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# Young people's perspectives of parent volunteerism in community youth sport

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### ABSTRACT

This interpretive study sought to critically examine young people's subjective meanings and experiences related to parent volunteerism in community youth sport. Using a constant comparative method of data analysis, the perspectives of 19 participants from 7 different family units (9 sons and 10 daughters) in Ontario, Canada were examined. The findings call attention to the gendered importance of fathers in highly visible volunteer roles (e.g., coach, game announcer) and the lack of recognition or appreciation for mothers' formal volunteer roles (e.g., assistant coach, league's board of directors) as well as informal volunteer roles (e.g., fundraiser). Moments of conflict in relation to peer groups as well as siblings and the potential for volunteerism to enhance a sense of connection through moments of togetherness and skill development are also emphasized.

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## 1. Introduction

In all sports, volunteers are the lifeblood – “take away the volunteers and the sport dies” (de Cruz, 2005, p. 83). Indeed, the investigation and importance of sport volunteerism has been the focus of several published special issues in the *European Journal for Sport Management/European Sport Management Quarterly* (1999; 2013) and *Sport Management Review* (2006). Community sport forms the largest sector of sport volunteers; however, volunteerism at the grassroots level remains relatively understudied relative to elite and professional sport organizations (Cuskelly, 2004). Within the delivery of community youth sport programs, the contributions of parent volunteers are particularly noteworthy and instrumental (Cuskelly, 2005; Nichols, 2005). Yet, the existing research has failed to take into consideration the potential impact of volunteer roles on the family unit. This is surprising given it may influence parental volunteer interest and commitment towards a youth sport organization. Research that seeks to understand the meanings and experiences of parent volunteerism within family life might provide a more holistic understanding of how to better enhance the experiences for the parent volunteer and that of their family.

Moreover, limited research has sought to understand young people's perspectives of their parents' volunteer labor within community youth sport organizations. This oversight is unfortunate as there is inherent value when involving young people in the research process, particularly within the family context. As Jeanes (2010) argues, young people may perceive things differently from their parents, and for this reason, it is imperative that young people's perspectives are understood.

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Thus, the purpose of this paper was to critically examine young people's discourse around parental volunteerism in community youth sport organizations. The gender ideology of *soft essentialism* (Messner, 2011) provided a guiding theoretical concept. An inductive qualitative approach was used that conceptualized the young people as active participants in the research process, capable of speaking on the meaning of their own lives. The context for this research is particularly relevant given that "millions of children play community-based youth sports every year, and these athletic activities are a key part of the daily lives of many families" (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009, p. 50).

The data come from a larger study that included in-depth interviews with all family members who resided in the same household. The focus of the analysis for the larger study was on understanding the discourses that individual family members used when they talked about their multiple roles and experiences within the youth sport culture. However, the young people's discourse was described in different ways from their parents in that the young people appeared to have little knowledge of the meanings that the parents' drew from their experiences (e.g., obligatory and purposive nature of volunteering). Likewise, the parents appeared to have their own interpretations and meanings drawn from their volunteer labor that seemed to center on the "politics" of their experiences related to organizational policies as well as disagreement with other parents within the sporting community (e.g., other coaches). Thus, given these very different perspectives, the present article is limited to analysis of the young people's interviews. For a discussion of the families' shared meanings and experiences related to organized youth sport and the multiple roles that family members embody within this context, refer to Trussell (2013).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The gendered dimensions of parent volunteerism in community youth sport

As Doherty (2006) points out, "sport volunteerism is critical to the sport industry itself, and to the voluntary sector as a whole" (p. 105). Although there are many definitions, arguably, volunteering includes aspects of being unpaid, freely chosen, and for the benefit of others or oneself (Cuskelly, 2004; Cuskelly, Taylor, Hoye, & Darcy, 2006). Volunteers in community-based sport organizations fill many different positions and responsibilities including coaches, referees, umpires, judges, scorers, timekeepers, trainers, and other roles that assume off-field positions such as commissioners, board members, treasurers and secretaries (Cuskelly, 2004; De Knop, De Martelaer, Van Heddegem, & Wylleman, 1999; Kim, Zhang, & Connaughton, 2010). The time spent in these roles may vary from a few hours a week to a substantial amount. For example, in her study of a Little League Baseball association, Grasmuck (2006) estimated that 111 league administrators, head coaches, and assistant coaches contributed a total of 33,330 h of volunteer labor in a season – an average of about 300 h per person per season. In addition to these hours, the association expected parents of approximately 500 households to provide four hours of domestic-related duties during the season (e.g., kitchen, field, or bathroom duty).

It is clear, too, that youth sport volunteers are more likely to become involved because their children participate in the community sport league (Doherty, 2006). For example, Busser and Carruthers (2010) found that the majority of coaches had a child on the team (90%). Research has reported that men tend to be more involved in youth sport volunteerism, are married with dependents at home, 35–44 years of age, and with a significant proportion having post-secondary education (Busser & Carruthers, 2010; De Knop et al., 1999; Doherty, 2005; Doherty, 2006; Kim et al., 2010).

Yet, a critical examination of volunteer labor reveals that mothers are also heavily involved in youth sport volunteerism, in an invisible or informal capacity that may be difficult to measure. Indeed, key qualitative studies in Australia (Thompson, 1999), Canada (Trussell & Shaw, 2012), the United Kingdom (Kirk & MacPhail, 2003), and the United States (Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009) highlight the gendered dimensions of volunteer work in youth sport organizations. In that, although fathers often fill the visible, highly public and formalized volunteer roles (e.g., coach, assistant coach), mothers fill the hidden, behind-the-scenes periphery roles (e.g., fundraiser, "team mom", "taxi driver"). Moreover, this hidden volunteer labor is essential to the success of community-based youth sport organizations, yet it is not formally recognized. Messner and Bozada-Deas (2009) argued that this lack of recognition towards women's contributions emphasizes the devaluation of their invisible labor. As those authors point out, although team moms may typically put in fewer hours of labor than the head coach, in some cases, they put in more time than fathers who are assistant coaches and are only seen on game day (e.g., coaching third base).

Thus, the research undertaken in this area illustrates that parent volunteerism, and the multiple roles that parents may dedicate to their children's sport organizations, is critical to youth sport participation. Research has also indicated the potential gendered dimensions that may be evident within the context of the organized youth sport culture. But as Jeanes (2009) argues, where are the young people in our understanding of youth sport and parent involvement? As she points out: "Very few studies of how family, sport and leisure interact have included the viewpoint of children. This is therefore a fertile and key area for development, with multiple questions to address" (p. 200). Research that examines young people's perspectives of their parents gendered youth sport volunteer labor remain understudied, and this paper seeks to address this gap in the literature. Research that emphasizes young people's perspectives may also help illuminate the significance of the volunteer-parent/child-athlete dyad in youth sport and how it shapes familial dynamics. The next section will consider the limited research on the dual role of parent-coach/child-athlete and the impact on their relationship.

## 2.2. Dual parent-coach/child-athlete relationships in youth sport

### 2.2.1. Research examining parents' perspectives

Research on parental perspectives emphasizes that the dual role of parent-coach/child-athlete may be a complex relationship fraught with contradictions. For example, [Weiss and Fretwell \(2005\)](#) reported that fathers who coached their sons cited positive and negative aspects of this dual role. Fathers were seen to take pride in seeing their son's achievements and they saw it as an important opportunity for their skill and social development. Coaching their son was also seen to facilitate quality/special time and bring a sense of enjoyment. At the same time, their experiences were defined by negative aspects such as challenging the parent-child relationship with rebellious behavior, difficulty separating the coach from the parent role, and greater pressure and higher expectations related to their son's leadership and performance.

Other research has also highlighted the implications of parents coaching their own children. [Leberman and LaVoi \(2011\)](#) reported that mothers who coached their children enjoyed aspects of quality time, the opportunity to facilitate positive development (e.g., self-esteem), and the importance of their children (and particularly sons) seeing them (mothers) in a leadership position. However, these authors also reported that some women struggled to juggle the dual roles of parent-coach.

### 2.2.2. Research examining young people's perspectives

Limited research has sought to understand young people's perspectives of their parents' volunteer labor and how it impacts the parent-child relationship, although we can garner a sense of the potential significance of these experiences in their lives. Seminal research on fathers' and sons' perspectives by [Weiss and Fretwell \(2005\)](#) describes the sons' contradictory feelings towards the father-coach role. That is, having their father as a coach had many positive aspects such as facilitating quality time, receiving special attention, and their father-coach understanding their ability level. The sons also cited negative aspects such as the difficulty in separating the coach from the father role, higher expectations/pressure to perform, and a perceived lack of understanding/empathy. This study examined the father-son relationship, and clearly, research that examines daughters' perspectives (as well as sons') would provide a more holistic understanding of this phenomenon.

### 2.2.3. Considering parental volunteerism beyond the 'coaching' role

Although research described in Sections 2.2.1 and 2.2.2 (i.e., the dual role of parent-coach/child-athlete) contributes to a more complex understanding of how parental volunteerism shapes the parent-child relationship in community youth sport, research that examines volunteerism beyond the coaching role may also provide important insights. In light of the benefits and challenges to the dual relationships, it is imperative to examine young people's perceptions and meanings of their parents' volunteer labor in community youth sport organizations more broadly. Accordingly, this study critically examines young people's discourse around parent volunteerism and community-based youth sports through the lens of the parent-volunteer/child-athlete relationship to encompass the broad range of volunteering roles that exist (e.g., coaches, timekeepers, trainers, board members, fundraisers) as well as the multiple roles that parents may fill.

## 3. Guiding philosophical assumptions

As [Creswell \(2013\)](#) points out, philosophical assumptions guide the research design and underlie the overall research process. It is important to understand and report upon philosophical assumptions, as these underlying beliefs formulate the research problem, questions, and how a researcher seeks information to answer the questions ([Creswell, 2013](#)).

### 3.1. Soft essentialism

Soft essentialism ([Messner, 2011](#)) provided a guiding concept for this study. Soft essentialism is a gender ideology that emphasizes the natural (usually biological) differences between groups of people. It also emphasizes the socially constructed discourses and cultural assumptions that serve to (re)produce these narratives. As [Messner \(2011\)](#) argues, soft essentialism "is a largely conservative, class-based reorganization of gender that resolves some of the contradictions of professional class work and family life in this historical moment, while giving rise to new and different tensions" (p. 155).

Youth sport, [Messner \(2011\)](#) maintains, has become an ideal site for the construction and naturalization of soft essentialism. For example, in his study of gender relations among adult volunteers in youth sport programs, most participants struggled with "how to square this belief in equality with the continued sex segregation [of children] in sports, and with the fact that the vast majority of coaches are men, while most women volunteers take on the helping roles of 'team moms'" (p. 161). [Messner's \(2009\)](#) seminal findings were based on several years of field observation with various youth sport leagues as well as fifty in-depth interviews with women and men volunteers. However, absent from [Messner's \(2011\)](#) research was an examination of the young people's perspectives.

### 3.2. Research with young people

Young people's missing perspectives are not unique to sport researchers ([Jeanes, 2009](#)). Indeed, prior to the 1990s, young people's interpretative research methods in the broader social sciences were relatively undeveloped ([Mauthner, 1997](#);

Morgan, Gibbs, Maxwell, & Britten, 2002). As Fraser (2004) explains, “one long-held view of social and psychological researchers has been that young children are not competent to describe or understand their own social world” (p. 16). Consequently, young people’s voices were typically excluded from mainstream social science. Instead, adult ‘proxies’ were used to speak on young people’s behalf, and were thought to present more valid accounts of the young people’s lives (Morrow, 2005).

Major criticisms arose in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s on the ‘adultist’ methods of exploring young people’s lives (France, 2004), and adult proxies were criticized for providing inaccurate representations (Valentine, 1999). Over the past decade and a half, there has been a movement for new ways of researching young people’s experiences which emphasizes research *with* not *on* them. This paradigm shift conceptualizes young people as active participants in the research process who are capable of speaking for themselves about the meaning of their own lived experiences (Christensen, 2004; France, Bendelow, & Williams, 2000) and one that guided this study.

### 3.3. Constructivist, qualitative approach

With the discovery nature of the young people’s perspectives related to youth sport and parent volunteerism, an interpretive qualitative approach was used. Although philosophical assumptions may change over time and over a career, they are deeply rooted in a researcher’s training (Creswell, 2013). Specifically, examining the human experience that is constructed through everyday lived experiences guided the research design of this study. Central to the ‘social constructivist’ worldview is the notion that the researcher seeks understanding within a particular social and historical moment in which they live and work in (Creswell, 2014). That is, rather than start with a theory (as you would in post-positivism), researchers inductively develop a pattern of meaning (Creswell, 2014). As Charmaz (2009) notes, a central aim of constructivist research is to locate participants’ meanings and actions in larger structures and discourses of which they may be unaware, and that may reflect dominant ideologies (e.g., soft essentialism).

Another important aspect of the constructivist worldview is acknowledging that the researcher is actively part of the co-construction of knowledge and positions oneself within the study (Creswell, 2013). For example, the interpretation and presentation of the findings in this paper represents as much of the author’s as the participants’ interpretation of the phenomenon. In turn, within this paradigm, the researcher relies on quotes and a literary style of writing as evidenced from the participants (rather than numerical approaches with a structure that resembles quantitative reporting) and it is the researcher’s interpretation of these quotes that is represented (Creswell, 2013).

In sum, the purpose of this paper was to critically examine young people’s discourse around parental volunteerism in community youth sport organizations. The gender ideology of soft essentialism provided a guiding concept for this study. The conceptualization of young people as active participants in the research process, capable of (co)constructing the meaning of their parents’ volunteer labor was also salient to the research design.

## 4. Methods

### 4.1. Participants

Nineteen young people (9 sons and 10 daughters) from 7 different families participated in this study. Several volunteer organizations (e.g., Kinsmen Club – a local service club for adults) in a rural community in Ontario, Canada were contacted to help with initial recruitment. Members of the organizations were asked to assist in the identification of potential participants who might be interested in the study. Purposive and snowball sampling strategies were used to identify and recruit families that were information-rich, illuminative, and were the best participants to begin to understand the research questions (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). These sampling strategies were selected as they coincide with the discovery framework of this study.

All of the young people who were interviewed in this study were participating in one to three community sport programs per year. Further, the range of competition level varied from house league (competition within the community) to “rep” or select teams (competition between local or regional communities). The average age of the participants was 12.8 years, with the youngest being 9 years old while the oldest was 17 years old. See Table 1 for a description of the participants’ demographic family information and current youth sport volunteerism (parents) or sport participation (young people).

### 4.2. Data collection and analysis

The primary source of data collection was semi-structured interviews. While the discussions were wide-ranging, the young people were asked questions about their typical day, what they perceived to be their parents’ labor to facilitate their sport participation, and how they felt about their parents’ involvement. All interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The interviews ranged from 15 to 45 min with 80% of the interviews lasting between 24 and 39 min. In part, the range of interview times may have been influenced by the young people’s age, maturity, and competence as well as diverse social identities (France, 2005; Kellett & Ding, 2005; Pattman & Kehily, 2005). For example, the older children tended to have longer and more complex responses. The interviews may have also been shaped by the intersubjectivity of the young

**Table 1**  
Profile of families.

Family	Sex	Age	Parents – past and/or current volunteer roles <sup>a</sup> – current sport participation
<b>Family #1</b>			
Father	Male	48	Hockey – Coach
Mother	Female	38	Baseball – Coach
Oldest child	Male	15	Baseball, Hockey
Middle child	Male	13	Baseball, Hockey
Youngest child	Male	10	Baseball, Hockey
<b>Family #2</b>			
Father	Male	50	Baseball – Coach; Hockey – Timekeeper
Mother	Female	37	Baseball – Scorekeeper
Oldest child	Male	14	Baseball, Hockey
Youngest child	Female	13	Baseball, Hockey
<b>Family #3</b>			
Father	Male	42	Hockey – Coach
Mother	Female	42	Baseball – Asst. Coach; Baseball & Hockey – Executive
Oldest child	Male	16	Hockey
Middle child	Male	14	Baseball, Hockey
Youngest child	Male	12	Baseball, Hockey
<b>Family #4</b>			
Father	Male	46	Hockey – Trainer
Mother	Female	43	Figure Skating – Executive Hockey – Trainer
Oldest child	Male	14	Baseball, Hockey
Middle child	Female	12	Figure Skating, Hockey, Softball
Youngest child	Female	10	Figure Skating, Hockey, Softball
<b>Family #5</b>			
Father	Male	46	None.
Mother	Female	45	Figure Skating – Test Chair; Soccer – Uniform Rep
Oldest child	Female	17	Figure Skating, Soccer
Youngest child	Female	12	Figure Skating, Hockey, Softball
<b>Family #6</b>			
Father	Male	40	Hockey – Asst. Coach
Mother	Female	41	Figure Skating – Treasurer; Hockey – Executive; Hockey – Team Manager; Baseball – Asst. Coach
Oldest child	Male	15	Baseball, Hockey
Middle child	Female	13	Figure Skating, Hockey, Softball
Youngest child	Female	10	Dance, Hockey, Softball
<b>Family #7</b>			
Father	Male	45	Hockey – Coach
Mother	Female	39	Hockey – Trainer; Softball – Asst. Coach
Oldest child	Female	13	Hockey, Softball
Middle child	Female	11	Hockey, Softball
Youngest child	Female	9	Figure Skating, Hockey, Softball

<sup>a</sup> Almost all mothers were involved in fundraising activities. To eliminate redundancy this role has been omitted from the table.

people's socialized identities as it relates to gender and social class (i.e., middle class and working class) and their subsequent social interaction with the interviewer.

Participant journaling (on-line journal completed for 10 days after the interview), family information forms, and informal observations provided complementary sources (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2013). A researcher journal was used to record logistical information (e.g., time, place, and date), while descriptive observations of family members and family dynamics were recorded after the researcher left the family home (i.e., the author spent an entire day in each family home). A parent was asked to fill out a Family Information Form, and in all cases it was the mother who completed this task. This form sought out information related to the family member demographics (e.g., age, occupation), type of sport participation, past or present for each family member and level (e.g., recreational, regional), as well as volunteer labor, past or present for each parent (e.g., organization and role).

Charmaz's (2006, 2013) constant comparison method was used as a guiding data collection and analysis framework for this study. The method of constant comparison examines similarities, differences, and degrees of consistency among the content of the data, which resulted in coded categories that have underlying uniformity. During this process, codes emerged from the data, rather than from pre-determined frames.



During the beginning stages of analysis, the author read through all of the data to obtain a general sense of the information and made reflective notes on each transcript. After a general familiarity was gained, the initial stages of the coding process began which included word-by-word and line-by-line coding. This process brought the author into the data to interact and study each fragment of it (Charmaz, 2013). The initial stage was seen to break up the data, define the actions and processes (rather than look for pre-existing categories), look for tacit assumptions, and explicate implicit actions and meanings (Charmaz, 2006). During this process, the author compared data with data as well as identified gaps in the data. This type of coding also provided the author with directions to explore and topics that required further elucidation (Charmaz, 2013).

The second major phase in the coding process was focused coding. It is at this point that the author decided which codes from the initial coding stage to explore as tentative categories. Charmaz (2006) defines focused coding as “using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytic sense to categorize your data incisively and completely” (p. 57). However, moving into the focused coding stage was not a linear process, rather the author worked back and forth through the initial and focused coding procedures. Further, the focused coding process is a discovery process whereby unexpected ideas emerge (Charmaz, 2006).

The next phase, axial coding, identified the possible relationships between categories that developed during focused coding procedures (Charmaz, 2006). An important aspect of this phase was to reassemble the data that were fractured during the initial coding to give coherence to the emerging analysis. That is, as the early coding stages fractured and separated the data, this process brought it back together again in a “coherent story”. During this phase the author developed sub-categories/sub-themes of a category/theme and showed the links between them (Charmaz, 2006).

### 4.3. Trustworthiness strategies

Several trustworthiness strategies were used as outlined by Creswell (2013), including triangulation, peer review, and rich/thick description. Triangulation involves the use of multiple and different sources of data collection. In this study, data collection included participant interviews, participant journaling, and a researcher journal. Together, these different forms of data collection provided “corroborating evidence from different sources to shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). The second strategy involved the use of a peer reviewer/debriefer who provided an external check of the research process. Through peer debriefing sessions, the peer asked hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations. Finally, the third strategy of providing rich and thick description in the presentation of the study’s written accounts was used. Within this strategy, participants’ verbatim quotes are embedded within the themes so that the reader can evaluate the trustworthiness of the research.

## 5. Results

Comparative analysis revealed that the young people had relatively little knowledge or discussion points related to their parents’ *motivations* for volunteering or the *politics* and *difficulties* that they experienced within the youth sport organization. Indeed, this was almost completely absent from the young people’s talk even after several attempts of probing these topics. However, the young people’s talk and the subsequent analysis of the data led to the development of three main themes/categories that best reflected the young people’s subjective meanings and experiences related to parental volunteerism: (a) the gendered importance of highly visible roles (Section 5.1), (b) enhancing a sense of connection through parent–child togetherness and skill development (Section 5.2), and (c) heightened tension with young people’s peer groups and parent–sibling dynamics (Section 5.3).

### 5.1. The gendered importance of highly visible volunteer roles

#### 5.1.1. Fathers’ and mothers’ formal volunteer labor

When young people shared stories related to their parents’ volunteer labor, it was typically the more visible, on-site roles (e.g., coach, announcer) rather than the more hidden informal roles (e.g., fundraiser) that were shared with enthusiasm and pride. This was best exemplified by two siblings who explained:

Well my dad does the timekeeping . . . he runs the clock for both my sister and my hockey. He’s really good at it! I’ve heard some really good comments about him! [When asked if his mother was involved at all, he replied:] I guess she does the 50-50 draws. (Male, age 14, family #2)

My mom does 50-50 draws as you saw [her mother was cutting up the tickets when the interviewer arrived]. And my dad, he’s the timekeeper for both mine and my brother’s teams. He announces and it’s fun to hear that! He says who scores and assists and penalties . . . And yeah, my mom just fundraises and helps with that [Voice has quiet intonation on audio recording.]. . . I really like his announcing and everything! I like to listen to him on the microphone. He sounds enthusiastic. It just makes me happy! [Voice is loud and enthusiastic on audio recording.]. (Youngest child, female, age 13, family #2)

Moreover, as the above quotes allude to, a comparative analysis revealed that it was the fathers' involvement and contributions in highly visible roles on the field or ice that were talked about and given prevalence within the young people's discourse. The gendered importance of this analysis is important to consider as six of the seven mothers were involved in visible roles on the field or ice. In contrast to discussion about the fathers' involvement, there were few examples of the mothers' representation in visible positions and when they did occur, they were framed with less enthusiasm or a sense of pride. As one daughter said with unenthusiastic intonation: "She was my coach . . . she would help people who got injured. She's like manager or something this year for my team" (Youngest child, male, age 10, family #1).

It was clear, too, that absent from the young people's talk were the contributions of their mothers' formal, yet invisible roles such as the league's board of directors. This is particularly noteworthy, as half of the mothers in this study were involved in hidden leadership volunteer roles. As demonstrated by one daughter's response when she was probed directly about her mother's formal, yet hidden role: ["Interviewer: How do you feel about your mom being president of the skating club?"] Daughter: "It doesn't bother me or anything. I don't have anything to do with the organizing or anything like that" (Middle child, female, age 12, family #5).

### 5.1.2. Mothers' hidden informal volunteer labor

Although the mothers spent considerable time in informal volunteer initiatives such as fundraising, the young people's responses indicated that these responsibilities might be seen as less relevant. This was evident by a complete absence of the sons' discourse related to their mothers' informal volunteer labor. However, although it was not readily discussed, when probed further, comparative analysis between the sons' and daughters' responses revealed that the daughters did have some level of awareness related to their mothers' informal labor. (Albeit, once again these stories were told without enthusiasm and required much probing relative to the stories shared about their fathers' on-field roles.) As this daughter illustrated during her interview:

[Interviewer: Are your parents involved in the behind the scenes of your sports?] They help out just a little bit but they're not the main coaches or assistants or anything. [Interviewer: What do they do?] My mom with hockey, she'll get everything organized and when we have auctions or little sales or something – she'll help out at a table or something like that. [Interviewer: Do you like her doing that job?] It doesn't make a difference, but you know, if she wants to do it, good. You know, it makes her feel good helping out or whatever, so yeah it doesn't matter. (Youngest child, female, age 12, family #5)

The first theme revealed the gendered nature of the parents' leadership roles and the implications it had for the young people's perceptions of the value and importance of their responsibilities. The fathers' visible volunteer labor (e.g., coach, trainer) was more readily acknowledged by the young people compared to visible volunteer labor filled by the mothers. Moreover, hidden formal and informal labor (e.g., Board of Directors, fundraiser) that was typically the mothers' responsibility was less readily acknowledged by the young people, and this was particularly evident for the sons.

## 5.2. Enhancing a sense of connection

The second theme revealed the importance of youth sport volunteerism to foster and build the parent–child relationship. Underlying much of the young people's talk about their parents' volunteer roles in youth sport was the notion of enhanced connection with their parents through moments of togetherness and skill development.

### 5.2.1. Enjoying moments of parent–child togetherness

Parent volunteerism in youth sport was highly valued for its potential to foster a sense of togetherness through shared moments and time. For example, one daughter explained: "I just like having her there. Like I can see her" (Youngest child, female, age 10, family #6). Sentiments of enhanced connection were echoed by another child who explained one of the most memorable moments of his childhood that occurred over a decade ago:

It was like my second or third year of hockey. I really liked it because I think that was the year I got my first goal or something. It was in a tournament and I just remember looking at the bench instead of looking up in the crowds, and just going to him . . . because he's on the bench. (Oldest child, male, age 15, family #6)

For this particular young person, his father was only involved as a coach during the first few years he played hockey; however, the opportunity to share this moment on the ice provided a powerful and lasting memory.

It was clear, too, that the young people enjoyed the physical proximity of having a parent who was also their coach, and this could enhance parent–child communication. For example: "I like it when they're coaching. I like it because after games you can talk to them more because they know what happened and what you're feeling too because they're just right there with you" (Oldest child, male, age 16, family #3).

### 5.2.2. Valuing skill development on the field or ice

Related to enhanced communication, several young people described the value of enhancing their skill development with their parent on the ice or field. For example:

And when you're on the bench they can give you little pointers. And they yell at you and correct you. And we never miss games. And like, if I'm having a really bad game, he'll say something like he'll tell me what I'm doing wrong and to go fix it. It's just those little pointers when they're on the bench. (Oldest child, female, age 13, family #7)

Baseball – usually my dad coaches it because he knows a lot about baseball. He gives my sister and I both good tips about baseball especially because he understands it so well. Scorekeeping, I guess there's no real way to say that you're not proud of him for that because he's really good at it. (Oldest child, male, age 14, family #2)

Analysis of the data also revealed that a sense of enhanced connection and communication developed from more instrumental benefits. One son, who had been coached by his mother and father, talked about getting the inside scoop: “because then I know what's happening and what they are thinking about” (Middle child, male, age 14, family #3). Moreover, the dual role of parent and coach seemed to provide a level of comfort and rapport that the child-athlete might not have experienced with a non-parent coach. This was best exemplified by one of the oldest participants in the study: “Well my dad usually coaches hockey and my mom usually coaches baseball. I'm a little more comfortable when you know, you're standing there you don't get more nervous. You're not afraid to speak up if you have a problem” (Oldest child, male, age 16, family #3).

Thus, having a parent involved with their sport organization could create a sense of enhanced connection and communication through togetherness and skill development as expressed by the young people. It was clear, too, based on the sons' and daughters' discourse that this was particularly heightened when the parent was in a highly visible and interactive role on the field or ice such as the coach or team manager.

### 5.3. Heightened tension with parent-volunteer roles

While for many young people the dual role of parent and volunteer was seen to shape the parent-child relationship in a positive way, this was not always the case. At the same time as these moments of relationship building, many of the young people perceived that the volunteer role could heighten tension and create strain within the parent-child relationship. In particular, conflict in relation to the young people's peer groups as well as the parent-sibling dyad was salient.

#### 5.3.1. Conflict in relation to young people's peer groups

Specifically, moments of conflict were evident when a parent was a visible volunteer in relation to the young people's peer group. For example, a sense of unease was expressed by some young people as they felt that their parents' coaching might negatively impact their relationship with their teammates. As two young people revealed, having their parent as a coach affected them in multiple ways:

Sometimes when they get yelling it's a little uncomfortable too. When they get pointing at people and stuff, you kind of feel the other person [teammate] that they're yelling at may look to you in a bad way just because you're their kid. (Oldest child, male, age 16, family #3)

Well, it is kind of weird when the other girls say comments about him and you're standing in line with them. Yeah, its like, [when] they don't want to do that drill. (Oldest child, female, age 13, family #7)

Another clear discomfort that several of the young people expressed was the embarrassment that they felt when their parents exhibited certain behaviors. As one child described it:

I don't really like it that much 'cause she's been the trainer for I think all the years I've played girls' hockey. I just feel like someone else should try it, because she's taken her turn at it. [Interviewer: Why do you feel this way?] She kind of says stuff or does stuff that's kind of embarrassing. [Interviewer: What would be an example?] She's just like weird sometimes or she wants people jumping and so she jumps. It's kind of embarrassing. (Middle child, female, age 12, family #4)

Other comments included a sense of heightened tension with the blurring of personal family stories into the sporting context. For example, one of the young people expressed times of embarrassment when her coach-mother shared stories from her home life with her teammates. She explained: “I like just having her there. But a disadvantage is that she embarrasses me. She tells stories about me sometimes not even related to baseball, and I get embarrassed and I push her off the baseball field” (Youngest child, female, age 10, family #6).

#### 5.3.2. Conflict with parent-sibling dynamics

It was clear, too, that the young people's discourse also took note of parental volunteer commitment to their sibling(s)' team(s). That is, it would shape the rhythms of daily life and how a parent could provide support to each respective child. As one participant explained, as a coach his father would have to go to his brother's games and this meant he would often have to miss his games: “Well this year my dad – because he coached my brother and he is off a lot of nights – its hard to make it a lot of the time [to his own games]. But whenever they could they both came” (Oldest child, male, age 16, family #3).

A comparative analysis of the data between sons' and daughters' responses revealed that the perceived loss of time to the parent-sibling dynamics was particularly evident for the daughters. For example, several of the daughters' talked about the lack of time spent with their parents. This was best illustrated by one daughter, who emphasized a sense of disconnect with her mother in relation to the time spent volunteering with her siblings' teams. As she described it: “Just not being able to talk



to the person ‘cause they’re running someone somewhere or just kind of like not being able to speak or just having the awkwardness like you haven’t talked for a while” (Middle child, female, age 12, family #4). It was also clear, that the parental volunteer labor in relation to their siblings’ sport involvement could also mean a noted absence in relation to their own sport participation and the perceived support they were given. As one daughter explained:

It’s usually my mom who comes because she’s the trainer. But I sometimes – I always hope – I scored once and I wish my dad would have seen that, but he was at my sister’s game. [Interviewer: So how does it make you feel when your dad’s not able to come?] Well, sometimes I’m pretty sad because I wish my dad would see me sometimes. (Youngest child, female, age 9, family #7)

Thus, the dual role of parent and volunteer could heighten tension and create strain within the parent–child relationship. This was particularly evident in relation to the young people’s peer groups and perceived moment of embarrassment related to what was deemed to be “goofy behaviors” and/or negative actions (i.e., yelling at teammates). Moreover, the dual role of parent-volunteer was also seen to facilitate perceived loss related to the sibling(s) interactions and relationship with their parent – and this was particularly evident within the daughters’ discussion.

## 6. Discussion

This study revealed the young people’s subjective meanings and experiences related to their parents’ volunteer roles in community-based youth sport and emphasized the gendered significance of highly visible volunteer labor. It gave attention to the perceived impact on parent–child relationships and interactions with the dual roles of parent-volunteer/child-athlete. This study also emphasized the importance of understanding diverse familial perspectives (e.g., young people). For example, in contrast to previous research that focused on parental perspectives (e.g., [Busser & Carruthers, 2010](#); [Trussell & Shaw, 2012](#); [Wiersma & Sherman, 2005](#)), for the young people in this study, the notion of their parents’ volunteering out of obligation or parental duty was completely absent. Comparative analysis revealed that the young people did not recognize that their parents were volunteering to ensure that they had the opportunity to participate or their parents might have some reluctance. Further, the purposive intent of volunteering to transmit altruistic values such as helping out, making a difference, and role modeling (e.g., [Busser & Carruthers, 2010](#); [Leberman & LaVoi, 2011](#)) was completely absent from the young people’s talk. Thus, the sons and daughters expressed little awareness or understanding of their parents’ motivations and contributions related to youth sport volunteerism.

The young people, however, did narrate excitement and stories related to their parents’ involvement in youth sport. These stories were clearly evident in the more visible and highly regarded volunteer roles (i.e., coach – particularly when fathers fulfilled such roles) compared to more informal volunteer responsibilities (i.e., fundraising – most often fulfilled by mothers) despite both requiring their parents’ time investment as well as emotional and physical energy. Moreover, the father’s more visible roles (e.g., announcer) were more readily acknowledged and something that they were enthusiastically proud of, compared to their mother’s visible roles (e.g., assistant coach) as well as invisible/hidden roles (e.g., Board of Directors) whereby they had to be continuously prompted for discussion in the interviews.

The young people’s recognition and appreciation of their parents’ contributions appears to reflect gendered dimensions of parent volunteer labor. Key qualitative studies examining parental perspectives have highlighted the gendered dimensions of volunteer work in youth sport organizations ([Trussell & Shaw, 2012](#)) and particularly in roles such as “helper” ([Kirk & MacPhail, 2003](#)) or “team mom” ([Messner & Bozada-Deas, 2009](#)). Research by [Thompson \(1999\)](#) and [Chafetz and Kotarba \(1999\)](#) criticized the invisible or informal volunteer labor that is essential to the successful operations of youth sport organizations, and yet remains largely unrecognized. Further, although somewhat sparse, the young people’s discourse as well as the mothers’ reporting of their volunteer labor (as shown on [Table 1](#)) supports shifting socio-cultural ideologies related to gender and the growing presence of mothers in youth sport coaching positions ([Leberman & LaVoi, 2011](#)).

The findings from this study emphasize the ways in which parent volunteer labor in youth sport helps “to recreate and naturalize the continuing gender inequalities in professional class work and family life” ([Messner, 2011](#), p. 154). The young people’s discourse and the narratives that they drew from created and conveyed cultural assumptions related to the social construction of gender and the reproduction of traditional gender relations related to motherhood and fatherhood ideologies. By revealing the gendered dimensions of the parents’ volunteer labor, the study emphasizes the underlying importance of “the responsibility on women’s shoulders to, through their ‘choices,’ straddle both worlds of public and domestic labor” ([Messner, 2011](#), p. 164). That is, youth sport and parent volunteer labor becomes a fruitful context in which broader gender ideologies are (re)constructed through the young people’s experiences.

Moreover, as [Weiss and Fretwell \(2005\)](#) point out, the dual roles of “coach and parent are often synonymous in youth sport, but little data-based research has been conducted on the parent-coach/child-athlete relationship” (p. 286). Research has typically investigated the influence of parent or coach independent of each phenomenon ([Weiss & Fretwell](#)). This study examined dual roles and how it may shape the parent–child relationship and broadens the conceptualization of the dual role to include parent-volunteer.

Aligned with previous research on adult perspectives (e.g., [Weiss & Fretwell, 2005](#); [Wiersma & Sherman, 2005](#)), it was clear in the young people’s discourse that parent volunteerism with the young people’s sport organization could create a sense of encouraged togetherness through enhanced connection and communication. This was particularly heightened when the parent was in a highly visible and interactive role on the field or ice. The idea of parental volunteerism

strengthening family relationships and interactions is similar to the leisure-based fathering literature as well as the family leisure literature (e.g., Kay, 2009; Shaw, 2008). That is, shared family activities have the potential to strengthen and build the parent–child relationship through enhanced communication opportunities.

And yet, similar to adult perspectives (see e.g., Weiss & Fretwell, 2005; Wiersma & Sherman, 2005), parental volunteerism in youth sport for the young people did not come without consequences. As this study revealed, although the parents' participation in volunteer labor (particularly formal on-field positions such as coach or team manager) could strengthen parent–child relationships, it could also cause considerable stress and tension. Further, heightened moments of conflict were evident with not only the young person whose team/league their parent was volunteering for, but at times, also with the sibling(s) who made note of their parent's "absence" in their lives (and this was particularly evident for the daughters). The young people also struggled with the dual role of parent/volunteer and their relationship with their peer group, and once again, this was particularly evident with on-field, visible positions.

Despite the apparent negative implications that parent volunteerism may have, it provides opportunities for positive family interactions and memories, maintaining the balance to its negative attributes and outcomes. In the lived-experiences and meanings of the young people, this study revealed that parent volunteer labor (particularly formal on-field positions) with youth sport organizations could be conceptualized as *inherently contradictory* (Shaw, 1997) as it relates to the family unit dynamics. That is, it builds and strengthens parent–child relationships at the same time as it creates tension and conflict. Framing the subjective experiences in a contradictory lens helps to capture the conflicting realities of this phenomenon. This is aligned with what Weiss and Fretwell (2005) refer to as cordial as well as contentious aspects of the parent-coach/child-player relationship, and a conundrum that clearly exists with the inability to separate these dual roles.

### 6.1. Practical implications

In terms of practical implications, the findings of this study call attention to the recognition of the high time commitment of parent volunteers in both a formal capacity (e.g., coach) as well as informal contributions (e.g., fundraising). Youth sport organizations may want to consider alternate models such as "job sharing" to help minimize the time commitment as well as provide parents with the opportunity to spend time supporting their other child(ren)'s sport involvement. Recognition of the informal or hidden volunteer roles may also bring awareness and appreciation to the (gendered) labor that appears to go relatively unnoticed by the young people (and particularly the sons). Modifications to the duration and intensity of the volunteer time commitment as well as recognition of the many different types of contributions may help provide a more enjoyable context for the families and heighten the parents' desire and ability to contribute to sport organizations.

### 6.2. Limitations and future research

Future research should consider the potential for the diversity and multiplicity of individual meanings from additional family units. Moreover, the design of this study was limited to the experiences of the 19 young people, and thus, decreases the generalizability of the findings. Large-scale survey designs would enhance the understanding of parental volunteerism and parents and young people's experiences as well as its impact on familial relationships and interactions. Other research designs, such as a longitudinal or retrospective study, might also provide new understanding about the potential long-term impact on parent–child relationships and subjective experiences from both the parents' and young people's perspectives. Future considerations focusing on parent–parent relationships as well as the parent–sibling and sibling–sibling dynamics would also shed light on how parents' volunteer labor impacts family dynamics and the multiplicity of meanings.

This exploratory study provides new insights into both sons' and daughters' gendered meanings of their parents' volunteer labor in youth sport organizations. As this study revealed, the daughters were more aware of their mothers' informal volunteer labor compared to the young men. The daughters were also more apt to speak about the perceived loss of time to their parent–child relationship due to their parents' volunteer labor with their siblings' teams. Future interpretive research may want to further examine these areas, as well as how youth sport volunteer labor helps to recreate and naturalize continuing gender inequalities. For example, do daughters have an easier time accepting their mother as a coach? How are mothers who take on highly, visible volunteer roles perceived by the young people? Do sons prefer their father or mothers to coach? Are sons or daughters more likely to see their parents' involvement as connecting or intrusive, and how do differing roles influence their perspective? As gender is embedded and created in everyday social interactions (Deutsch, 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987), an enhanced understanding of how young people perceive and construct their parents' volunteer labor within dominant ideological norms may shed light on how heteronormative gendered roles are reproduced and resisted within the sporting culture as well as other life contexts.

In sum, community youth sport constitutes a significant part of the social fabric of post-industrial societies and parent volunteers are integral to its success; youth sport programs would cease to exist without them. To effectively manage volunteers in the sport industry we "must have a clear understanding of sport volunteers and their experiences" (Doherty, 2006, p. 105). The results of this study would suggest that it is important to not only understand the infrastructure and capacity of organizations and its impact on the volunteer experience (see e.g., Misener & Doherty, 2009; Sharpe, 2006), but also the impact it may have on the family unit if we are to have a holistic understanding of community sport volunteerism.

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