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# **The Olympic family? Young people, family practices and the London 2012 Olympic Games**

Elizabeth Such

## **Abstract**

The London Olympic and Paralympic Games in 2012 sought to 'Inspire a Generation' of young people to engage in sport. The paper explores the ways in which a group of young people in the North West of England and the East of Scotland experienced the Games in the context of their everyday family and relational lives. Using a family practices theoretical framework and applying the concept of 'family ecocultural pathways', the paper examines how watching the Olympics on television served as an opportunity for families to express their sport and physical activity values, needs and goals in their everyday practices of 'doing' and 'being' a family. Empirical data from the study is presented alongside critical explorations of the neoliberal policy and political context of the London 2012 Games. Discussion focuses on how sport legacy policy (and sport and physical activity policy in general) could be reconceptualised and reconstructed to include a family practices perspective.

Keywords: sport legacy; family practices; ecocultural pathways, mega-event; policy

## Introduction

The London 2012 Olympic Games (the Games, London 2012<sup>1</sup>) was taglined with the ambition to ‘Inspire a Generation’ of young people to participate in sport. The success of the Games was predicated not only on its ability to ‘inspire’ during the competition but to encourage children and young people to develop a lifelong affinity with sport and physical activity (DCMS 2008). The extent to which this could be achieved is strongly contested not least because the evidence base for such an effect is weak at best (Coalter 2004, DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, ippr/Demos, 2004, London Assembly 2007, Mansfield *et al* 2010, McCartney *et al*, 2010; 2013; Weed *et al* 2009). The ambition for lifelong inspiration is contingent upon a complex of factors that provide the context for everyday life throughout the lifecourse. One of the critical factors that shape children’s and young people’s sport and physical activity is their family lives and relationships. For many, the family provides the first contact children have with informal and formal worlds of sport and the influence of family members on continuing engagement, attitudes towards sport and physical activity, opportunities to play sport and the types of activities engaged in is crucial (Côté 1999; Kay & Spaaij 2012; Dagkas & Quarmby 2012). The legacy policies of London 2012 rarely accounted for this range of familial influences, instead focussing on individualised programmes of sport and physical education provision. Adding a family-focus into the sport and mega-event policy mix presents complexities for both theory and practice.

The aim of this paper is to scrutinise the ‘Inspire a Generation’ slogan and intention by exploring both the responses of young people to London 2012 six-eight months after the Games and by examining sport and physical activity in the everyday relational lives of the young people in question. This is done with a focus on family practices: the ways in which young people make sense of the world through their relationships with others in their intimate lives. The paper achieves this by firstly examining the theories and concepts of a family practices perspective and through the adaptation of a model of the ‘physically active family’ based on Christensen (2004). The policy context of London 2012 in terms of health, youth and sport policy is then outlined before data from 23 qualitative interviews with young people are presented to unpick how the ‘inspire’ message was received and interpreted during London 2012. Concluding discussions focus on the conceptual and theoretical contribution of the paper to the field of sports legacy policy and planning (and to sports policy research in general) by offering a novel perspective on the ways in which family and relationships could be used to lever participation.

## Theories and concepts: family practices in sport and leisure

Studies of family life and sport and leisure activity have a long history in research. Classic studies of the family leisure lives of couples spans back to the work of the Rapoport in the 1970s (Rapoport and Rapoport 1975). Subsequent inter-disciplinary and international interest in the family has continued to highlight the importance of family influences and contexts to the sport and leisure lives of children and young people. In addition, the field of family studies has made significant sociological contributions to the theoretical and conceptual understandings of what is ‘family’, how it is experienced and attributed meaning. A familial approach that draws together these strands of work is novel in studies of sport and mega-events and represents an emergent field of conceptual and

theoretical development and empirical exploration. In an attempt to develop a starting point for this exploration the following seeks to:

- i) describe the theoretical underpinnings of a 'family practices' perspective – one of the most substantial developments in family theorising since the 1990s;
- ii) develop a conceptual model of family sport and physical activity practices based on Christensen's model of the health-promoting family (Christensen 2004);
- iii) interrogate the sport and physical activity eco-cultural pathway of families using extant literature to illustrate how within-family processes mediate sport and physical activity.

### **i) The 'family practices' perspective**

Since the late 1990s, sociological studies of family life have increasingly focussed on what families do in their practice of everyday life (Silva and Smart 1997). This movement heralded a shift away from an understanding of 'The Family' in terms of its structure and/or function. Structural approaches tended to focus on 'types' of families and the role of families in society. Functional approaches focused more on the roles of family members and how these contribute to family functioning; a perspective still dominant in much North American, social-psychological approaches to family life and leisure (Smith et al. 2009; Buswell et al. 2012). Both of these approaches are limited to generating understandings of the family as a 'unit' or a 'thing' (Morgan, 1996: 199) that is rather static and offers limited insight into how family life is experienced and changes over time. Research on family life trajectories, for example, highlight the complex interweaving of family actors' interrelationships over time and challenge the notion that 'family' is a state rather than a process (Such, 2006). As a result of this conceptual change, sociological investigations began to focus on the 'large range of practices, experiences and statuses' (Morgan 2011b) that characterise family life. This approach connects, rather than views in isolation, other key sociological concerns such as paid and unpaid work and gender that link family life to broader social processes. In taking this approach, a family practices perspective seeks to more accurately account for the everyday lived experience of 'doing family' within its social, spatial and temporal context. It also notes that family practices are beyond acts of 'doing' and include ways of 'being' that imply practices of membership (Morgan 2011b), exclusion and inclusion. To illustrate this Harrington demonstrated how everyday family leisure practices were constituted and experienced, identifying leisure as 'purposive'; a means by which families express 'togetherness' and a method of performing what it means to be 'family' in a classed social context (Harrington 2014).

This refocusing of studies leads us towards an understanding of family members as actors, constructing and deconstructing what it means to be related biologically, socially, morally and intergenerationally. It also highlights the contingent and negotiated nature of what it means to 'do' and 'be' family and reveals the 'messiness' of interconnected histories, biographies and everyday, interrelated behaviours. This 'turn' in family studies (Morgan 2011a) has informed a rich vein of theorising and primary research not only in 'family practices' (Morgan 1996; 2004; 2011b) but 'personal life' (Smart 2007; Smart and Neale 1999) and 'intimacy' (Jamieson 1998; Gabb 2010). The value of this approach is that it enables the recognition of diverse contemporary patterns of intimacy (Giddens 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Jamieson 1998) and so does not promote one 'version' of the family over another. This approach is also amenable to embedding within it accounts of different family actors. In parallel sociological developments, the social study of

childhood in the 1980s and 1990s began to note the absence of the 'voice' of children and young people in research on family life and went about redressing that imbalance (James et al. 1998; Jenks 1996; Prout and James 1990).

## **ii) A conceptual model of the sport and physical activity of families**

The development of a family practices approach and a movement towards listening to the voice of children can inform understandings of children and young people's sport and physical activity in the context of family life. Christensen (2004) in her presentation of the 'health-promoting family' recognised the need to address the neglected area of "how, in their everyday life, families engage in promoting the health of their members" (Christensen 2004: 377). Using a conceptual model that combines the evidence from family practices and childhood studies' research, Christensen identifies how family health practices are mediated by factors external and internal to the family. The model, which is modified and reproduced below in the context of sport and physical activity (see Figure 1), holds great potential for improving understandings of how families' sport and physical activity is constructed in the everyday.

**Figure 1 here.**

According to this model, the sport and physical activity of families, which is located at the centre, is placed within a broader social and political context. Decades of the study of the sport participation of populations have routinely highlighted the importance of these macro-level factors and local and national policy has been pursued to tackle inequalities of access and outcome. Despite this, participation levels continue to vary widely by socio-economic and demographic variables. Secondly, outside of the intimate relational context of the model, community influences such as school and neighbourhood factors and access to services shape the context with in which young people participate or do not. Finally, at the core of the model lies a complex of relational factors that influence sport/physical activity behaviour. These include genetic factors, family histories of physical activity and sport practices and the child as an agent of physically active behaviour. In addition, the values, goals, needs and practices of families interact to generate an 'ecocultural pathway' (Weisner 2002); a way of 'doing' and 'being' family through the use of resources internal and external to the family. Within this pathway, families 'have their own goals and values that they pursue through their daily routines' (Christensen 2004:379). These may or may not be achieved and are balanced against other needs, goals and values. It is within this ecocultural pathway – a complex of values, needs, goals and practices - that this study seeks to examine the sport and physical activity practices of families.

## **iii) Evidencing the 'family ecocultural pathway'**

Although no studies to date have applied the concept of the family ecocultural pathway to sport and physical activity, substantial research evidence has been collated that help elucidate what it might look like. In terms of families' values, research has shown families often, for example, value 'time together as a family' and may balance this with a value of promoting children's participation in sport or physical activity. This may result in co-participation with parents and children in family-based physical activity but equally it may not, depending on competing goals, pressures and imperatives, for example, earning a sufficient wage. 'Family sporting cultures' have been identified as important in fostering participation among children and young people (Birchwood *et al* 2008; Haycock and Smith 2014; Wheeler 2011). These cultures emerge as crucial in the 'socialisation' of children and

young people into sport and physical activity (Kay 2000; Wheeler 2011). This is not to suggest such socialisation is a unidirectional, inactive process but one which is “dynamic, reciprocal and contingent ... characterised by degrees of negotiation between young people and parents” (Haycock and Smith 2014, pp.286-87).

In terms of families’ sport and physical activity goals, a goal-orientation has been identified to exist among ‘sporty parents’ who employ a set of strategies and practices to ensure their children’s participation (Wheeler 2011, Wheeler and Green, 2014). Among middle-class parents this is termed an ‘investment’ in children’s ‘sporting capital’ and part of the process of middle class reproduction (Wheeler and Green 2014). Shaw and Dawson (2001) suggest this activity by parents is ‘purposive’ in that it fulfils perceived parental obligations to provide children with worthwhile activities that are productive and meaningful.

In terms of practices, Harrington’s exploration of classed family leisure identified ‘display’ practices that reinforced and embodied different social statuses or classes. She noted that families undertook reproductive leisure practices that displayed the kind of family that parents wanted to be seen. Display practices for middle income parents intersected with values in the ecocultural pathway: the importance of physically active leisure was valued, acted out and displayed publically. Participation in sports, bicycle rides and bushwalking were cited as examples of purposive leisure that was considered ‘for the good of their children now and in later life’ (Harrington 2014: 12), highlighting the ‘concerted cultivation’ of middle class children (Laureau, 2003). Contrasting this, low income families placed paramountcy to the value of family bonding and togetherness through leisure, thus highlighting the value of ‘fitting in’ rather than ‘standing out’ (Gillies 2005 cited in Harrington 2014). Leisure practices were constrained by income so low-cost activities that practiced ‘being together’ were commonplace.

The combination of these goals, needs, values and practices points to a broader observation that sport and leisure is a forum for ‘doing family’ (Trussell 2009; Shaw and Dawson 2001; 2003/04) and one which warrants further exploration from a scholarly and policy perspective. It is notable that, excluding Harrington’s study, much research to date has focussed on the goals, values and practices of families from relatively high socio-economic backgrounds in the Global North. By implication, these studies have also concentrated on sports and physical activity within families at the ‘performance’ end of the sports continuum rather than the ‘participation’ end. In other words, children and young people’s sport and physical activity has been viewed in the context of relatively privileged families who promote competitive engagement and achievement. In addition, Kay’s qualitative study of young Muslim women’s engagement in sport in the UK highlights the different ways in which sport can be supported, promoted and constrained in diverse family settings (Kay 2006).

### **Family relationships in UK sport policy, politics and London 2012 legacy**

The role of families in the promotion of sport and physical activity is often referred to in political discussions but is matched with only partial acknowledgement in terms of policy. As a whole, family policy in the UK is characterised by considerable paradigmatic continuity, despite changes in political administration (Daly 2010). The family continues to be conceptualised as a largely private domain in the context of a minimalist state interventionist paradigm with institutions only becoming involved

in cases of need or crisis (ibid.) Notwithstanding this, Gillies (2012) points to an increasing neo-liberal emphasis on family 'competencies' in providing children and young people with the skills and abilities to function in modern society and an increasingly interventionist agenda in, for example, the practice of parenting. In terms of sport and physical education, policy has primarily focussed on individualised provision of sport in schools, communities and club settings through the two main government departments (Department of Culture, Media and Sport and Department for Education). Physical activity policy, although having shifted in its ministerial 'home' over the past 10 years (between sport and health) is the current responsibility of the Department of Health which also views policy through a distinctly individualised lens (Katikireddi et al. 2013). Straddling these two policy spheres of sport and physical activity is the London 2012 Olympic and Paralympic legacy policy delivered by a dizzying range of governmental, quasi-governmental (e.g. London Organizing Committee of the Olympic Games) and commercial partners and governance arrangements (Girginov 2012).

At the heart of London's ambitions was a sport and physical activity legacy to promote health and for the benefit of young people. The slogan 'Inspire a Generation' launched 100 days before the start of the Games was, by its conclusion, ubiquitous. As stated by Lord Sebastian Coe, the Chair of the London 2012 organising committee: "Every one of those individual performances will create a symphony of inspiration that will create lasting change" (Guardian, 2012). This ambition relates to a well-rehearsed dominant political belief: the demonstration of sporting success and brilliance 'trickles down' to the rest of the population and encourages greater engagement in sport. Existing evidence suggests such a demonstration effect is minimal and, in particular, has no effect on those populations who are least active or engaged in sport (Coalter 2004, DCMS/Strategy Unit 2002, ippr/Demos, 2004, London Assembly 2007, Mansfield *et al* 2010, McCartney *et al*, 2010; 2013; Weed *et al* 2009). Promises about a lasting physical activity and sport for health legacy are therefore contentious (Bloyce and Smith 2012). Never before had an Olympic and Paralympic Games made such legacy claims (Weed *et al* 2009) nor was there any clear convincing evidence base for them (Bloyce and Lovett 2012).

The emergence and promotion of the sport and physical activity for health legacy for young people has its roots in dominant neoliberal discourse, policy and practice that moves along two axes: 1) youth projectisation (Gillies 2011) and 2) healthism/'healthification' (Fusco 2006, 2007). In Gillies' (2011) terms, children's and young people's lives have become 'projectised' through policy in the pursuit of developing the 'competent self', one which is a self-governing, responsible, healthy citizen. Alexander *et al's* (2014) empirical observations reveal that children are encouraged through public bodies and discourses to self-govern play and leisure to promote health. Embedded in this is an individualised healthism; referred to as a pervasive health consciousness (Crawford 1980) of contemporary public institutions; a 'new public health' (Peterson and Lupton 1996) that highlights the responsibility of individuals to pursue a healthy lifestyle. Taken together, these principles do not altogether neatly extend to children and young people with responsibility for health messily split between those of the child/young person and the parent/guardian and other responsible adults such as teachers. These unresolved tensions between child and parental responsibilities can be seen in several spheres of social policy (Such and Walker 2005).

Sport, physical activity and physical education policies reflect these dominant themes and tensions: they focus on the project of youth, the development of healthy bodies and self-regulation. Family

practices constitute a muddled area of policy discourse and policy-making within this. Policies that focus on the individual (such as behaviourist policies) are more straight-forward to make and implement (Katikireddi et al. 2013) whereas the rhetorical power of 'the family' is strong (Gillies 2011). In addition, the policy narrative is complicated by long-standing tensions with the notion of 'sport for sport's sake' or sport as an end in itself rather than a means to an end (Collins 2010). Devine (2013) contends that former UK Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, that adopted the former Labour administration's sport and Olympic legacy policy, pursued a competitive sport for sports sake agenda through, for example, the school sport strategy. What is clear is that these narratives co-exist and represent long-term tensions between different government agendas both within and between administrations.

The 'inspire a generation' message and background policy can be seen in the context of these broader contemporary neoliberal institutional and discursive trends. Although identified as more of a 'branding' rather than a funding programme (Devine 2013), beyond the slogan there lay a programme of Olympic-related activities and initiatives that stretched from home to overseas (cf. the international development 'International Inspiration' programme). A physical activity and sport legacy policy for children and young people has been split between several different political administrations (Labour 2005-2010; Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition 2010-2015; Conservative 2015-) and can be loosely categorised into policies relating to health, education and sport although there is much overlap. It is beyond the scope of this paper to provide a detailed policy analysis across these spheres, not least because of dispersal of responsibility across departments and quasi-governmental organisations and shifts in political administrations over time (see reviews such as Milton and Bauman 2015 for analysis of physical activity policy). Notable policy milestones include the 'Legacy Action Plan' (DCMS 2008) which stated an aim to get two million people 'more active' by 2012. This goal was 'quietly dropped' after the change in government in 2010 (Milton & Bauman 2015). Significant funding was directed to national governing bodies to deliver increased sporting participation; a strategy that also is likely to shift after the consultation on sport policy carried out in 2015 (DCMS, 2015). Additional emphasis was placed on 'healthy living' social marketing through the Department of Health Change4Life campaign which began in 2009. Sitting alongside the 2008 legacy plan was the Labour government's PE and school sport strategies that initially predated the successful Olympic bid. PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) and later Physical Education and Sport Strategy for Young People (PESSYP) represented a large investment in school sport; the 2008 Legacy Action Plan identified a commitment to increase the guaranteed minimum hours of PE and school sport from two to five hours. This commitment alongside funding for School Sport Partnerships was withdrawn post-2010 in favour of the Primary PE and Sport Premium, the School Games and health-focussed Change4Life Sports Clubs (2012-2015) (see DCMS 2010 and DCMS 2012 for a heavily revised legacy action plan). . . It is noteworthy that policy and delivery in these legacy spheres are very much focussed on provision *for* children and young people as individuals. Education and sport policy spheres supports the provision of sporting opportunities for children and young people largely outwith wider facilitative relationships such as family and peer networks. Health-focussed initiatives such as Change4Life recognise relational dependencies in the 'provision' of healthy lifestyles for children via their parents. It also clearly, however, fits with the neoliberal projectisation of youth and healthism described above. Relationality is, therefore, narrowly defined and fails to make connections between family-level 'health choices' and the broader social environment.



## Methodological approach

This exploratory study adopted a qualitative, interpretative approach in order to access young peoples' experience of the Games in the context of their everyday, interconnected and family lives. The main objective of the project was to explore how the London 2012 Olympic Games was experienced by young people from a family practices perspective. To achieve this aim, the following research questions were asked:

- (How) did children and young people watch the Games?
- In what terms (if any) were children and young people 'inspired' by the Games (attitudinal and behavioural)?
- Did the 'inspiration effect' influence parents, siblings or friends? If so, how?
- How was 'inspiration' manifest in the relationships between young people, family members and friends?
- What were the outcomes of this dis/engagement? (action [sport/physical activity], non-action [attitudes/orientation to sport/physical activity])
- What were the processes by which action/non-action were negotiated with family and friends?

The study group of 23 young people aged 12-18 were selected on a purposive and convenience basis as participants of sporting activity at out-of-school-time groups. They were not elite participants although some took part in occasional competitions e.g. football, badminton, athletics.

The sampling strategy involved engaging a sport community trust in the North West of England and a community football club in the East of Scotland. In line with practice guidelines (Shaw et al. 2011), approaches were made to the Trust's and club's key (adult) gatekeepers who engaged in discussions about the best ways to engage with the children and young people who made use of their facilities. Materials for the research and distribution/sampling strategies were agreed and finalised with the help of the organisations involved. Both the Trust and the club were located in mid- to high- areas of social disadvantage with the Scottish sample residing in an area with a very disadvantaged socio-economic profile. In order to derive a sense of the geographical and social 'reach' of the London 2012 Games, participants were outside of the area where most of the Games' venues were located in the South East of England. Young men outnumbered young women in the study group with 17 males and 6 females. The Scottish group were notably older than the North West England group. As a result, the young women in the study were, on average, younger than the young men. The study group was not ethnically diverse owing to the social-geographic profile of the study areas. Early findings from the study have been published elsewhere (Such 2013). The current discussion builds on these initial findings by including data from ten additional interviews but the primary contribution of the discussion below is the application and development of the conceptual framework outlined above. The sampling strategy and size, location and characteristics of the study group all represent limits to the conclusions that can be drawn from the study. An analysis of geographical/spatial influences on the 'decay' or otherwise of the inspiration effect, for example, is limited by the absence from the study of young people from the London and the South East of England.

Prior to the interviews, the author visited the research sites to observe the activities and interactions of the young people, to introduce them to the project and to the researcher. It was also an

opportunity to develop a rapport with the children and young people, some of their parents, the sports group (adult) leaders (as recommended by Punch 2002) and to emphasise that it was the views of children and young people that were of interest. This reflected the operationalisation of the concept of the child as the competent subject and expert of their own experience (Harden et al. 2000). It was also explained that parental consent was required for children aged under 16 and parental consent forms were distributed for the children to return. The principle of informed consent was exercised so that the children and young people in the study had a clear idea about what the project was about and that they could answer questions in any way they chose or not answer them at all (Davis 1998).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews which lasted between 15-45 minutes were conducted with young people alone, in pairs and in small groups. There was much variance in the extent to which the young people in the interviews expanded on their responses to questions relating to the Games, indicating that those in the study variously engaged with the topic (Kirk 2007). It was important, however, to ensure that probing for answers and expansion was exercised in the context of openness and consideration for young people's relatively powerless position in society (Punch 2002) and own agendas (Kirk 2007). It was important to emphasise that there was no 'right' answer to questions and that the participants could engage on their own terms (Punch 2002). A range of techniques were used to encourage open answers and discussion, including image prompts of some of the 'faces of the Games' (for example Mo Farah, Jessica Ennis and Bradley Wiggins) to help explore young people's memories of the Games and some of the personal/family histories that some of the elite athletes might have had (ibid.).

Interviews were carried out in the winter of 2012-13, about six to eight months after the summer Olympics. They were audio-recorded and transcribed in full. Recommended ethical procedures were followed in the conduct of the interviews and throughout the research process (Shaw *et al.* 2011; Social Research Association 2003). Interview data were managed with the assistance of the software NVivo 10. Data were coded thematically in analysis according to the topics determined by the aims and objectives of the study, its theoretical underpinning and those emerging from interviews. Themes that garnered longer discussions or reflections and thus produced large quantities of data were sub-coded to focus in on the nuance of opinion and experience. Connections between categories were made by way of a process of axial coding and a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning was adopted. All participants chose their own pseudonym for the research.

## **Research findings and discussion**

Using the narratives of the young people in the study and the conceptual framework presented, the following identifies how the 2012 Games were experienced by the children and young people in the study group within the context of their everyday familial and relational lives.

### ***Watching the Olympics as a family practice***

All of the young people in the study group watched the Olympics on television to a greater or lesser degree. Only two participants indicated that they had no real interest in it and limited recollection of it. Some watched it every day, others just dipped in and out of the extensive coverage. Almost all in the study watched the Games in a relational setting usually with family but sometimes with friends. Parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents and friends were all referenced as co-watchers. As noted by

Lull (2014), the family is the most common viewing group. Many different sports and sports stars were watched during the Games. As reported previously (Such 2013), popular sports included track and field athletics, football, swimming, hockey, tennis, cycling. A vast array of sports were highlighted in discussion including horse riding, table tennis, volleyball, BMX racing, boxing and badminton, indicating that there was a broad level of engagement in the event. Popular athletes were recalled and included Usain Bolt, Jessica Ennis and Mo Farah. Many of the participants particularly enjoyed British and Scottish success. As Ryan (aged 16) commented: “[I liked] watching British gold medals ... you see them like competing against top athletes in the world and thinking like you’ve got someone for your nation that’s up there with them”. This excitement of watching British athletes in the Games and the type of atmosphere in the household when events were taking place was often recalled:

Em (aged 13): Mo Farah’s run ... everyone in the house was cheering! ... They were always talking about it and everyone was like recreating that moment. And it was getting very loud!

A similar atmosphere was described by those watching it with friends: “Well me and my friends were just both cheering for the same person, so just shouting ‘come on!’” (Jamie, aged 14). George (aged 13) in his reference to Jessica Ennis commented: “we [the family] were all cheering her on, hoping for her to win... when the 400 metres started we were just like, come on Jessica, come on! Really cheering her on”. He also noted that he would discuss potential winners with his family co-watchers: “we had a debate on who would win, we’d always be like he’d win or they’d win, just arguing!” This type of engagement in television viewing between family members reflects observational studies on the family practice of television viewing (Morley 1986; Lull 2014). It demonstrates that television as a family leisure activity is not a passive pursuit but part of the everyday practice of family life and, as such, reflective of and active in the construction of what it is to ‘be’ and ‘do’ family. Cheering, debating and arguing all formed part of watching the Olympics, reflecting broader observations about family life that reflect belonging and intimacy (McCarthy 2012).

Some of the young people noted how the Olympics was something beyond the ordinary or the usual sport event and so drew in some of their friends and family who were not otherwise particularly interested in sport or at least sport on the television. One of the interviewees (Paddy, aged 18) mentioned watching the Olympics with his brother who had no real interest in sport, other than during the Olympics: “He has no, he has no sort of, I don’t know, no liking in sport ... But when we were watching the Olympics he quite enjoyed it, like the rowing and stuff like that.” Similarly Ryan (aged 16) commented: “I don’t really like take interest but I’d watch it like if someone else was watching ... there was like sports that I’d never even heard of... so it was kind of quite interesting to watch them”. These findings highlight how wanting to be together encouraged co-watching and engagement in the event. They demonstrate the influence commanded by family members on the behaviours and interests of others; thus devising a family practice.

This extension of encouraging co-watching to participants who were not usually interested in (televised) sport was reflected by George (aged 13) who said: “No matter whatever programme was on, it would be the Olympics that we watched ... it like brought us together just to watch sport”. This could be related to Weed et al’s (2009) development of the concept of the ‘festival effect’ in relation to the Games but at a micro level. It was evident that the hosting the Games in England were an added incentive to watch and feel involved. This was compounded by the ‘drawing in’ of co-

watchers in a family environment, the sense that whole families were involved in watching the Games together and, as such, participating in this at a distance. Some of the Scottish participants suggested they felt dissociated from the Games owing to its English location. Jack (aged 18) commented “maybe it would be good if it was near, like in our own country” suggesting that being involved at a family level is contingent on a sense of association at the level of social identification. A comparison here with the Commonwealth Games held in Glasgow in 2014 would be instructive. In sum, the ‘everydayness’ of the family practice of television watching was enhanced by the Olympics; it provided a specific reason for families to watch television together in common pursuit.

### ***Watching the Olympics and family values, needs and goals***

As a relatively rare event with a specific subject matter (sport), London 2012 gave some families the opportunity to reflect upon their own sport and/or physical activity values, needs and goals and how they ‘did’ sport as a family. Some suggested their parents were influenced by performances and projected these shifting goals and values on their children. For some this came in the form of parental support, as Laura commented: “I think my mum and dad were a bit more enthusiastic about me and my brother doing sports now” (Laura, aged 14). Jordan (aged 13) commented that: “They [parents] thought it was like dead inspiring and want me like to do sport and things ... My mum just kept saying like it’s really inspiring like how much they’ve like put into the Olympics and stuff so I think it’s inspired my mum a bit”. Oscar (aged 12) thought that London 2012 had also impacted on his sister’s and mum’s behaviours towards physical activity saying that they did more after the Olympics. Of course, these reported changes in orientation and action may be transient. Nevertheless, some in the study group reported how changes to practices were made as a result of a shift in attitude relating to the value of sport during/after the Olympics:

Before obviously they [parents] were supportive always if we wanted to do something but now like, I don’t know how to describe it, like before my mum and dad cos like my brother does a lot of sports, I’m not really sporty but my brother says a lot but they were like saying ‘enough’s enough’ cos they had to take him somewhere like every day and they didn’t have time but now they’re like making time for things more and they’re a bit more enthusiastic about us doing things. Like I started netball this year after the Olympics. So ... (Laura, aged 14)

These types of practice-based changes to family life were not frequently mentioned in relation to the Olympics, although many of the young people talked about the practical support their parents, in particular, gave them in helping them play sport (see below). More common was a reported new emphasis in the narrative around sport that came about as a result of watching the Olympics. This focussed on parental encouragement to strive to achieve in sport, as the following comment indicates:

My mum said ‘imagine, imagine if it’s you there’, and I thought it will take a long time but the amount of sports I do, I’ve got to succeed in one of them hopefully ... she was telling me if you want, try some more sports, but I said there’s no more sports I can try, otherwise I’m never going to get my school work done, she said, well make sure you don’t quit any of these. So I think that was her way in saying ‘keep this up’. (Goalkeeper, aged 12)

Similar comments were reported by others. Em (aged 13) commented: “they (parents) kept on like saying that could be you if you keep it up”; George (aged 13) suggested that his family had been inspired: “It’s really inspired us like to do more sport and to think we could be there one day”.

While this narrative around the goals and values of sport as striving to be successful, putting in hard work for a return and elite ambition was largely accepted as unproblematic, some of those in the discussions were less sure that it was wholly positive. This was evident in reported parental narratives that were perceived as placing pressure or unrealistic expectations on young people, for example Georgia (aged 13) reported:

My Mum was like, ‘Georgia, this is what you can be like if you carry on with a sport’. I was like ‘okay’” [disbelieving] [everyone laughs] ... [I told] my mum like ‘I wished I’d carried it on’ and she went ‘well, if you really find something you like and stick to it then someday you’ll end up in the Olympics’.

Such a narrative ties in with the ‘investment’ thesis that has been evidenced by research with middle-class parents (Wheeler 2011). It demonstrates the value placed on sport as something to strive for not only as end in itself but also as something reflective of a young person’s positive characteristics of individual determination and achievement. Dylan (aged 16) commented how his parents related Olympic and sporting elite performance to his own sport: “[They say] just aim to be like him. Stick at it. Just work hard and then you might become him ... Be committed”. This ‘investment’ narrative fits well within the broader concept of the projectisation of youth (Gillies 2012): engagement in sport is viewed as purposeful, positive self-governance and responsible (‘committed’). Internalisation of this, however, may result in damaged self-efficacy in physical activity and sport and actually discourage participation.

The story of “determination” and “you can only be the best that you want to be” (Ryan and Jack, aged 18) if you work hard and “believing in theirselves” (Kai, aged 17) was replicated among the young people when reflecting on what it took to be an elite athlete. As shown above, this may act to undermine self-efficacy as much as promote it and thus represents a problematic dialogue for policy intended to prevent young people “sitting on their bums and that” (Cameron, aged 16). For example, Paddy reflected on his own tennis after watching Andy Murray by commenting: “[it] just showed me how bad I was” and Laura commented (aged 14): “I was like, ‘wow, I can’t do that’ basically what I thought about the whole thing it’s like ‘oh God, I’m rubbish at everything’”. This highlights the potential danger identified by Hindson *et al* (1994) that rather than encourage participation, the demonstration of world-class athletic achievement can discourage it. Nevertheless, the young people in the study highlighted how the narrative of the value of sport and the goal of sporting achievement is promoted at the family level, forming part of the sport and physical activity ecocultural pathway of family life.

### ***Relating Olympic performance to the everyday family ecocultural pathway***

Many young people commented that they felt the Olympics had influenced their families’ outlook on sport and physical activity but the extent to which this could be disentangled from their pre-existing orientation towards sport was difficult. Discussion that linked the Games to the everyday often led to revealing insights into how sport and physical activity were interwoven with key relationships between family and friends and contributed to the construction of an ecocultural pathway. Through

discussion it was noticeable that family relationships were central to the lifeworlds of young people when it came to sport and physical activity and that friendships were essential 'in-situ' relationships that were formed and/or maintained through sport.

#### *Key lifeworld figures: Family*

Family were referenced as introducing participants into a sport or a range of sports, reflecting how sport was valued and viewed as a legitimate family and/or parenting goal. Parents were often mentioned but so were grandparents, siblings, aunties and cousins.

Jack (aged 16): ... I go to games with my auntie, she's really into her football, she like played football for a professional team when she was younger. ... So if there's anyone that's inspired me it's going to be her.

Tom (aged 12): The Olympics has inspired me but my main inspiration is my grandma. ... She's interested in what I do and she, she's like, I don't know she just really like talks to me about stuff that I could work on and it really helps.

These comments suggests the family net is widely cast when it comes to sharing sport and physical activity values and goals within the ecocultural pathway. Family were also there to support basic engagement needs: football boots, fees for playing, transport to participate and so on:

Jolie (aged 14): My dad makes sure I can go to everything after school and then when I'm with my mum at the weekends she always takes me to the stables with my cousin cos she has a horse so she always takes me there.

In addition, family members were essential 'coaches' in the sense that they provided emotional support and were important 'critical friends'. In Em's (aged 13) words they were important because they: "always say well done, even if I've not done very good". Similarly, George noted:

He's [dad] sort of like a coach in a way ... like in the car when he's driving, he's always giving me little tips because when you're playing you don't really notice things that you do wrong, like little things, because he's watching, he's always telling me what I do wrong and what I do right and what I should do better. ... it's really helpful! (George, aged 13)

These findings reflect those of Kay (2000) and Kirk *et al* (1997a; 1997b) who noted that committed young sports people relied heavily on the support of family to meet essential participation and support needs. This also seems evident at the level of more casual engagement as well as high performance participation. It highlights how sport and physical activity represents the values of the families of the study group and the importance of the material and emotional resources facilitating it, forming part of the ecocultural pathway for physical activity.

Further commentary on the role of family relationships in participation related to how family members supported one another in their sporting activity and how young people's participation motivated parents to become more active. As Goalkeeper and Tom commented:

I think it's influenced my family ... the rest of your family but in a way keep your sport going and still egg on your family but make sure that your sport is vital to keep it going. Because my mum and my dad support me but they'll keep going their sport as well (Goalkeeper, aged 12).

I think I've inspired my mum to do sport because she didn't do anything but when I've accomplished what I've done, she's like started doing stuff, like she does Zumba and stuff (Tom, aged 12).

This highlights the important function of intra-family reciprocity in the field of sport and physical activity and how young people can, in fact, play the part of 'role model' to older members of families thus turning on its head the notion that 'inspiration' is a one-way street from the old to the young. In terms of the model suggested in Figure 1, it represents the child/young person as a physical activity promoting actor in the relational context of the family.

#### *Key in-situ relationships: Friends*

Friends were important in maintaining interest in sport during participation and friendship groups would form around the sport in question. Beyond the mechanics of simply needing a peer group to make up teams to play sport, friends were helpful in terms of moral support, advice and guidance and as competitors to beat or look up to.

George (aged 13): they support you and like give you, like I say like little coaching tips and if you like all work together with like a group of friends when you're playing, it gets, it makes you like a better team and it also like helps out your socialising skills and ... It's not just sport, it's also like a social-ish type thing.

This sentiment was repeated by Em (aged 13): "My friends at other sports groups, they're always saying like well done and stuff and telling me how to get better". It wasn't necessarily the case that this was communicated to them, however: "I want to probably be as good as them [friends] but you don't really say it to them" (Ryan, aged 18).

Friendships were important in creating a social setting and a social reason to continue to play sport. As Jordan (aged 13) commented: "My friends ... say that if I don't like carry on doing things [sports] they'd miss me". Mixing with peers in a sport setting also prompted new aspirations in some.

Georgia noted how being involved in sport encouraged her to be sportier:

When you start a sport you have like a few friends at like the club you go to and then like cos you go the more often you go you make more friends and then like ... like in my badminton club ... there's people like that are loads better than us and like the more friendly you get with them the more you want to be like as good as them so you try and push yourself. Cos my friend Rebecca has been going for five years and she's like really good at badminton so I'd like to be like her. (Georgia, aged 13)

There was also the risk that friendships could be jeopardised by not taking part:

Jolie (aged 14): If ... all the rest of your friends all go to like a club or something and then you come back after school like the next day to school and they're like talking about how funny it was and like how much fun it was and it's like 'oh, why don't I do it?' so I can, I know what's going on. What all the fuss is about. So you kind of want to join so that you can join in with all the fun and conversation.

Friends proved to be a key asset in retaining participation among the young people in the study group and could offer the potential to offset non-sporty family situations. In a peer group of similar others, young people may be able to sustain engagement.

### ***Future participation***

Of course the intention of the 'inspire' policies was not simply to create excitement and activity during the Games or in its immediate aftermath but to sustain this for 'generations'. Some of the young people were aware of this intention: "I think it means like inspire younger people to join in sports and even if they're not athletic, then give it a go and, yeah, take part in activities" (Oscar, aged 12); "I really think they're trying to get children off their seats and doing all this sport that they see on the telly" (Goalkeeper, aged 12). Comments largely focussed on participation in the immediate-term rather than any long-term influence over the lifecourse or beyond that to future generations. The extent to which young people in the study internalised the 'inspire' message or applied to their own experience was questionable. Themes that emerged around understandings of the slogan centred on how 'other' young people might be inspired; about how the Games had made them think about themselves as potential high-level sports performers and about the influence the Games had on their desire to try something new in sport. Rarely did the participants reflect on how the Games might affect their own sport or physical activity in the longer-term.

There was suggestion among the young people in the study that the ambition to inspire over time and space would be contingent on the context of their lives. This awareness draws in some of the other factors outside of the family ecocultural pathway suggested by Christensen (2004) including community and social environmental influences (see Figure 1). Some of the young people speculated about some of the barriers they faced in their participation and that of their parents as family-employment based:

Georgia (aged 13): Yeah you get a job like that you need to contribute to and then you have like children to look after as well so you have to like look after them as well so you don't really have time to do things like that as much.

Georgia also continued to raise the question if young women see this from a particularly gendered perspective:

Obviously like depending on what job we get we're gonna have to see how much time it takes up and then like if you have children then you're gonna have to like spend more time with them but if you don't then you'll have time to do other things like sport.

There was also the suggestion that older people were 'naturally' disadvantaged in their participation. This might be because of injury: "When she was younger she (mum) did a lot of running and she goes for runs in the woods now but she did her back in once and she finds it hard now" (Goalkeeper, aged 12). Others suggested that older age resulted in a tendency to be "fat and lazy" (Jamie, aged 15).

This is a rather concerning rationale from a policy point of view. Parental behaviours in the form of relative physical inactivity might form part of a future-oriented rationale for non-participation or reduced participation among young people that requires further exploration. In the current study, young people found it hard to look into the future of their sporting and physically active lives.



Qualitative longitudinal work would facilitate future examination of this issue. It gives pause for thought about the social marketing of the 'inspire' message in that it may reinforce the exclusion of older people (e.g. parents) from a sport context. Perhaps a message that is *across generations* is both more inclusive and one that challenges possible orthodoxies about ageing. It is also suggested in this study that a cross-generational or –relational message is also more reflective of existing family practices.

## **Conclusions from and limitations of the study**

This study of 23 young people in the North of England and East Scotland has revealed some important observations about the way London 2012 was consumed and how the 'inspire a generation' tagline to the Games was interpreted and understood. Using a family practices perspective (Morgan 1996, 2011b) and working within an 'ecocultural pathways' framework (Chistensen 2004) the findings reveal the relational way young people consumed the Games through the television with family members the most frequent co-watchers. The televised Games acted as a catalyst for family discussion about the sport and physical activity of family members, particularly around the theme of continued participation of the young people in the study group. Some felt this led to a change – in perception at least – of parents who had not been particularly sport-oriented in the past or had lapsed in their interest. Using the model of ecocultural pathways, the Games served as an opportunity to reflect on the existing values, goals, needs and practices of families in relation to sport and created some space for discussion and negotiation of the sport and physical activity of family members, in particular the activity of young people in the family. There was some evidence of reciprocity between family members with respect to the influence that each other had on sporting behaviour. Some young people reported that their own sporting activity influenced their parents' behaviour, reflecting the notion of the young person as a family physical activity promoting actor. In general, it was difficult to disentangle the effect of the Games on family values and goals in relation to sport and physical activity from pre-existing orientations. This represents a limitation of the study.

Moreover, the current study is limited in its size, scope and generalisability owing to its explorative nature. There are distinct limitations to the methodology with two groups of young people participating in the research as two 'case studies'. The study group in Scotland was, for example, all male, on average older and from a more disadvantaged area than the English study group. Restrictions of time and resource resulted in these limitations remaining unresolved. The study was also retrospective with young people recalling their experiences 6-8 months after the Games. As such there was no opportunity to capture the exact nature of the experience of watching the Games or the character of the interactions at a family level *in situ* or otherwise.

## **Broader policy and conceptual implications**

Although limited by its scope and methodology the paper offers some original research findings that enable the exploration of promising conceptual and theoretical avenues in the sport, physical activity and mega-event fields. The proposed conceptual model develops the potential for new, deeper empirical work and further theoretical exploration. The video-diary and depth interview studies with a small number of families watching the Games by Mackintosh and colleagues represent an example of how more detailed research with families can reveal interesting insight into how mega-events are experienced relationally (Mackintosh et al 2014). The advantage of the eco-

cultural pathways approach is that it connects the principles and practices of families and their moral and experiential perspectives. Such an approach also raises a challenge to policy-thinking. Including family contexts and practices as a means of leveraging sport and physical activity participation requires both i) an acknowledgement of the family/relational context as important to the policy development process and ii) the engagement with more complex models of policy development to accommodate it. With further empirical testing, it is feasible that a family practices perspective based on Christensen (2004) may offer such an avenue. Nevertheless, the inherent complexity of the family practices perspective requires considerable reflexivity and contextualisation in order for it to be operationalised in a sport legacy (or any other) policy environment.

Policy and governance may not be entirely hostile to such an exploration. For example, there is broad acknowledgement that family (and peer) contexts are important to sport development. The work done on the segmentation of sports markets by agencies such as Sport England (cf. <http://segments.sportengland.org/>) and the targeted initiatives advice document produced by the Department of Health in the year of the Games (DoH, 2012) reflects this. Dominant political discourses relating to the projectisation of youth and healthism, however, create 'ideological noise' that distracts from broader openness of policy development to operationalise complex models such as the ecocultural, relational model suggested (Figure 1). In Mansfield *et al's* (2010) terms there is a requirement for greater reflexivity in policy circles which is a challenge in the prevailing ideological setting. In support of a more reflexive, relational model, this and other research (Kay 2000, 2009; Wheeler 2011; Wheeler and Green 2014) suggest sport and physical activity is broadly highly valued across families and forms a way of 'doing' and 'being' family. This does not necessarily, however, translate into action and this can be seen as part of a complex of competing needs, goals and practices that compete for finite resources such as time and money. The challenge to policy is to better account for those competing factors and build on an already apparent willingness of families (in different contexts) to engage with sport and physical activity.

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## Footnote

1. It is acknowledged that the Paralympic Games formed an important part of London's bid to host the Olympics. Commentary and analysis of the 2012 Paralympic Games is, however, outside of the scope of this paper.

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