been active in a sports club (Bakken, 2017). These high numbers point toward organized sports as a normalized part of growing up in Norway (Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2018) and as indicative of the general cultural approval of sports (Goksøyr, 2008). Sports' position in Norwegian society is also mirrored in the country's high level of public expenditure on sports and the integration of sports into more overarching policy areas, such as public health and social policies (Kulturdepartementet, 2012).

The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports (NIF) is the umbrella organization that organizes all national sports federations in Norway. NIF distributes the majority of the public means that are granted to sports, both by assigning access to sports facilities among member clubs and by redistributing public grants. The organization is a part of the third sector, and its primary effort on the local level is based on volunteers. NIF's institutional legitimacy is primarily based on two pillars, elite sports and children's mass sports, and the idea that these two mutually benefit each other (Hanstad, 2011; Støckel, Strandbu, Solenes, Jørgensen, & Fransson, 2010).

Organized sports participation decreases markedly during adolescence. While boys' participation in Oslo drops from 67% in grade eight to 31% in grade thirteen, the corresponding girls' rate drops from 57% to 21% (Strandbu, Bakken, & Stefansen, under review). Youth opting out of sports creates a potential legitimacy issue for Norwegian sports (Hanstad, 2011). The decline suggests that the social meaning of youth sports participation changes over time, from being more or less self-evident to becoming an active choice and has garnered concern from state authorities in Norway (Kulturdepartementet, 2012).

“Dropout” as a Phenomenon

“Dropout” from youth sports has been widely researched. The social mechanisms involved when youth leave sports are complex and can be influenced by intrapersonal, interpersonal, structural, and broader societal characteristics (Crane & Temple, 2015). In their literature review, Crane and Temple (2015) suggested five common clusters of reasons for youth sports attrition: (1) lack of enjoyment; (2) poor perception of physical or sports competence; (3) strong or conflicting social pressures (e.g., both for participation in sports and related to other arenas); (4) competing priorities; and (5) physical factors, such as injuries and maturation. The two most recent reviews of withdrawal from organized youth sports (Crane & Temple, 2015; Balish, McLaren, Rainham, & Blanchard, 2014) showed that the reasons for withdrawal can be what Gould (2007) considers both within and outside youths' control and may be related to reasons both internal and external to the sports club. Many approaches to youth sports withdrawal emphasize the social and psychological dynamics within the sports club environment (e.g. Sarazzin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Cury, 2002). A key influence upon the choice to opt out of sports is a perceived lack of sports-related competence (Rottensteiner et al., 2013). Youth often cite feeling too much pressure to perform or feeling

that they are not competent enough as important reasons for opting out of sports (Carlman, Wagnsson, & Patriksson, 2013; Seippel, 2005). The balance between enjoying and disliking competitiveness is also an important variation among youths still engaged in organized sports (MacPhail & Kirk, 2006).

Although previous research has mainly devoted attention to characteristics of participants and the sports club environment (Balish et al., 2014), Lindner, Johns, and Butcher (1991) have suggested that the primary explanations for youth opting out of sports is the choice to prioritize other activities. When youth are asked to rate the importance of various reasons to opt out of sports, they attach special importance to prioritizing other activities and a lack of fun (Seippel, 2005; Rottensteiner et al., 2013). Among other activities, youth (especially girls) consistently rate schoolwork as an important reason to opt out of sports (Butcher et al., 2002) because of time scheduling- or time demand issues (Gatouillat et al, 2019)

Often, youth rate a number of other reasons as being influential but less important. Some examples include injuries, parental discouragement, sports being too expensive, a dislike of their coach or peers, overly long distances to training facilities, or a lack of opportunity within the club to continue (Butcher et al., 2002; Molinero, Salguero, Álvarez, & Márques, 2006). Other studies have reported that having fun, feeling joyful, and being with friends are the most important reasons youths cite for engaging in sports (Seippel, Sisjord, & Strandbu, 2016). As shown in a qualitative study of 14-year-olds, one of the main positives elements about participating in sports was ensuring a safe position among one's peers because sports participation secures social belonging in a period beset by shifting alliances and changing relations (Strandbu, Stefansen, & Smette, 2016). This situation points to how organized sports have the potential to give children and youth a sense of *belonging* that is crucial in their lives (Baumeister, Leary, & Steinberg, 1995), a theme that we will return to in the discussion.

To summarize, sports can be an important social arena for youth. However, as they grow older, reasons both internal and external to sports may lead some to opt out. While youth sports participation rates in Norway are high, a significant number of youth still opt out.

Material and Methods

We analyzed data from a large-scale school-based survey, *Young in Oslo 2018*, distributed to nearly all lower and upper secondary schools in Oslo. The survey was part of the national comprehensive youth survey YoungData¹. A total of 84 schools participated. The response rate was 74%, comprising two-thirds of teenagers in Oslo (Bakken, 2018). One open-ended question was included, asking the respondents to briefly describe why they quit organized sports. The goal was to test the applicability of previously employed predetermined reasons for opting out of sports.

All respondents were asked whether they participated in organized sports. Of the initial sample of 10,788 students from upper secondary school (16- to 19-year-olds), one-third proceeded to the section with questions regarding sports. Among those 3,068 who received questions related to sports participation, 1,390 reported that they had previously participated in sports during their teenage years but had quit; 1,289 of these respondents answered the open-ended question, “Could you give a short description of why you quit organized sports?” (response rate: 93%). Answers that were impossible to interpret, that were obvious “nonsense,” or where the respondent had clearly not answered the question were coded as missing ($n = 37$). Four participants were excluded from the analyses because they did not report their gender. The final sample consisted of 1,248 respondents.

Table 1 shows the sports backgrounds of the participants, which were consistent with the general pattern in Norway of football/soccer being the most popular sport among teenagers, followed by handball among girls and cross-country skiing among boys. The respondents had quit organized sports after the transition from children’s to youths’ sports at the ages of 13 to 15 (grades 8-10, boys = 58%, girls = 65%) or 16 to 19 (grades 11-13, boys = 42%, girls = 35%). We used information on school grade as a proxy for age. Because our knowledge of when the respondents quit sports is limited to this sorting, the opportunities for analyzing responses according to age is limited and will not be presented herein.

[Table 1]

¹ YoungData is the most comprehensive national youth survey in Norway. For more information, see the website <http://www.ungdata.no/English>.

We analyzed the material using a bottoms-up approach and a step-by-step procedure with the aim of extracting meaningful categories of reasons that would remain close to the life-worlds of the participants. The analysis was conducted in line with core ideas of Hill et al.'s (2005) "consensual qualitative research" (CQR) method, which was primarily designed for analyzing interview data. The aim of CQR is to compress large amounts of qualitative material into a few categories or themes through an iterative process of reaching consensus within the research group. Inspired by CQR, the analysis proceeded as follows.

- 1) The first and second authors and a research assistant blind-coded the material separately. The coding was done manually in MS Excel, and all responses were sorted based on themes and terms used by the informants. Themes that overlapped or were related were then arranged into larger categories of reasons.
- 2) Each round of coding concluded with the coders comparing the coding, discussing each individual case that was not coded similarly until reaching consensus. The coding system was then discussed among the research group that made decisions on how to revise the structure of categories and themes. Then, the coders blind-coded again.
- 3) Based on discussions and consensus reached within the research group, the categories, what themes they included, and the coding were consecutively revised. The basic ideas of the CQR, thus, were followed by involving several of the researchers in the coding and categorization processes, carrying out coding and categorizations in several rounds, and revising the coding principles and categories based on the discussions and consensus reached within the research group.

Results: Reasons for Opting Out of Sports

We identified nine main reasons for opting out of sports in the material. In the following, we present the organization of these reasons by describing what themes occurred in each answer category.² Table 2 lists the reasons according to their frequency, starting with the most

² The category "other reasons" consists of a variety of themes that (1) occurred so seldom in the material that separating them into categories did not make sense and/or (2) did not fit the other categories of reasons that had been established. This analytical category will therefore not be discussed in this paper. The category includes the following themes: "moving or traveling," "issues with body image," "the team is not good enough," "logistical challenges," "friends quit," "family issues," and "weather" as well as other reasons that only appeared once.

frequently stated reason. The total number of reasons stated in the material was higher than the number of participants because the answers often contained more than one reason. In total, 41% of girls listed two or more reasons for opting out ($M = 1.46$) while 33% of boys did the same ($M = 1.33$). When we controlled for this difference, we found the gender difference to be significant for only three of the categories: lack of enjoyment, injury and illness, and lack of suitable options in the club. We will return to how the significant gender differences may be interpreted in the Discussion.

[Table 2]

First, we present reasons that are internal to sports; in the second section, we describe sports-external reasons. In both sections, the reasons will be presented in the order from most to least common. In the third section, we describe the category “lack of enjoyment”, which is often included in research on drop-outs but can be difficult to interpret concerning what meaning the informants assign to this feeling. In accordance with CQR, we have attempted to keep as close as possible to the respondents’ descriptions in the analysis. As part of the analysis, we will therefore outline which sub-themes we have sorted into our nine main categories of reasons (all main reasons are shown in **bold**).

Reasons Related to Sports-Internal Processes

Some of the participants pointed to processes related to the sports activity itself: how sports are organized or the culture in the team or group. With no significant differences between boys and girls, 18% of the informants described how sports had changed in a direction that made the culture and organization **too competitive/serious**. They expressed this idea in five recurring and largely overlapping themes. One common theme was “too much focus on skill/not being good enough”, as in this case:

I felt like I wasn’t good enough. (Boy, 16)

The quote illustrates how too much focus on one’s abilities can create a sense of not fulfilling expectations and may lead youth to associate sports participation with negative emotions.

A second theme of answers categorized as **too competitive/serious** was related to the volume of training. Some informants would count the days or hours they had practice to illustrate how the training volume increased:

I quit handball because the team started to aim higher than what I personally wanted. I was elected to play for the first team right before I quit. Handball was something I did to have fun, not to aim at becoming a professional. It later became too much for me to train Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, and every other Friday, in addition to matches on the weekends. I chose to prioritize school, leisure, and friends over handball and had to make a choice when it became too strict. (Girl, 17)

The informant described a discrepancy between her ambitions and the ambitions of the club and the training volume that followed, thus, leading to detachment from the sports organization. It is interesting to note that this girl had been elected to play for the first team even though this was not in accordance with her own ambitions. In the Norwegian public debate about youth sports, a common claim is that youth should be allowed heavy training loads to develop into future elite athletes (Lønnebotn, 2019). As this quote illustrates, however, not all those who are considered sports talents are motivated to participate beyond playing sports for fun.

This scenario is also interesting in terms of the third theme: reports of feeling downgraded or experiencing favoritism:

Too little resources were granted the teams that played for fun. The coaches were not motivated. (Boy, 18)

The quote shows how prioritizing talented and ambitious athletes may come at the cost of what the club offers to those who are not seen as determined or skilled enough. Seeing other athletes enjoy better conditions may lead youth to feeling demoted and unappreciated within their club, instilling a sense of alienation from the sports arena.

This sense is also related to the theme of pressure to compete/perform/achieve results. This was often presented as an escalating issue, as in the example below:

[I] quit when the team started to aim for elite play, and the pressure to achieve increased, since I was never any good at handball and just trained because I liked it. The pressure to perform made it difficult to continue because I felt like my teammates looked down on me. (Girl, 16)

This description illustrates how the increased pressure to perform was not simply an issue in itself but also affected the group dynamics and the relationships between youth, thus, leading some to feel excluded from the peer group and the activity.

As youth grow older, sports become more competitive and serious. The themes presented within this category largely overlap and all point to this process. These organizational changes did not necessarily correspond with the youths' own ambitions, what they wished sports to be for themselves, or how much effort and time they would have liked to dedicate to sports. This may also lead to alienation and exclusion by peers and coaches who have adopted the culturally dominant idea of youth sports as a serious and ambitious activity and can lead some youths to feel alienated from sports.

Another sports-internal reason was **lack of suitable options within the sports club**, reported by 9% of the informants. Almost twice as many girls as boys claimed this reason to explain why they opted out of sports. The responses mainly consisted of three themes, one of which was how the team had dissolved, often followed by a lack of tempting alternatives:

The team dissolved. [I] Changed teams, but it did not fit me. (Girl, 16)

This aspect points to how dissolving groups and creating new ones might disrupt youths' experience of sports as an important social arena. Another related cause for withdrawal within this category was not having opportunities at the correct skill or age level:

Had to switch from girls 15 to girls 17 where I did not know anyone. (Girl, 16)

The quote shows that being part of a team with people with whom youths have stable relationships and whom they feel they know is an important aspect of sports participation. Lacking opportunities at a matching skill level led some respondents to feel a lack of belonging to the group, as in this case. The quote below emphasizes how group connectedness and social bonds with peers may even be more important for youths than participating at a skill level that the coaches perceive to be appropriate for the individual.

I was the best of those at my age and got moved up a level. There, I was the worst player and got teased and ridiculed. In addition, they were more developed than I, since I hadn't hit puberty yet. (Boy, 17)

The third theme in the **lack of suitable options in the club** category was bad organization or a lack of organizational resources in the club, such as coaches, training hours, and information:

We didn't get a coach or training hours, so our team had to train with the team one year younger than us. The coach there didn't want to train us, so the team dissolved. (Girl, 17)

The quotes above point to how a lack of opportunities within the sports club for many was connected to a lack of belonging as well and illustrate how structural characteristics within sports may also affect the peer relationships that individuals have within sports clubs.

The concept of belonging leads to the interpersonal reasons for opting out of sports. Among the participants, 7% reported being **socially unhappy** in their sports clubs in relation to their peers, with no significant difference between girls and boys. One common theme was opting out of sports because of experiences of being bullied or discriminated against:

[I got] bad comments from my teammates; I was really upset. (Boy, 17)

Others were less precise and reported a negative social environment in general or just being unhappy and not fitting in with their peers in the club:

I didn't have anyone to be with. I wasn't bullied or anything, but everyone else who attended gymnastics had started out together, so it was really difficult to get to know them. There were others there as well who didn't start together with the rest, but I didn't click well with them. So it really wasn't that good socially. (Girl, 16)

While the quotes above describe interpersonal challenges with peers, 6% of the respondents also described adult-related **negative experiences in the sports club** as a reason for quitting sports. There were no significant gender differences for this theme either. Some of the negative experiences were directly and explicitly linked to coaches:

The coach yelled at my family in front of other adults. (Girl, 17)

Further, several participants mentioned negative experiences with other adults who often had formal roles in the sports club:

The board of the club was bad and unfair, which resulted in several people leaving the club. (Girl, 18)

As previous research has indicated, social relations are an important aspect of youths' motives for participating in sports. Thus, interpersonal experiences and relationships with peers and adults alike affect their motives for opting out of sports, which is not surprising. These findings illustrate how several processes within the sports club can affect youths' decisions to leave organized sports. There are also processes external to sports that may affect youth sports participation, described next.

Reasons Related to Sports-External Processes

Time and/or school pressure was the largest category within our material, described by 31% of the informants, surprisingly without significant gender differences. One common theme in these answers included descriptions about having to or wanting to spend more time on schoolwork:

[Sports] took too much time. I had to put more work into school to keep my grades up. [Sports] took up about three hours each day, so it was a lot. (Boy, 17)

As this quote illustrates, a common theme was how school took up an increasing amount of time as youth grow older and how, at some point, they had to choose. Two related themes were general stress in their lives—which meant they had had to reduce the number of activities they were involved in—or too little time in general. As the girl below describes, the combined demands from school and sports may become impossible to meet:

I quit because it just became too much. School took up too much of my free time, and it was impossible for me to do well at school and be social and active at the same time. Football also started to get serious, and I didn't want that. Norwegian schools are hard, considering you have to choose which secondary high school to attend, which will change your whole life when you're only 15 or 16 years old. (Girl, 16)

This example highlights how many youth decide to opt out of sports when they experience increased school demands at the same time as sports becoming more serious and time

consuming. This finding is an important nuance of previous fixed-response research on drop-outs that only showed that youth experience either general time constraints or school-demands as important reasons to opt out of sports.

Furthermore, 12% described **injuries or illness** as reasons for quitting sports. Girls reported this twice as often as boys. Because respondents often did not specify whether the injuries were sports-related or not, we chose to sort them under reasons related to external processes of sports. This choice may be contested; if the majority of injuries are actually sports-related, they should accordingly be categorized as internal to sports. The sorting of this category must therefore be seen as a simplification due to a lack of information in the responses.

In some cases, the participants simply named or described their injury or illness, thus, indicating that why this led them to quit sports was self-explanatory. In other instances, the participants did not specify the injury or illness, just its consequences:

A knee injury made me miss practice for a while, which made me realize that football was not something I had to do anymore. (I think I felt that I lagged behind, and I struggled with healing my knees, so it was painful to run.). (Boy, 17)

This response reveals how withdrawal from sports was the result of a combination of reasons, with an injury being the triggering reason in this case; it also illustrates how youth, in general, might take sports participation, before an injury, more or less for granted, and that (in this case) the break due to an injury contributed to the respondent becoming aware that sports were not a necessary part of life. Even though injuries can be considered force majeure reasons to quit sports, this quote points to how injuries might also lead to a process of feeling excluded due to not being able to perform athletically at the desired level. This illustrates how skills and performance are connected to feeling a sense of belonging to the team.

In contrast, some informants reported specific mental health problems or serious illnesses as their reason for withdrawal. In these cases, it was clear that sports participation had become impossible and indeed irrelevant; in some cases, the respondent presented withdrawal as a necessary measure to prevent further health problems, as recommended by health professionals. Here, quitting sports was not necessarily a choice to opt out and should be considered external to sports.

Among other sports-external reasons, 10% of the informants reported opting out to **prioritize other leisure activities**, with no significant gender difference. Some described that they wanted to prioritize having more leisure time in general without relating their desire directly to other specified organized activities. Some added a wish to prioritize relationships outside of sports:

[I] wanted to prioritize other activities and get more time with [my] family and friends. (Girl, 17)

Others reported opting out of sports because they chose to prioritize specific leisure activities. Only a small group ($n = 28$) reported that they wanted to spend time training by themselves, highlighting the opportunity to determine when and where to exercise.

As is apparent from the quotations, the youths' responses often consisted of several intertwined reasons for opting out of sports. Reasons internal to sports included sports being too competitive/serious, experiencing a lack of suitable options within the sports club, being socially unhappy, or having bad experiences in the sports club. Reasons we have termed external to sports included experiences of time and school pressure, injuries and illness, and a desire to prioritize other leisure activities.

As for the last category in the material, we refrained from classifying it as either internal or external to sports given that it can be placed along both dimensions. This category also illustrates how different reasons and combinations of reasons can lead to the same feeling, which itself becomes a reason to drop out from sports: a lack of interest or joy.

Lack of Interest or Joy

Almost one-third (31%) of the respondents stated that they had **lost interest or joy** in sports. While 39% of the boys reported this as a reason to opt out from sports, a significantly lower proportion of the girls, 26%, claimed the same. Many of the responses in this category were rather vague and short and included the following themes: got bored or lost motivation, not fun anymore, not for me, and could not bother. Based on these vague responses, it is difficult to point to the specific processes that lead youth to lose interest or joy, as illustrated below:

Because it got boring. (Boy, 16)

However, many responses were more specific and reported a lack of interest or joy combined with a variety of reasons. Many linked this lack of interest or fun with time pressures related to some combination of the amount of training and schoolwork they had to do, various competing demands, and the deterioration of their social environment:

[I] didn't feel like I was any good anymore, [I] didn't fit in at the team anymore, and [I had] lots of schoolwork. [I] lost the joy. (Girl, 17)

This quote points to the fact that both sports-internal reasons, such as increased competitive pressure and seriousness, *and* sports-external reasons (especially schoolwork) may reinforce each other and lead to sports becoming less fun or interesting for youth. The connection between losing interest or joy and an increased competitive focus was frequently reported, as this quote illustrate:

I played to have fun. Suddenly, only the best got to play and everyone focused on winning, and it was not fun anymore. (Boy, 17)

This statement illustrates how a lack of joy may directly result from what happens in the team or sports club. The 185 informants who provided responses that combined a loss of interest or joy with other reasons for opting out were informative to the extent that we can assume a link between the loss of interest or joy and the other responses—most frequently, time-school pressure (27.6% of responses) and sports being too competitive or serious (also 27.6% of responses).

Discussion

Our aim has been to describe various opting-out processes through a qualitative, interpretative analysis of youths' answers to an open-ended question of why they had chosen to quit sports. We conclude that there is a need to view processes internal to sports and processes in other arenas of youths' lives in relation to each other when discussing reasons to opt out of sports. We begin with a comparison of the similarities to previous approaches and recommendations for future studies. Then, we succinctly discuss the significant gender differences found in our analysis. Last, we discuss the implications of the study for understanding youths' motives to participate in or opt out of sports and suggest that the perspective of belonging could offer a fruitful avenue for thinking about organized youth sports and opting out processes.

Comparisons with Fixed-Response Research and Recommendations for Future Studies

Close to one-third of the participants claimed "lack of enjoyment" and "time/school pressure" as reasons for opting out of sports, which accords well with quantitative research on preformulated reasons (e.g., Butcher et al., 2002) and the broader dropout literature on organized youth sports (Crane & Temple, 2015). These reasons were followed by "too competitive or serious," which was mentioned by close to 20% of the participants. The remaining reasons were stated by a lower share of between 6% and 12% of respondents.

While previous research indicates that perceived lack of skills and increased competitive pressure often lead youth to opt out, our results show that the youth in our study pointed to at least two different ways these reasons could *push* them out. Some youth presented competitive pressures fairly pragmatically and wrote about practical issues, such as sports taking up too much of their time and energy, both in terms frequency of trainings and in the required effort involved. Other respondents also connected competitive concerns with feelings of not belonging in the group. The two mechanisms are very different, in that one refers to the structural level (e.g., when, how, and how often trainings are done), while the other points to an interpersonal level (e.g., pressure from coaches, relations to their peers, or a general feeling that they are bad at sports). These details and the complexity of connections are often lost in fixed-choice surveys but emerged clearly in our open-ended responses.

Because our findings indicate that withdrawal often involves several reasons, we recommend that future studies (including those with fixed-choice questionnaires) should be open to the possibility of reporting several reasons. The various reasons also point toward conducting field studies that would follow sports teams over a certain timeframe to grasp processes that lead to continued participation or to leaving sports. We should note that, using our approach, we found several other reasons that typically are not captured in studies with predefined categories. Several of the respondents reported negative experiences in sports that other studies on sports dropout have not included: being socially unhappy with the group (5%), having no suitable option in the club (5%), and having bad experiences in the club (5%).

Our results also highlight the importance of including injuries as a response option in fixed-choice questionnaires. With some exceptions (e.g., Butcher et al., 2002; Enoksen, 2011), injuries have not commonly been included in previous studies. Among our

respondents, 12% mentioned injuries or illness as a reason for opting out of sports, which means that injuries were the fourth most common reason for opting out of sports. Our results revealed multiple mechanisms for injury-related withdrawal. For some, injuries directly prohibited them from further participation in sports, which is how quitting sports due to injuries is often represented in the literature as well (e.g., Enoksen, 2011). Our analysis also illustrates how injuries might keep youth away from sports for a period. Participating in the group may be more difficult after recovery, leading to a weakening of the social ties to the group.

Gendered Motives to Opt Out of Sports

There were significant gender differences for only three of the presented categories: injuries and illness, lack of opportunities, and lack of joy or interest. Regarding the high rates of reported injuries and illness among the girls, it is difficult to conclude whether this is an expression of a sports-internal problem, where girls are more exposed to injuries, or whether this is an expression of a general trend in Norwegian society. We do know that Norwegian girls in upper secondary school tend to be less happy with their health (69.5%) than their male peers (57.7%; Bakken, 2018). Still, the gender difference in injuries and illness needs further examination in the context of organized sports.

Further, due to a lack of opportunities in the sports club, 10% of girls reported opting out of organized sports, whereas 6% of boys mentioned this. A common theme in these responses was a lack of resources, such as training hours and coaches. If this is an indication of Norwegian sports clubs' lack of ability to give girls the same resources and opportunities as boys, it points to a gender discriminatory practice where public funding is not redistributed to girls at the same rate as boys. Distribution of resources within youth mass sports according to gender reveals itself as an important topic for future studies. One might expect this to be a more pressing issue within masculine sports, and further analysis should include information on which sports the youth have withdrawn from. The finding highlights the importance of including "a lack of suitable options" when conducting surveys based on fixed-choice responses, especially if one wishes to examine potential exclusion processes internal to sports for marginalized groups.

The third gender difference was that 39% of the boys mentioned a lack of joy or interest compared to 26% of the girls. This finding is surprising because the literature on

sports participation has shown that girls often are presented as the group who quit sports because they are ‘just not that interested’ (Cooky, 2009). We have not conclusively determined how to interpret this finding. One suggestion could be that boys have a tendency to write shorter and less precise answers than girls, and, accordingly, a significant share of boys have written answers such as ‘boring’, ‘lost interest’, etc. A closer look at this category strengthens this explanation; 67% of the girls who reported a lack of interest or joy reported it in combination with other reasons while only 39% of the boys did the same. This points to an important potential limitation with open-ended survey responses given that the data is vulnerable to how willing and competent the respondent is to give a written response and whether this varies between different groups.

Implications for Understanding and Organizing Sports: Belonging as an Analytical Tool

Having fun and—intertwined with having fun—being with friends and peers while engaging in joyful activities are generally the most often reported reasons for taking part in sports (Seippel et al., 2016). What we have defined as **lost interest or joy** is a category that is frequently included in survey-based research in which youth rate or choose between fixed-choice responses for why they quit sports (Crane & Temple, 2015). The answers categorized as **lost interest or joy** illustrate an important point: what sports clubs offer youth as they grow older does not necessarily correspond with what youth wish and need sports to combine with in other arenas that are important to them. Our findings illuminate how several complex factors, such as interpersonal relationships, structures, and priorities within sports clubs, as well as what happens outside of sports can contribute to or inhibit a sense of belonging and enjoyment in sports among youth. When separating sports-external and sports-internal reasons for youth sports participation, sports-internal reasons to opt out are often highlighted as what is within the reach of sports federations, clubs, and coaches to prevent. Our findings illustrate the need to see sports-internal processes in relation to processes in other arenas that are important in the everyday life of youth.

We suggest that the concept of belonging accentuates some of the meaning related to the processes involved in staying in or opting out of sports. Previous studies have highlighted the significance of *belonging* as an essential part of sports participation (Strandbu et al., 2016). A sense of belonging requires long-lasting, positive, and stable relations (Baumeister et al., 1995). According to Cuervo and Wyn (2014),

In addition to supporting an understanding of the ways in which institutions and formal processes include and exclude (i.e., who ‘belongs’ and who doesn’t) the metaphor of belonging frames an understanding of the efforts youth make to be connected to people, places and issues that matter to them. (p. 903)

This perspective allows for an analysis of the disengagement that follows from exclusion processes (i.e., processes that disrupt a previously felt attachment) and, in the context of this paper, the ways in which organized sports may offer and limit youths’ possibilities for connectedness and meaningful engagement. Several of our findings accentuate the question of belonging (or not) to the sports group. Belonging is a social matter that represents both access to a place and an individual’s ability to come to terms with the discourses and practices at play in that place (Antonsich, 2010). The number of youth who seem to opt out of sports due to what we have termed “sports-internal processes” may indicate that a significant percentage of youth experience sports as an arena that becomes less important for a sense of belonging and social wellness as they grow older because sports participation comes into conflict with other parts of their lives.

To conclude, we find that processes both external and internal to sports may work together in ways that amplify youths’ feelings of not belonging in sports. This has important implications for how youth sports should be organized. If the ambition is to keep as many youth active as possible through organized sports, as is an ambition in many national contexts, youth sports have to be organized in a way that allows youth to balance sports participation with other arenas in their lives.

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