



Keeping pace: Mother versus athlete identity among elite long distance runners

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways elite female athletes negotiate the competing identities of motherhood and athlete as they return to high-level training and international competition after giving birth. This paper draws on findings from 14 semi-structured interviews with world class runners from Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. We identified three main discourses: first, participants reported that support from their spouses, families, and sponsors allowed them to make meaningful decisions about elite sport and motherhood; second, elite female athletes reported feelings of guilt upon their return to training, which in turn, gave rise to a binary where athletes felt that motherhood necessitated selflessness and running required selfishness; finally, some participants reported that running/competition enhanced their mothering, transforming the ethic of care that informed their guilt into a site of empowerment.

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Literature review

The discursive landscape surrounding pregnancy in Westernized countries is rife with contradictions. Pregnant women are subject to imperatives surrounding their bodies and pregnancies including “eat junk food but do not get fat, wear sexy clothing, but be a good ‘selfless’ mother. Be fit but do not exercise too much” (Nash, 2011, p. 51). This is part of a broader social pattern where “childcare and domestic practices for ‘mothers’ and ‘fathers’ are partly reinforced as natural and taken for granted ‘facts’ in concrete institutional practices (e.g., unpaid or lower pay for domestic labor, maternity leave offered only for women or less time offered for paternity leave for men, media constructions that reinforce gendered roles)” (McGannon & Schinke, 2013, p.181). Thanks to these factors, women tend to leave their professions, transition to part-time work, and put their careers on the ‘back burner’ (Ranson, 1998) when they have children. New mothers are also subject to the powerful social imperative that they must sacrifice their leisure time to fulfill familial obligations. This is compounded by the reality that mothers have less unambiguously free time to devote to leisure or exercise than their male partners, and tend to be less involved in organized leisure activities outside of the home (Parker & Wang, 2013). New mothers are also less likely to be physically active than mothers with school-aged children (Marcus, Simkim, & Taylor, 1994), and studies

demonstrate an overarching, inverse relationship between motherhood and participation in physical activity (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). This reinforces, and is reinforced by, women’s role as primary caregiver within the family (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005), and many mothers limit their participation in leisure activities to a support role, such as driving children to their activities. Leisure thus becomes an extension of their roles as mothers (Miller & Brown, 2005). This is detrimental to mothers’ emotional and physical well being: a woman’s self-esteem increases when she is physically active during and after pregnancy (Nash, 2011). Exercise and leisure offer mothers, and particularly mother-athletes, a means to maintain an aspect of the pre-pregnancy identities (Nash, 2011).

Outside of time constraints and the unequal division of domestic labor, there are social and ideological factors that impede mothers from pursuing leisure and/or competitive sport. Post-partum, many women confront the construct of the ‘good mother’, calls for them to be selfless and self-sacrificing, putting the needs of their families first (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). Dominant ideologies surrounding motherhood and the corresponding construct of the ‘good mother’ create barriers to women’s participation in fitness activities (Miller & Brown, 2005). This is partly the product of patriarchal discourse, which situates women as naturally fulfilled by motherhood, and thus not needing time for leisure, or requiring complex identities (such as career-mother or athlete-mother). If mothers do not reproduce these norms, they risk being labeled as ‘bad’ or ‘selfish’ women who ignore their responsibilities (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). This construct is grounded in an

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ethic of care, which Carol Gilligan originally proposed as an integral component of women's moral development (Gilligan, 1982). Gilligan's ethic has been linked conceptually and empirically to women's lack of a sense of entitlement to leisure (Miller & Brown, 2005).

Mothers' emotional responses to this ethic of care, and the corresponding construct of the 'good mother,' limit their participation in leisure and in the formal workforce. Studies consistently show that women who devote time to pursuits outside of the home experience feelings of guilt and selfishness (McGannon & Schinke, 2013; Miller & Brown, 2005). The tensions that women experience between familial and professional obligations are particularly well illustrated by studies about women's return to the academic workforce. For example, OrNSTEIN, Stewart, and Drakich (2007, p. 8–9) found that female professors were reluctant to discuss balancing tenure and promotion with their familial responsibilities because they worried that their colleagues would perceive them as not dedicated to their careers. Like their non-academic counterparts, female professors also undertake the majority of domestic duties, which compromises their ability to produce quality research (Schiebinger & Gilmartin, 2010, p. 39–44). It is very difficult for women to negotiate these competing obligations, and they often report feeling like 'bad academics' and/or 'bad mothers'. We can attribute this, in part, to the reality that many sectors (including academia) operate on a male-centered model, which assumes that an employee either has no children, or has a full time partner who fulfills the majority of domestic work (Mason & Goulden, 2004, p. 88). In their discussion of the academic workforce, Dryfhout and Estes (2010, p. 112) explain:

the occupational structure of academia does not accommodate individuals with significant familial demands [...]. Given the mismatch between the ideal worker norm, which characterizes academia, and the fact that women are still likely to shoulder a larger share of family responsibilities than men, it may be that having children leads women to seek other positions or even other occupations that are more family friendly.

It is clear that family planning, child-care, and work-life balance are important issues for women who decide to pursue careers both within and outside of academia. Given the tensions mapped above, it is sadly unsurprising that once women juggle a career and domestic responsibilities, engagement in sport or leisure becomes an impossibility.

Studies consistently show that new mothers sacrifice their participation in physical activity in order to meet the needs of their spouses and children (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). Like women who return to work postpartum, new mothers often report feeling selfish when they participate in leisure or sport, and these feelings were a significant deterrent from physical activity (Thompson, 1999). When new mothers were active, they "explained their 'time out' as an additional responsibility that had to be juggled alongside household demands" (Miller & Brown, 2005, p. 411). As a result, participating in leisure or physical activity could increase, rather than relieve, the stress new mothers experienced. Mothers developed different strategies to cope with these feelings. For example, those who were active before their pregnancy saw physical activity as a means through which they could better fulfill their roles as mother and wives, and these respondents framed exercise as "a pleasure or a 'release' rather than work or a chore" (Miller & Brown, 2005, p. 414). While these two bodies of literature do not initially seem related, taken together, they reveal that women feel the same feelings of guilt (although, to varying degrees) when they participate in activities outside of the home such as work, sport, or leisure. There are few studies, however, that explore the realities of elite athlete-mothers, for whom the boundaries between work and exercise (or leisure) are blurred. Our study attends to this gap in literature, as the co-participants in our study are professional runners who earn a living through endorsements, appearance fees at races, government funding, and prize money. For these women, abandoning a career and abandoning sport become inextricably linked. It is worth noting, however, that our participants' salaries fluctuate from year to year: they can earn financial bonuses for exceptional

times and/or winning races, whereas poor results do not yield financial rewards. While many have spouses who are the principal breadwinner, these women's participation in sport far exceeds that of mothers who are the subject of much of the literature surrounding leisure and motherhood. For our participants, being an elite athlete is a 24-hour a day commitment, much like having a child. They dedicate hours a day to training and recovery (physiotherapy, massage, sport psychology), and they must also devote their spare time to rest, sleep, eating nutritious food, travel to meets, and endorsing products for their various sponsors. In effect, for our participants, sport is their job, and thus comparing their experiences with data surrounding women and work is useful as the time commitment required to compete at an elite level is often more demanding than that required to participate in the formal workforce, and poses specific challenges for chronically sleep deprived new parents. Comparing mother-athletes with mother-workers is also useful because the former group experiences the same feelings of guilt as the latter upon re-entering the workforce postpartum. Both groups require strong support networks to meet their competing obligations, this study explores what forms these supports take for elite runners.

The studies that do exist about elite athlete-mothers foreground the overlaps and incongruities between the experiences of mother-athletes and those of other women. For instance, in their study of 9 elite athlete-mothers in New Zealand, Palmer and Leberman (2009) found that many elite athletes experienced intense guilt upon their return to high-level sport. These mother-athletes missed their children's milestones (birthday parties, the acquisition of new skills) and relied on networks of friends and family for childcare support. Mother-athletes experienced guilt in the same contexts as other new-mothers, and like their peers, these feelings were inextricably linked to the ethic of care. Respondents not only felt that they should put their family's needs before their own, but they felt the added pressure of balancing the demands of sport, paid work or endorsements, and family (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Appleby and Fisher (2009, p. 4) explain "the social expectations of motherhood can also be complicated for female athletes as they re-enter sport after giving birth. In many cases, the responsibility of motherhood must be balanced with other life priorities such as training and competing, both of which may take a significant amount of time away from family". For many elite runners, these factors are compounded when they adhere to traditional notions of femininity and motherhood that demand self-sacrifice, or rely on the ethic of care described above. As a result, "women negotiating motherhood and an elite sport career may be particularly vulnerable to experiencing guilt in relation to an ethic of care, as they devote large amounts of time to training and sport related travel which keeps them away from children for lengths of time" (McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015, p. 52). Mother-athletes successfully negotiated these feelings by viewing sport/leisure as a right, rather than a privilege or as an act of selfishness (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). It is important to note, however, that Palmer & Leberman's respondents competed in team sports, which presents an additional set of time constraints. These women must meet their teammates regularly for practice, whereas our participants enjoyed more flexibility as they competed in an individual sport. In fact, it is possible that the flexibility of long distance running allows women to pursue sport post-partum as they can more easily schedule training around their other obligations.

The tension between motherhood and athletics is exacerbated by media discussions about pregnancy and elite sport. In Australian sport, for example, stakeholders tend to view pregnancy as a problem or an impediment, rather than a cause for celebration (Nash, 2011, p. 10). Similarly, Appleby and Fisher (2009) found "in the running community, pregnancy was seen as something antithetical to running well". This perception is not universal, however, and media outlets have begun to celebrate "Olympic moms", that is, mothers who compete at the Olympic level who manage to "do it all" which erases the neo-liberal scripts inherent to the image of the "super-mom" (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012). Given these

tensions, many elite long distance runners felt pressure to delay motherhood until they had retired from competition (McGannon et al., 2012). When women had children before retiring from competition, they merged their newfound identity as mother with their sense of self as an elite athlete (McGannon et al., 2012). Here, athlete-mothers felt that motherhood allowed them to gain a new and multifaceted identity outside of sport (Appleby & Fisher, 2009), while still including athletics as an integral part of their identities (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Motherhood not only allows women the chance to renegotiate their identities, this stage of life grants them the opportunity to re-evaluate their career trajectories and obligations. Sometimes new mothers welcome the transition away from the workforce, or they develop a multifaceted identity beyond their occupational status (Miller & Brown, 2005). The aim of this study is account for the ways motherhood gives rise to this identity shift among elite long distance runners. Specifically, we will explore how our participants negotiate motherhood, their return (or not) to high-level competition, and participation in the formal workforce amidst widespread social pressure that they sacrifice their needs and desires for their spouses and children.

Methods

The Research Ethics Board at the University of [blinded] approved this study, which was part of a larger mixed methods research project that aims to understand the experiences of elite female distance runners as they trained during pregnancy, and returned to competition. Within the parameters of this project, we employed a descriptive case study (Yin, 2014). We used snowball sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), a form of purposive sampling, to recruit elite female distance runners (Kuzel, 1999). In order to be eligible for participation, subjects had to meet the following criteria: their first pregnancy had to have been within the last five years; participants' must have run the USA 2012 Olympic Trials "B" standard marathon time (2:46:00) or the equivalent performance for track races of 1500 m or longer. To determine these time equivalencies, we used International Association of Athletics Federation (IAAF) Scoring Tables of Athletics (Spiriev, 2011). Meeting these times standards is very difficult, and requires years of rigorous training. Women who meet these standards are regarded as elite middle and long distance runners. We also used semi-structured interviews (Fontana & Frey, 2005), which allowed for a conversational approach during the interview process. This provided us with some flexibility, allowing us to ask questions, and to seek clarification when necessary.

Author 1 (n = 12) and another trained interviewer (n = 2) conducted semi-structured interviews with 14 elite female distance runners (see Table 1), using an interview guide approach (Henderson, 1991). The lead author of this paper drew from key findings in the existing literature to develop this guide (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Beilock, Feltz, & Pivarnik, 2001; Currie, 2004; Guillory et al., 2014; Palmer & Leberman, 2009). The interview guide included questions about current training

activities (e.g., Did you return to pre-pregnancy level of training and competition?), the role of supports and strategies in order to train (e.g., Where did you seek advice or support? What/who enables you to continue as a professional athlete?), and tensions balancing motherhood and training (e.g., Did your perception of training change once you became a mother? Do you feel your identity has changed from an athlete to a mother and an athlete? Do you feel greater pressure to take on one role over the other?). The interviews were conducted in person, on Skype, or over the phone, and lasted between 45 and 90 min. The first author transcribed the interviews, with the help of two research assistants. After this, they returned the transcripts to participants for verification, and none of the participants requested changes to their transcript. In order to safeguard each participant's anonymity, the first author assigned pseudonyms to each respondent. Overall, participants in this study have between one and three children, and are from Canada, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Ireland, and Australia. Collectively, the participants have competed in 14 Olympic Games and competed at 72 World Championships. All of the participants received sponsorship from major sports apparel companies. These companies provided our participants with equipment (shoes, clothing, nutritional supplements), and the majority received financial support from major athletic brands. All of the women received appearance fees from competitions, and won prize money at these meets. Although it is useful to compare our participants with women re-entering the formal workforce, elite mother-athletes face a specific set of financial barriers when they have children. Further studies about elite-mother athletes are thus necessary to make sense of this problem, and to propose useful solutions.

Theory & methodology

To analyze our interview data, we use discourse analysis, which sees experiences as constituted through language (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). According to Michel Foucault (1980), discourse "denotes a group of verbal performances...that which was produced (perhaps all that was produced) by the groups of signs...also a group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions. Discourse can be defined as a group of statements that belong to a single system of formation (Foucault, 1980, p. 24). These extend beyond verbal utterances, and "are practices that systemically form the objects of which we speak" (Howarth, 2000, p. 7). Discourses are shaped by social practices, and give rise to social norms, pressures, obligations, and shape social relationships (Howarth, 2000). Discourses are not fixed or stable, rather, they are simultaneously the source and site of struggle, as well as the location of constant contestation of meaning (Mills, 1997).

The methodology of discourse analysis maps how specific discursive constructs shift and change. Phillips and Hardy (2002, p. 5) explain "discourse analysis explores how texts are made meaningful through these processes and also how they contribute to the constitution of social

Table 1
Demographic table.

	Pseudonym	Olympics	World Championships	Race	Highest level of education	# of children	Partner main financial support?
1	Riley	Yes	Yes	White	University	2	Yes
2	Caitlyn	Yes	Yes	White	University	2	Yes
3	Carina	Yes	Yes	White	University	2	Yes
4	Sally	Yes	Yes	White	University	2	Yes
5	Maggie	Yes	Yes	White	University	1	Yes
6	Kallie	No	Yes	White	University	3	Yes
7	Kora	No	Yes	White	University	3	Yes
8	Sandra	Yes	Yes	White	University	3	Yes
9	Larissa	No	Yes	White	University	1	No
10	Karen	Yes	Yes	White	University	1	Yes
11	Siena	No	Yes	White	University	1	Yes
12	Marcie	Yes	Yes	White	University	2	Yes
13	Heather	Yes	Yes	White	University	1	Yes
14	Melissa	Yes	Yes	White	University	1	Yes

reality by *making* meaning". Discourse analysis allows researchers to study the ways participants use language to make meaning. Discourse analysis was supported by the use of NVivo10™ software to organize the data. We read and re-read the transcripts to become familiar with the interview content and began to map reoccurring themes and behaviors. Both authors coded the interviews separately and met periodically to discuss commonalities and discrepancies in the emerging discourses in order to increase construct validity (Lather, 1991).

One of the constructs we evaluate using discourse analysis is an ethic of care. In her ground breaking text *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan (1982) asserts that men are socialized to deploy principles of justice as hallmarks of fairness, whereas women's decisions tend to be grounded in caring for other people (McLaughlin, 1997). According to Gilligan (1982, p. 29), women "see moral requirements as emerging from the particular needs of others in the context of particular relationships". Gilligan names this approach 'an ethic of care', and when this ethic is fully developed, women do not see their decisions as self-sacrificing, but rather as the product of living in relation to other people. From this standpoint, women create a world "of relationships and psychological truths where an awareness of the connection between people gives rise to recognition of responsibility for one another" (Gilligan, 1982, p. 30). An ethic of care is not based on which decisions are selfish or selfless, but rather, are grounded in responsibility, connectedness, and obligation to those around us.

Poststructuralism and the linguistic turn have allowed feminist thinkers to develop some important critiques of Gilligan's work. For example, Joan Williams argues that Gilligan's analysis does not account for complex subjectivities, and positions gender as the sole influence on men and women's moral reasoning (1997, p. 296). Because Gilligan's work assumes that men and women have essentially different ways of interacting with the world (and one another), her research can be deployed to argue that women are simply too different to succeed in the contemporary workforce, which obscures systemic oppression (1997, p. 296). Feminist thinkers have also mapped the in which *In a Different Voice* reinforces a "biologically deterministic notion of women's nature" (Heyes, 1997, p. 146), which is a positive quality that women must nurture (Kerber, 1986, p. 309). Critics have also argued that Gilligan uses overly general social categories, which erase salient social, political, cultural, and economic differences among her co-participants. Here, Gilligan fails to account for the "socially constructed and necessarily local, temporally specific, and diverse nature of gender" (Heyes, 1997, p. 147).

Despite these critiques, feminist thinkers also use Gilligan's work to productive ends. Williams explains that scholars can use the ethic of care in a way that "signals a societal choice to ignore a whole series of differences for strategic reasons" (1991, p. 298). For example, Heyes (1997, p. 145) also advocates for strategic essentialism, and explains that dismissing this strategy fails to account for critics must attend to the drawbacks of essentialist theorizing, and explore how these "the necessity of continuing with research projects rather than subjecting them to prolonged deconstruction". In these projects, "claims of sameness are not mere assertions of pre-existing similarity; they are a way of carrying on discussions about social ethics" (1991, p. 299). Williams names this approach "post-modern sameness," which contextualizes the failures of subjugated groups amidst structural oppression (1991, p. 308). We deploy Gilligan's ethic of care as Williams describes it, and we understand mother-athletes (and women more broadly) as not inherently relational, but as relating to one another through a range of social processes and expectations. In the context of this study, Gilligan's work helps us account for the ways new mother-athletes negotiate their complex relationships with their spouses and children, social pressure to sacrifice their needs and desires, and the guilt they experience in the pursuit of their athletic goals.

We will use discourse analysis to explore this ethic of care for a number of reasons. Miller and Brown (2005, p. 407) assert that while most research in this field accounts for Gilligan's ethic, researchers must

move beyond mapping the factors that impede women's access to leisure time, and focus on the "context of cultural beliefs and household negotiations pertaining to leisure". Similarly, McGannon and Schinke (2013, p. 179–180) argue: "qualitative studies that include mothers' own voices and how they negotiate being active are a significant gap in the literature. Additionally, theoretical perspectives that conceptualize motherhood as socially and culturally constructed are needed to further understand the influences if mothers' physical activity participation within the context of society and culture". This paper takes these claims seriously, and works to foreground women's voices and experiences within the discursive constructs of 'good motherhood', which is couched in an ethic of care. Discourse analysis will allow us to make sense of the ways Gilligan's ethic informs the decisions our participants make surrounding running and motherhood, but does not take this ethic as naturally occurring or given, but as the culmination of years of gendered socialization. Discourse analysis will allow us to map the ways our participants make sense of the guilty feelings they report when they return to training, as well as the strategies they use to resist this pressure.

Results

This project revealed three main themes. First, participants reported that support systems such as spousal and familial support enabled them to make meaningful decisions about elite sport and motherhood. Second, elite female athletes report feelings of guilt upon their return to training. This guilt created an impasse where athletes felt that running was selfish, and motherhood demanded selflessness. Finally, some participants who continued to compete at an elite level reported that running/competition enhanced their mothering, transforming the ethic of care into a site of empowerment. We will review these findings, and contextualize them within broader scholarly discussions, in detail below.

Support systems

Every participant in this study discussed the importance of support networks to make meaningful decisions about motherhood and elite sport. Participants described support in varying ways, as Larissa states:

Having financial support, having a very understanding spouse who is on board with your goals, and then if you have extended family and friends beyond that who are willing to help, that's absolutely critical, someone who can come over and hang out with the baby while you do your thing [training]. And then advice, like the friends that have been there and can help you stay positive and stuff.

Support in various capacities is essential for elite female distance runners to return to training and competition. Siena added "you need support. It can come from your coach, your team that you have, physiotherapist or other runners...If you just have a good support system then that definitely helps." Other participants noted that they needed support with childcare if they were to continue training and competing at an elite level. Marcie struggled with childcare issues and had to develop alternative strategies in order to continue competing: "I always actually picked races that are close, within like a hometown. Because it's always been a problem trying to get a babysitter and getting to the race. I think the biggest issue is having a support system with childcare and the whole lot". Melissa acknowledges the support of her husband and mother as crucial to her training, "having a really supportive family and spouse is important [...] my mom is willing to help out whenever she needs to so if I didn't have family in town it [training] would be very difficult."

While support was variously defined, all of the participants were the primary caregivers within their family, and thus the most important form of support was childcare. However, support extends beyond help

with childcare: the majority of participants (13/14 participants) relied on their spouses as primary source of income, and they needed financial support to pursue their athletic goals. As Sally pointed out “[my husband] was working so I survived on his income”. Kallie also acknowledges that her career is only possible because of the support (financial and childcare) her spouse provides, “my husband, he's so supportive. I mean anytime I go to train he's got the kids, but we've never had the relationship where he's the babysitter, he's dad. And I always relied on my husband. I could not have this career without my husband's income.”

Similarly, Siena added “he [husband] was there supporting me 100% and that helped a lot knowing that I had that support. It helped push me a lot too.” Karen added that “I was lucky that I had a lot of support from my husband so that I was able to still train properly, I was able to go out and get my workouts done in the morning, sometimes before anyone was even up.” Support networks as noted by the women were inclusive of spouses, grandparents, friends, and coaches; however, the emotional and financial support of a spouse was essential for all of the women to return to training. Spousal support provides women with the time they need to balance training and being the primary caregiver. This support also motivated mother-athletes to be dedicated to their sport, as their spouses dedicated time and money so that they could train and compete.

Guilt of motherhood and tensions between mother-athlete identity

Although many of our participants had supportive spouses, they still reported feelings of guilt when they returned to training, particularly as they negotiated the tensions between motherhood and elite athletics. Marcie reflected on her pregnancy and her competing priorities, explaining:

Yes, my priorities changed, it was all about the baby. It's funny I think when you're pregnant you always have this vision of getting back competing and everything - but once the baby comes you realize there is a lot more. Reality kicks in!

This reality often involves negotiating the new role of motherhood with that of maintaining the lifestyle of an elite athlete, which requires that she devote time to training, rest, and physiotherapy/massage, and sponsorship commitments such as social media outputs and public engagements to promote sponsors.

Many of our participants report feeling selfish when they do not put the needs of their children and spouses above their own. Some participants grounded their decisions in an ethic of care, for example, Caitlyn reports: “I miss running really fast. I miss the thrill of lining up and knowing I'm so fit to win but it has totally taken a backseat since having my kids.” New mother, Heather, explains her struggles as a mother-athlete:

I need to train and get back into things so I'm feeling the pull right now where I want to be there for certain management of him [baby] and taking care of him and making sure he gets what he needs but also wanting to make sure I get back into things so I think it's all about figuring that balance out which probably takes some time.

It is evident the dichotomy ‘good mother/bad mother’ has a significant impact on our participants. Many of them discuss the ways they negotiate the competing obligations and pressures that give rise to this duality, as Larissa explains,

I feel pressure to do both well [...] I feel pressure now to figure out how to take my athletics to the next level. And where the give and take is going to come from. [...] I feel pressured to be more scheduled and to clear things off my plate to make room for a clear priority of running and being a mom.

Riley shared her struggles and explained, “when I was gone to do a workout I was definitely as quick as possible doing the workout and

the baby was there in the corner of the track and I was constantly feeling like, ‘oh no they're crying.’ And it definitely interferes with your focus.”

The tensions between mother and athlete identities extend beyond individual pressures, and some participants compared themselves to their competitors, and Caitlyn explained,

You know I look at [names other elite athletes] I am sort of like a little bit envious that they had that will power to train so hard - because I'm sure that they are the exact same as me. They don't want to leave their kids, they don't want to miss out on stuff but they are willing to do it. I just wasn't and I wish that I was sometimes. There's moments when I'm thinking just focus here, you know? [The baby] is going to be fine if you go out for an extra half an hour run.

Many participants foregrounded a disempowering double bind: if they focus more attention on their children, they compromise their training, and jeopardize their athletic goals. However, if they do “an extra half hour run”, or devote the time that is necessary to compete at an elite level, they report feeling selfish and/or guilty. Either decision foregrounds the reality that balancing motherhood and sport in a social context permeated by an ethic of care is a complex and emotionally fraught process. The mother-athletes in this study had numerous strategies for balancing their obligations. Regardless, a common theme was that elite athletes require strong supports (from their spouse, family, coaches, physiotherapists, etc) in their lives in order to enable a return to training and competition, but that relying on these supports can exacerbate their feelings of guilt because they are unable to ‘do it all’ as the trope of the ‘good mother’ demands.

Some participants felt that they had made enough sacrifices as elite athletes, and were prepared to shift their priorities towards their new families. Caitlyn stated, “we all have a life to live and for myself I had pushed back kids for so long because I wanted to be this athlete. It was time for me to give my time to my kids.” Melissa concurred with this sentiment, and explained: “I think most people would agree that once you have your child that's the most important thing, their health and well being and happiness. My needs are not as important as his needs.” While some participants recognized that balancing motherhood and elite athletics was not feasible, other women felt that training and competition enhanced their ability to mother and vice versa.

Running/competition enhance motherhood

Many female athletes felt that returning to elite level running made them ‘better mothers’. Moreover, some participants felt that having children also improved their athletics. Kallie tells new mother-athletes, “welcome to the best job in the world. Being a mom and an athlete, it's great.” Rather than identifying the complexities of managing an athletic career with mothering, some participants focus on the positive changes in their lives. Larissa explains that since becoming a mother, “I think, I feel more comfortable, more confident in who I am. Just overall, just as a whole person. I have more overall meaning and more perspective.”

For some participants, prioritizing a child or children over running seems to ease the pressure to perform. As Sally describes, “I'm really OCD type so if I have something I want to stick to a plan so I always aim to be twenty minutes early for everything and that kind of thing. But, I think once I had kids I had to learn to chill and just roll with it and it's been great.” Her experience of becoming a mother-athlete forced her to be more relaxed about her running career, ultimately improving her athletic outcomes. Similarly, Sandra discussed the reality that having a family reduced the pressure she placed on herself to perform, “My kids always came ahead of the training [...] so I think it took a lot of pressure off trying to perform as well. I guess my perspective was different I was just doing it literally because of passion and hobby”.

Motherhood enhances athletics

The women in this study demonstrate that a shift in priorities for mother-athletes can positively impact women's abilities to successfully perform their competing roles as mothers and athletes. Larissa explains her thinking and approach to balancing motherhood, athletics, and a career:

I know I can't do everything. There's a million approaches to parenting you can take [...] you can put endless energy into a baby, but I don't necessarily believe that all of that is a positive gain, for the kid or for you. I actually feel like one of the most important things I can do as a mom is to be a successful business person and a strong female athlete and have my son grow up with a mom who has things that she's passionate about in her own life. And he can grow up witnessing what work ethic is, and what it takes to get what you really care about [...] growing up with just seeing a balance between career and family happening in some way. It's worth it to develop myself as an entity independent from a mom.

Larissa goes on to explain that she is teaching her child to consider the needs of others, and to put others before themselves. While Larissa is certainly challenging Gilligan's ethic, it is striking that she is also reaffirming it by teaching its guiding principles (connectedness and relationships with others) to her child through her commitment to sport. Larissa, as well as many elite female athletes draws on the ethic of care model to return to their pre-pregnancy routine in order to role model dedication, a healthy lifestyle, and time management to their children. Moreover, our participants construct meaning in very different ways, as they simultaneously buy into and challenge existing discourses around mother-athlete identities.

Discussion and conclusions

Below, we situate our main results within the existing literature in order to contextualize and discuss how our findings align and diverge from other research studies. Our findings are consistent with the broader literature stating that women can have successful careers and raise children when they have access to substantial support networks like those typically available to men (Ranson, 2005). Where these studies focus on the formal workforce, our analysis reveals that this is also true for professional athletes who have similar time constraints. Elite mother-athletes have unique needs, however, as their athletic careers demand extensive training, rest, and meticulous attention to rest (especially sleeping well every night) and other forms of recovery such as massage, physiotherapy, and sound nutrition. Pursuing high-level sport often exceeds the time demands of employment in the formal workforce.

Support systems

Our findings are congruent with other studies on mother-athletes, which show that this group requires support to resume training and competition (Palmer & Leberman, 2009). Family, particularly spouses, are indispensable parts of this support network: "Instrumental to accomplishing a sport-integrated identity was that significant others provided opportunities for these women to be active (i.e.: helping with childcare), reinforcing behavioral practices linked to sport-integrated identities for athlete-mothers" (McGannon & Schinke, 2013, p. 180). Support alone will not allow mothers to successfully return to training, as McGannon et al. (2015, p. 55) explain "it is not simply that women 'need more support' to continue athletic careers as shown in previous research, but that such support may be difficult to negotiate when athlete and mother identities are polarized". Our study reflects this trend, as the women who returned successfully to competition were those who saw motherhood and sport as complementary.

Even with a supportive network, studies show that childcare and household responsibilities impede women's participation in leisure, regardless of a woman's socio-economic status (SES) (Miller & Brown, 2005). Women continue to do a 'double duty' even when they have supports in place to allow them more flexibility. Structural factors exacerbate this tension for mother-athletes, and sports organizations resemble the formal workforce in their reliance on a male-centered model. Palmer and Leberman (2009) found that sports organizations are not structured to accommodate athletes who have child care requirements, particularly when extensive travel is required. This is reflected in our research, as participants discussed competing in races closer to home, or cutting back on training when they might not necessarily want to, in order to meet their multiple obligations. Elite long distance running often requires extensive travel to meets. These venues rarely have facilities for breast feeding or other child care needs, which suggests that the current model for high performance athletics does not account for mother-athletes.

Guilt and changing priorities

Many of our respondents felt conflicted, and even selfish, upon giving birth. On one hand, they felt that they would have to sacrifice a great deal in relation to mothering or athletics to be successful at both. This reflects broader research on mother-athletes, which showed that women needed to successfully resolve this tension if they were going to compete at a high level (Appleby & Fisher, 2009). This conflict between athlete and mother are also at play within broader media discussions of 'Olympic mothers' where "the demands of athletics and motherhood were portrayed as polarized, placing women in a position where they may have to choose between athletics and motherhood" (McGannon et al., 2015, p. 55). This tension foregrounds an important identity shift for mothers postpartum, as Appleby and Fisher (2009, p. 4) explain, "for athletes who have often spent a large part of their lives devoted to training and competing, allocating their time to mothering may signify a significant shift in their identity". Our results reflect these findings, as many of our respondents reported a shift in identity away from athletics after they gave birth. Interestingly, some of our respondents framed this transition as a 'reality check' as though competing at an elite level is not as 'real' as mothering. This reflects findings that the contradictions between mother/athlete render these subjectivities unintelligible (Pedersen, 2001), as in this figuration, 'real life' reflects hegemonic gender norms, which situate women's natural role as mothers. In some ways, our participants erase their own complex subjectivities through this line of thinking. While this is beyond the scope of this paper, the ways that elite mother-athletes minimize their accomplishments by dismissing their experiences before motherhood as 'not real' is exacerbated by the reality that many of them suffered cuts to their sponsorship when they took time away from running to start a family. They were not competing while pregnant or immediately after giving birth, and thus did not receive appearance fees or win prize money at races during this time period. This punitive response on behalf of sponsors heightens the financial precarity of elite mother-athletes, and reaffirms these mothers' thinking that elite sport is not a 'real' or legitimate pursuit.

Athletics enhances motherhood

Some respondents in our study saw athletics as enhancing their abilities as mothers, particularly as it allowed them to model dedication, healthy eating, and other positive behaviors to their children. This is consistent with literature about women and leisure. For example, some of Miller and Brown's (2005) respondents saw their commitment to fitness as an indicator of their commitment to being good mothers (McGannon & Schinke, 2013). Miller and Brown (2005, p. 413) also found that "most active women emphasized the benefits for the entire family if they achieved some time out. Many women admitted that

their role was central to the family's well-being and that participating in physical activity made them better able to fulfill the role of mother and wife". In their survey of professional or semi-professional female athletes in New Zealand, Palmer and Leberman (2009) found that motherhood helped their respondents develop their resilience and adaptability, which enhanced their athletic pursuits.

Interestingly, however, our respondents still ground their decision to pursue elite running in the very ethic of care that leads many women to feel intense guilt. This diverges from other studies about women and leisure, where an ethic of care leads women to abandon their other pursuits, including physical activities (Miller & Brown, 2005). Our study shows that some elite runners approach the ethic of care, and the construct of 'good mother' as a means to maintain facets of their identities beyond their roles within the family. This strategy does not necessarily disrupt the social primacy of Gilligan's ethic, as it continues to rely on the construct of the 'good mother' itself, this strategy shows that elite runners can mobilize this ethic to legitimize their desire to train and compete. This finding reflects McGannon et al.'s (2012) work on athletes and identity, which shows that elite long distance runners could create an identity which melded their child rearing with sport. This would allow them to resist dominant media narratives that framed intense training as antithetical to the construct of the 'good mother'. Our research extends this analysis, and shows that for mother-athletes, sport is an integral part of their identities, and they can use the very construct that produces their guilt as a means to blend their identities as mothers and athletes.

Athletics enhances motherhood

This usage of Gilligan's ethic of care is an example of Foucault's discussion of subjectivation, or the development of new capabilities as a person is subjected to disciplinary power (Heyes, 2006). Through subjectivation, Foucault projected an image of human subjects as beings whose individuality was constituted by the self-consistency that gave them a separate independent existence, but who were simultaneously subjected to whatever brought such self-referential identity into being. Sought in the name of freedom, such subjectivity opened individuals to domination by the powers...that made it possible (Siegel, 1990, p. 276).

Subjectivation is possible because constructs such as 'good mother' exert a disciplinary power over women with children, demanding that they always put their family's needs before their own. This power is not a top down force, rather, "we are both acted upon and we act- not in separate acts of domination and submission, but with submission relying on domination/mastery, and mastery relying on submission" (Davies, 2006, p. 428). Our findings show that constructs such as 'the good mother' become the sites where women develop new identities and capabilities, such as developing a complex understanding of self, and deploying this construct to legitimize their desire to train and compete at an elite level. This reflects broader studies on leisure, which show that physical activity "allows women to challenge dominant ideologies surrounding womanhood and motherhood, in the latter as women struggle to find personal time to devote to activities outside of familial obligations" (Miller & Brown, 2005, p. 407).

For Foucault (1980, p. 342), the double directionality that characterizes subjectivation is possible because "power is exercised only over free subjects, and only insofar as they are free". Foucault's assertion ultimately foregrounds some of the limitations of our study: our participants are all white, middle class women who have supportive spouses. They have the familial stability, and financial resources, to devote themselves to pursuits outside of the home and the formal workforce. As a result, they enjoy social privilege, and are subjected to very different discursive constructs and ideologies, than racialized women, queer women, single mothers, or mother-athletes with disabilities. More studies are needed to foreground the experiences of these mother-athletes as their experiences their subject positions likely give rise to

new challenges. Moreover, future studies that examine gender equity in elite level sport, particularly they ways in which parenting impacts women's options to continue at an elite level of competition, are required. We further highlight the need to examine the ways in which sporting organizations, coaches, and policy makers can support the experiences of elite athlete mothers in order to retain women in sport. In order to adequately address the needs of elite female athletes, assessment of existing resources and further advocacy for elite athlete mothers are crucial to address inequity in sport. Ultimately this research underscores the ways the identities of mother-athlete can be complementary rather than conflicting.

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