What are youth sports for? Youth sports parenting in working-class communities

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in Sport, Education and Society, March 1 2021, https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2021.1894114

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Abstract

This paper explores youth sports parenting in the context of Norway, focusing on the orientations of parents living in predominantly working-class communities, specifically what they believe youth sports are for. Its particular focus is the ideas and resources that underpin the various positions parents in such communities take toward youth sports. Drawing on qualitative interviews with 19 parents of 13 and 14 year olds, we identify two orientations towards youth sports: the *belonging* orientation, in which youth sports are seen as a means of connecting to a community, and the *structuring* orientation, in which youth sports are primarily used for protection and to provide frames for children, particularly as a bulwark against excessive screen time and sedentary and unhealthy lifestyles. Despite their differences, both orientations may be seen as articulations of a shared parenting ethos of 'fitting in' instead of 'standing out', which is aimed at ensuring that children will become decent and able citizens with sound, respectable lifestyles. This parenting ethos differs from the investment and cultivational ethos that guides upper middle-class families' parenting practices related to sports and other enrichment activities. However, fitting in does not preclude projects of distinction; for some community-oriented parents, engaging in youth sports allows them to stand out as pillars of society.

Keywords: youth sports; family sport culture; parenting; social class

Introduction

This paper explores orientations toward youth sport among parents living in predominantly working-class communities, specifically what they think youth sports are for and how they engage with their children's sporting activities in practice. Researchers have documented that across classes, parents' engagement in youth sports has increased and changed during the last few decades (Stefansen, Smette, & Strandbu, 2018); we see a more supportive and invested parental role (Johansen & Green, 2019; Wheeler & Green, 2019). This change is not exclusive to sports but connected to a general shift in cultural ideas about good parenting,

which can be conceptualised as ‘involved’ (Forsberg, 2009) and ‘responsibilised’ parenthood (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). The increase in parental engagement also reflects how youth sports, at least in Norway, the empirical context of this study, have become more demanding, both economically and logistically, and hence more difficult for youths to manage on their own (Stefansen et al., 2018; Strandbu, Gulløy, Andersen, Seippel, & Dalen, 2017).

Most research to date has studied youth sports parenting among the middle classes (Knight, 2019). Although comparative studies on sport and leisure orientations among working- and middle-class parents exist (e.g. Lareau, 2003; Sjödin & Roman, 2018; Wheeler & Green, 2019), few studies have investigated why and how parents from working-class communities engage with youth sports. Those studies that have investigated this have focused mostly on barriers, restrictions and a lack of resources to explain such parents’ more limited youth-sport engagement. Both Chin and Phillips (2004) and Bennet et al. (2012) point out that working-class parents lacked the financial, cultural and/or social capital necessary to find, access and take advantage of structured activities. Sjödin and Roman (2018) likewise point to ‘time poverty’ to help explain why working-class Swedish parents viewed sports and other extracurricular activities as less important and enrolled their children in fewer activities: working-class parents typically have less flexible jobs than middle-class parents.

Whereas the focus on restrictions on working-class parents’ youth sports engagement is vital to understanding classed patterns of participation, the cultural significance of youth sports parenting in working-class communities and the kinds of resources that are relevant to youth sports parenting in such communities has yet to be explored. There is also a lack of attention to variation among parents within such communities in this field of research. This situation is unfortunate; it may lead to an uncritical reproduction of middle-class practices as representative of (‘good’) youth sports parenting and an overly simplistic understanding of the meaning youth sports have for parents in other classes. Our aim here is to expand the

understanding of youth sports parenting beyond the middle classes. To this end, we investigate youth sports parenting among parents in working-class communities from a more comprehensive perspective that includes both deficiencies and resources and focuses on family resources in the broad sense. In addition to economic and cultural capital, we include 'family sport capital', i.e., the degree of interest in and value accorded to sports in a family (Strandbu, Bakken, & Stefansen, 2020).

We draw on a qualitative study among parents of 13 to 14 year olds in two rural working-class communities in different parts of Norway. Most of the parents in our sample had grown up in these communities in working-class families. Our study addresses what Vincent et al. (2008) have termed the 'managing to cope' rather than the 'struggling to cope' segments of working-class communities. Here, this entails families with adults with more-or-less stable employment, a decent income and available time to follow up on their children's schooling and leisure activities.

Our analysis indicates two main orientations towards youth sports among parents in working-class communities: sport as a means of belonging and community and sport as a means of structure and protection against risk. While the two orientations are different, we suggest that they are both linked to a broader and distinctly working-classed framework of meaning or the *parenting ethos* – one that differs from the investment and cultivational ethos that guides upper middle-class families' parenting practices related to sports and other enrichment activities (Lareau, 2003; Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011; Vincent & Ball, 2007). We consider how this broader ethos is linked to an ideal of 'fitting in' rather than 'standing out' (cf. Gillies, 2005). While fitting in signals social equality and group solidarity, we argue that the fitting in ideal does not prevent projects of distinction; for some belonging- and community-oriented parents, engaging in youth sport allows them to stand out as pillars of society.

Youth sports in Norway

To provide some context for our analysis, we will first describe the Norwegian youth sports setting and the roles parents play in facilitating youths' sports participation. Sports are generally valued in Norwegian society, and participation rates in child and youth sports are high (Green, 2016). Among youths aged 12–18, 93% have participated in club-organised sports during childhood (Bakken, 2019). Football/soccer and handball are the two most popular sports, followed by skiing and gymnastics (The Norwegian Olympic and Paralympic Committee and Confederation of Sports, 2018). Working-class youths are somewhat less active than middle-class youths (Andersen & Bakken, 2018), including in teams sports such as football/soccer and handball (Vaage, 2006). Working-class youths also drop out at steeper rates during adolescence (Bakken, 2019).

Youth sports in Norway are organised outside schools, as part the voluntary sector. Parents play important roles here, especially in child sports; they are involved as coaches, team managers, administrators and fundraisers. As described by Archetti (2003), this type of parental involvement can be seen as a gift from parents to the sports club that facilitates sports participation for their child. In youth sports, professional coaches are more common. Aside from the formal roles that parents take on, some degree of parental involvement in children's sporting activities has become a general norm in Norway and considered part of being a good parent (Stefansen et al., 2018). The cost of participation in youth sports in Norway varies between sports and clubs within the same sport. Parents see it as necessary not only to pay for fees and sporting equipment but also to drive the child to and from practice, games and competitions and take a keen interest in the sport and the team. It is against the backdrop of child and youth sports as generally accessible and parental involvement being viewed as a hallmark of good parenting that we explore youth sports parenting in working-class communities.

Parenting and social class

Our study draws from the Bourdieusian tradition, which, following Lareau (2003), has dominated the sociological study of classed differences in parenting. In this field of research, youth sports engagement is described as part of the middle-class practice of 'concerted cultivation', a future-oriented child-rearing logic that relies on access to middle-class resources. This ethos of cultivation involves purposefully instilling growth through enrolling children in various enrichment activities (Vincent & Ball, 2007) with the underlying goal of producing a child who will stand out (Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013). In contrast, Lareau (2003) described the working-class child-rearing logic as 'the accomplishment of natural growth', in which the idea is that children will develop and thrive if offered a warm and safe environment with opportunities for play and socialising. The underlying goal is to produce a child who 'fits in' (Gillies, 2005). Specific enrichment activities are not seen as necessary to accomplish this. Lareau's binary schematic of classed parenting has become nuanced. Studies have found that middle-class parents vary in their views on the role of sports. In one study, middle-class Norwegian parents are described as more concerned about their child's social integration and health in the here and now than ensuring a successful future (Johansen & Green, 2019). Other studies have connected different approaches to specific fractions of the middle classes. Aarseth (2017), for instance, found that parents among the 'cultural' elite in Norway view enrichment activities as a venue for the unfolding of the person, while parents from the financial elite were more focused on enrichment activities as part of comprehensive preparation for a demanding future. Similar efforts to develop a nuanced view of parenting in working-class communities are rare, although exceptions do exist. One source of inspiration for our exploration is Vincent et al.'s (2008) study, from the UK. As they did in their study, we focus on the various forms that 'working class-ness' can take *vis-à-vis* a specific institutional setting, in our case youth sports.

The family has been recognised as an important influence on sports participation (Fletcher, 2020; Furusa, Knight, & Hill, 2020; Newport, Knight, & Love, 2020), but research is lacking in terms of understanding not only differences in resources but also differences in the attitudes in families, which may affect parents' ability to support their children's sports engagement (Kay, 2004). This lacuna has continued to date (Knight, 2019). Our analysis starts from the premise that to understand why parents behave in different ways related to sports, researchers must consider 'aspects both within and beyond sport' (Knight, 2019 p. 14). In this article, we will therefore consider both parents' orientations towards sports and the broader parenting ethoses and life worlds those orientations reflect. Whereas parents' orientations towards youth sports are conscious and explicit, a parenting ethos can be understood as parents' broader outlook on what a good life can entail for people like them (Irwin, 2018). Parenting ethoses are intrinsically connected to 'family practices' (Morgan, 1996) because such practices derive significance 'from their location in wider systems of meaning' (p. 190). We understand parenting ethoses as part of the conditions that shape parents' feelings towards and engagement with their children's sporting activities, what we term their orientation toward youth sports.

Method

Our data are drawn from *Inequality in youth*, an ongoing multi-sited longitudinal qualitative project on youth and social inequality (see Eriksen, 2021; Eriksen & Stefansen, forthcoming).[2] The project consists of repeated interviews with youths, starting with 40 girls and 41 boys, when they were 12 to 13, as well as single interviews with their parents. The analysis is based on interviews with parents conducted when the youths were 13 to 14. The youths were recruited via their schools in four communities and were selected to represent

[2] Inequality in youth is approved by the Norwegian centre for research data.

differences in local employment structures, socio-demographic profiles and levels of urbanisation. The parents were recruited from two of the sites: a rural town in south-eastern Norway and an industrial village on Norway's west coast. We conducted 16 interviews with 19 parents (14 mothers and five fathers). Three couples were interviewed together. All but one couple had an ethnic Norwegian background. Although the gender of the parents and children is likely to play a significant role in terms of the parents' youth sports involvement, this is beyond the scope of this paper.

The interviews covered everyday life in the family, including the children's leisure activities and the parents' perspectives on and involvement in such activities. There were other children in the families, but the interviews focused mainly on the child who had been recruited for the study. All the parents had children who were or had been engaged in organised sports such as bicycling, gymnastics, cheerleading and track and field. The majority, however, were most active in football/soccer and handball. Therefore, the analysis below is dominated by parents' experiences of youths' team sports. In general and in contrast to upper middle-class families in Norway (Aarseth, 2015) and elsewhere (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007), the families in our study led rather relaxed lives. Most worked the Norwegian standard of 7,5 hours per day, five days per week, and they normally did not describe their everyday lives as hectic or stressful. None of the children participated in numerous sports and activities.

We categorised the parents in terms of class, following the logic of the 'Oslo Register Data Class Scheme' (ORDC) developed by Hansen et al. (2009). The scheme is inspired by Bourdieu's model of the social space (Bourdieu, 2013) and structured along two axes: overall amount of capital (four main classes: working, lower middle, upper middle and upper) and the dominant form of capital (economic, cultural and in between, or 'balanced'). In formal class terms, the sample is somewhat mixed: about half had working-class occupations and

working-class spouses, and the other half belong to a lower middle-class segment because they had some higher education and/or were employed in lower-level managerial jobs. Most, however, also had working-class spouses and had grown up in working-class families. Despite the share of lower middle-class participants in the sample, we consider this a study conducted among families with strong connections to working-class culture and communities; the families live in communities that can be described as working-class in terms of the types of jobs available and the level of education and income among the population.[3] Following Hansen et al. (2009), the working class includes skilled workers, unskilled and partly skilled workers, farmers, foresters and fishermen and people on welfare benefits larger than their own income. The lower-middle class is defined as either the cultural lower-middle, such as primary school teachers and social workers; the professional lower-middle, such as nurses and first secretaries; and the economic lower middle, such as accountants, with incomes below NOK 500.000 (about € 46.500), which is significantly lower than average upper middle-class incomes.

Because our intention was to investigate parents' youth sports orientations in light of broader parenting ethoses, the first phase of the analysis was a case-by-case comparison in which we probed the interviews for a sense of what was important to the parents, including their values, life goals and sense of self in relation to others, thereby developing an understanding of their worldviews. We purposefully did not code thematically at this stage lest we lose sight of these broader framings. In the second phase, we identified what we termed orientations toward youth sports, which were defined primarily based on the main motivation that drives the parents' youth sports involvement and the resources relevant to their involvement (or lack thereof), as well as being categorised according to class. The third

[3] The analysis does not include the one interview we conducted with a couple from the professional upper class. The parents in this family were not locals and had few connections to the local community other than through their jobs.

phase consisted of linking the individual sport projects with the different types of resources families had access to, comparing and contrasting first those with similar sport orientations and then comparing respondents across profiles.

Analysis

The two main orientations toward youth sports that the parents' articulated are detailed below. One orientation treated sports as an arena for belonging and community; the other focused on sports as a form of structure and protection against risk. Some parents clearly identified with one orientation, while others offered more mixed ideas about the meaning of sports and their own role. The two orientations are not mutually exclusive and are not necessarily static. It is not our ambition to link each orientation to a distinct group of parents, because the same parent or family could have several orientations, although one would be preferred. Rather, we describe what resources in parents' lives underpin their orientations.

Sport for belonging and community

One main orientation towards youth sports parenting among our participants involved bonding and belonging to a community: a community of peers, the local community or a community of sports people; people who love and follow the sport their child was playing. Parents who considered belonging to a community to be a key purpose of their children's sports participation may be placed along a continuum. At the one end, a few parents saw youth sports as merely a convenient instrument for making friends and maintaining social ties, for children and parents alike. Recognising that few other leisure activities were available in the community, they found sport participation to be useful and often necessary in order to meet people and socialise. In their opinion, sport itself was not a compulsory part of childhood. Only one mother tended to see her daughter's handball practice as in slight conflict with her main family project, which was directed at keeping her homely joys and

comforts: ‘We like nice and quiet homely pleasures in our family’. When her daughter recently had quit handball due to lack of motivation, this came as a relief to the mother. Although she recognised the social value of team sport participation, she found family life ‘hectic’ while she still played, but after she quit handball, she said that: ‘now there is more spare time’.

At the opposite end of the continuum, some parents saw sports as important in their own right, while also being the best possible way to connect and contribute to a community. The parents of three children, for example, described how engaging in sports meant that they were part of something bigger than themselves. Their children played football, and both parents had been coaches and team managers for their children’s teams. All their spare time was devoted to football, and they had no other hobbies. Describing what she thought the children got out of participating in football, the mother said:

> Community. Bonding. That’s what I find most important, really. Because you’re part of that football family then … you’re part of something. You’re part of … that community. It’s not only about the matches and all that. It’s about coming to practice; it’s [being there] before and after practice, and there are the meets and travelling. It’s a lot to look forward to, and there are disappointments … and joys you share …. We [the family] have been to the Norway Cup with many [other families] every year. It’s the highlight of our holiday!

For her, football was simultaneously a means to connect to the local community and a family venture that was almost spiritual in its capacity for shared passion and unity. At both ends of the continuum, the main motivation for youth-sports involvement for these families was *belonging*: social integration and connectedness.

The idea of sports as an arena for belonging is related to the value of solidarity and doing something for others. This idea is perhaps best illustrated by Frank, father to a 14-year-old girl and an older daughter. In his own childhood in the same village, he had played sports

and hunted together with his father. He came from, and had created for his own children, a community of doing: both his daughters played football in the local club, where he had a central role as a trainer. He stated that what the children gained from football was ‘belonging. Belonging and a sense of accomplishment. These are the two most important factors’. Integral to his orientation towards youth sports was the foundational value of group belonging and solidarity communicated through an unyielding moral code. He noted, for instance, that if his children were to wish to quit their football team mid-season, he and his wife would be unwilling to discuss the matter: ‘We don’t discuss such things. We as parents decide’. A similar approach was voiced by Katrine, who, like Frank, was strict about participation: her children were not allowed to skip training as long as they were healthy, because ‘your team depends on you’.

This level of solidarity demands effort from both parents and children: organisation and supervision from parents, and compliance from their children. In Frank’s words, ‘the community is there. I’m really strict about that because a team is a team. … I don’t care what they [do or] who they’re with [in their spare time] – but when they have team training and meets [to compete for] and are a team, then they *are* a team’. Integral to this value of solidarity and community is a commitment to doing one’s duty, for the benefit of the team. This commitment is not related to being the best version of oneself in terms of effort and performance, an expectation that middle-class parents are typically seen to transmit to their children (Eriksen, 2020; Aarseth, 2015); rather, it is a moral duty of solidarity in order to not let one’s team down.

Aside from solidarity, a permeating theme among the belonging-oriented parents was a strong commitment to being part of their children’s activities. Helga conveyed this commitment when she explained why parents should show up to watch football matches: ‘It’s important for the contact [between us] and our relationship when they grow up that we were

there for them in their childhood. At least you feel as though you've done what you can'. For the parents, this commitment entailed a willingness to devote time and resources to benefit their children. Katrine, for example, worked reduced hours because she wanted to 'give [her] time to the children', while Ina was the team manager, and her husband coached their daughter's football team. As she said, 'It's kind of important that when you have kids, [that] you make time for them and are there for them. So that's the main priority. If they're okay, we're okay.' Frank was even more explicit that parenting should be about sacrificing one's self-interest. Saying that he thought many parents thought too much about themselves, he described how, despite considering himself a 'ski enthusiast … skiing is one of my passions', he had 'not been skiing alone since I had kids'. Even though he was not particularly interested in football, he had committed himself completely to his children's football teams and now dedicated all his free time and energy to the task.

We were curious about which resources are relevant to understanding this attitude and for facilitating this type of commitment to solidarity, showing up and supporting others. Among those families in our sample who primarily talked about their commitment to youth sport through the *belonging* orientation, all were married and had double incomes. Economic resources were mostly insignificant, however, as team sport fees in the two communities were low – a nominal 100 Norwegian kroner (about €10) per term – a fee which these two-income families could easily pay. The resource demands in terms of time and effort, however, were formidable. The most important factor for their relations to their children's sport participation was their capacity for active involvement. In line with their commitment to solidarity and sacrifice, the majority of the parents with this orientation provided both the time and means to support their children's activities.

Those of the parents who were the most oriented towards sports for belonging were also typical driving forces in the sports club, involved in administration and fundraising.

Some parents, like Ina and her husband, were so involved that at times they had consciously stepped back to give their children space: their children were 'used to us being around them a lot as we attend matches and trainings. We're never far away, but when [our daughter] participated in the football cup last year, we tried to distance ourselves and just come to matches and not be around as much....'. Facilitating their children's sport activities filled much of these parents' time, such as by driving children to practice, watching games, baking cakes and making coffee, and, as Ina did, 'coming to every match and everything [else] that happens'. A few of these parents talked about the somewhat dismaying labour of driving, describing it as 'tiring' or 'hectic', but most talked about supporting their children's sport activities as being worthwhile. Importantly, most of the parents came from families where sport was an integral part of life, and quite often they linked their parents' engagement in their own sport activities as children to a sense of support, love and security. This practical and emotional support was something that most had incorporated into their own parenting.

The labour of accommodating their children's sport activities to such an extent as the most ardent parents, served also other purposes than supporting their children. These actions signalled to their local community that what the parents were respectable and decent; pillars of society. Katrine, who drove back and forth and contributed at competitions to accommodate her children's skiing activities, reasoned that 'in my youth, only a few families were enthusiasts, where the fathers fixed the ski tracks and we mothers run the kiosk, and we travel together on trips and around the county'. Notably, Katrine blended her memories (in the past tense) of the enthusiasm from her youth seamlessly to a present tense and the word 'we' in 'we mothers'. She positioned her own family today as among the 'few families' with the positive local standing she remembered from her youth.

Those of the community-oriented parents who invested the most in supporting their children's sport, were characterised by having both strong social ties within their community

and a large degree of sport capital in the family. They had lived in the same place for generations and now had deep roots and tight networks that fuelled their motivation to participate and show themselves as reliable and worthy participants of their community. Their motivation was also related to their particular mix of resources in the family: most importantly their ability to invest time and effort in their children's activities and the sporting milieu. Although they had the same formal class backgrounds as the other parents in the study, their drive and dedication to their children's sports presented them as key figures in the working-class communities they were part of.

Sport as structure and protection against risks

The other main orientation towards youth sport was the view of sports as a structuring agent and protection against risk. Some parents saw sports mainly as a means for exercise and a protection against inactivity and an unhealthy lifestyle. Anne's son played football but had chosen not to play matches, an arrangement she thought was 'just great'. She said that 'I feel as though I get to keep my cake and eat it too, because the boy is active, and I don't have to drive.… For me as a physiotherapist, it's brilliant, because the boy wants to be active and train, and it isn't that competition thing that drives him. He thinks it's fun. And that's great!' According to this viewpoint, as long as football is self-motivated and devoid of unhealthy competition, the sport is a convenient way to stay active.

Other parents were not explicitly concerned with exercise, but primarily saw sports as a way to reduce excessive screen time. Kristine was one of many parents, primarily of boys, who worried that her children would get hooked on gaming. Describing her struggle to limit her sons' screen time as 'demanding', she reasoned that participation in sports would have been a useful tool. She said that 'If they'd been a bit more active in sports, it would've been easier to limit [their gaming]'. Sports were not overly important for Monika, but participation

made sense to her because sports provide structure and something to do besides gaming. She noted that her son's time spent gaming had escalated when he had quit football. To reduce his screen time, she and her husband had threatened to cut their children's internet access. The threat failed, however, and they had few other opportunities to control their children's gaming outside organised sports. Several parents reasoned that the structuring necessary with sports was particularly acute during the long and cold Norwegian winters, whereas time in the summers, as Katrine put it, was spent on 'football and trainings, and it's light out and nice and we have the trampoline … and then there's no more time, and no screen in his room'.

When protecting against screen time, the structuring was primarily temporal: the idea seemed to be that when children fill their time with sports, they will not fill it with gaming. The worry about excessive screen time thus appeared to be double: the notion was that gaming in itself is unwanted and that sports may instrumentally be used as a tool to limit screen time. But the opposite notion was also evident: screen time consumed the time that otherwise could have been spent on more healthy endeavours such as sports. Both when parents viewed sport as a means for exercise and for reducing screen time, the rationale for youth sport was primarily instrumental.

Using sports as a structuring agent, both as a means for exercise and a protection against screen time, is linked to an endorsement of natural, healthy and wholesome activities. Particularly for those parents who used sports as a means to get their children to exercise, leading a physically active life was pivotal. In general, however, the pursuit of a healthy lifestyle goes beyond mere physical activity. Sports remain wholesome if the parents are careful not to apply undue stress, pressure or expectations on the children. Organised sports are wonderful, but not if they are stressful or marred by unhealthy competition – which was why Anne was so pleased that her son would come to football practice but not play matches. Similarly, Monika emphasised that 'we've said that we think it's a bit boring or sad that they

just sit and play [video games], but we've never pressured them to start playing football'. From this perspective, the positive benefits of sports ideally should not be achieved through pressure or stress; instead, the benefits should come from the children's inherent motivation.

The fact that the children were, ideally, to engage in sociable and wholesome activities was also visible in the value the parents placed on free play. We noted how many of the parents lamented wintertime as a period when it was particularly difficult to engage their children in outdoor play and to limit their screen time. Many parents talked about the ideal of spending spring and summer out in nature, as Eva stated: 'that wholly impulsive playing that just continued on and on; I wish I could see more of that'. Parents noted that getting children to go out and play was harder than before. This talk showed a sense of nostalgia – a longing for what childhood was like back when the parents had grown up, natural and carefree. Coming from this nostalgic position, the parents established a logic of necessity around sport, not because the activity in itself was important but because of the changing conditions of childhood. The pitfall of the value of self-motivated free play was that what the boys in particular seemed motivated to fill their time with was gaming. Organised sport represented a compromise between the free play of their own youth and the possibilities and demands of modern-day parenting.

Like those who were mainly community-oriented, the parents whose main or only orientation towards youth sports was as a means for structuring were engaged in the labour of facilitating: both in terms of driving to practice but also in cases where they did not necessarily have to drive. They displayed little enjoyment relating to this work; rather, they portrayed driving and similar tasks as stressful and tiresome, as when Kristine rejoiced in no longer having to drive her daughter to handball practice. Naturally, perhaps, these parents did not see the point in watching practices or even matches; Kristine described parents watching

their children's training as 'stupid', saying that 'parents are not supposed to be at football training.'

The notion of being a driving force in the club and local community, which characterised the core of the community-oriented parents, was more or less absent among the most structure- and protection-oriented parents. This was not due to lack of resources. Even Eva, one of the most industrious facilitators, compared herself to other parents and acknowledged that 'sometimes you feel as though you're the only one who's not interested in baking a chocolate cake from scratch in twenty different ways for the parent-teacher meeting or [who don't think] that voluntary work [*dugnad* in Norwegian] on the ski tracks and for the football and gymnastics groups is more important than visiting friends'. The hesitation to participate in this way was not due to a lack of time or money, but rather lack of family sport capital: it was not because Eva could not afford the ingredients for the cake, or that she did not have the time to bake it, she would just rather spend her time doing other things – like visiting friends.

There were, however, indications that some of these parents experienced their resources as being deficient in terms of providing what they themselves valued for their children: to provide structuring in terms of rules for their children, and not least, to follow these up with clear sanctions. They struggled and felt resigned. For Monika, for example, structuring was intrinsically demanding. Her two sons played computer games alone in their separate bedrooms, and their time-consuming gaming was a constant battle for her. She struggled to get the boys to come to dinner on time: 'Because they sit and play and then they're slow to come. I tell them, "You know I come home at 4:15 or 4:30, and then it's dinnertime". It shouldn't be that difficult, but they've been gaming and aren't done yet…. So, there've been times when they just haven't come [to dinner]'. Although their formal class positions were similar to those of the community-oriented parents, parents in this category

displayed less drive and had less sport capital – sport was simply not central to their lives. Their positions in the local community were also different: they did not talk about themselves as having important roles and responsibilities.

Discussion

This study has investigated youth sports parenting in working-class communities in Norway and what parents in such communities believe youth sports are for. Our analyses suggest that parental engagement in youth sports was connected to two rationales, which we conceptualise as parental orientations toward youth sports: the belonging orientation, in which youth sports are a means of connecting to a community, and the structuring orientation, in which youth sports serve as a barrier against excessive screen time and a sedentary and unhealthy lifestyle. Here, we will discuss these orientations and the ways in which they are similar to and distinguishable from middle-class orientations toward youth sports.

We see a distinct 'working class-ness' (Vincent et al., 2008) in both orientations: the core purpose of parenting is to ensure that children will find their place in the local community and become decent and able citizens. Parents with the belonging orientation worked to instill in their children the idea of solidarity and group belonging, sometimes to the point that they sacrificed their own interests and spare time to accommodate and teach their children these values. This orientation involved connecting to 'the social' and was, essentially, a commitment to ensure that the children became part of the group. Parents with a *structuring* orientation toward youth sports valued sound, natural and healthy activities and habits in the hope that their children would become sound and capable. As such, both orientations share an overarching ethos of decency and respectability, and a key motivation seems to be to fit in through discipline, accommodation and strong framing. We recognise what Gillies (2005), drawing on Skeggs (1997), has described as the working-class ideal of 'fitting in', as opposed to the middle-class ideal of 'standing out'.

This project of ‘fitting in’ clearly differs from the project of concerted cultivation that is commonly visible in upper middle-class families (Lareau, 2003), where the focus is on personal growth and the accrual of skills that may be transferred to other areas of life. None of the parents we interviewed talked about their children’s talents and sporting as a means of cultivating them for future success in school and work. In the *belonging* orientation, the idea of setting one’s own interests aside contrasted with how upper middle-class parents’ engagement in their children’s activities is described. While upper middle-class parents often wish to be invested personally in their children’s projects, they are not sacrificing as such through this practice but are, instead, ensuring that they and the children will be ‘resourced’ from the sporting activity (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011). In contrast, the ‘resourcing’ we see in these working-class communities is directed toward raising children to lead a rich and connected social life, in which social responsibility plays a significant role. Moreover, the families interviewed in our study valued relaxation and uncomplicated lives; the norm was for the child to engage in one activity. The overscheduling and acceleration typically described in studies among upper middle-class families (Lareau, 2003; Vincent & Ball, 2007) was not present here. Rather, the parents in our study worked toward the ordinary and the non-remarkable to ensure that their children would be capable of leading normal and productive lives, in which they belonged to and participated in a strong community, and that their lifestyles would be sound and respectable.

However, fitting in and standing out need not be mutually exclusive. In a study of French and American working-class men, Lamont (2009) points out how men used morality as boundary work to distinguish themselves from other men, who were both ‘above’ and ‘below’ them. Similarly, some of the parents in the belonging orientation may be seen to engage in boundary work to signal that they are morally different – and better – than those parents who do not contribute to the community. The idea that fitting in may be also a way to

stand out for the parents is particularly clear in such instances. Whereas there were no clear-cut links between the parents' class positions and the two orientations, whether they were working class or lower-middle class, these belonging-oriented parents nonetheless presented themselves as pillars of the local community who, through their sacrifices, signalled respectability, sound morals and their status as reliable and active providers. These parents were generally resourceful, not in terms of economic capital or educational credentials but because they had played sports themselves and were willing and able to spend the necessary time to fully commit; they possessed a form of sports capital they could invest in the local club. Through their commitment to youth sports, they also claimed a central space in the community and, as such, perpetuated their social position. Parents who used the language of protection and boundaries related to youth sports lacked some of the resources of the community-oriented parents. They had less experience with and interest in sports, they seemed to have less time to invest in their children's sporting activities and they did not position themselves as pillars of the local community. As in Vincent and colleagues' study, we see a heterogeneity in working-class parents' orientations toward key institutional contexts that is 'underpinned by individual possession and activation of diverse capitals' (2008, p. 74).

We found a distinct commonality of parental engagement in youth sports in working-class communities: an ethos of fitting in instead of standing out. Yet fitting in does not preclude projects of distinction; for some community-oriented parents, engaging in youth sports allows them to stand out as pillars of society. This article contributes thus to an understanding of both a distinct 'working class-ness' and diversity within working-class communities in social meanings and practices related to youth sports. It also highlights the importance of broadening the understanding of what types of resources that make a difference for parents' orientations towards youth sports.

Parents’ orientations towards youth sports may be influenced by factors other than class. Our study is limited to ethnic Norwegian parents from working-class communities, and we have not addressed how ethnicity influences parents’ orientation. Nor have we explored differences between mothers and fathers. Research has shown, however, that some gendered differences are likely to exist in how parents relate to sports (Stefansen et al., 2018). We have not addressed the impact of the child’s gender on parents’ sport orientation, but analyses of the youth sample in the *Inequality in youth* study show that there is a significant gender gap in youths’ sport ambition (Eriksen, 2021) which could influence parents’ orientations. The paper must be read conscious of these limitations.

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