

Termination of sporting careers among South African sportswomen

BEN J.M. STEYN AND CLAUDIA C.O. SLATTERY

Department of Biokinetics, Sport and Leisure Sciences, Sport Centre, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002 Republic of South Africa. E-mail: ben.steyn@up.ac.za

(Received: 8 December 2012; Revision Accepted: 28 January 2013)

Abstract

The primary aim of this study was to determine the reasons why sportswomen compete at a high level in sport but terminate their sporting careers soon after school during the tertiary phase and prior to reaching their full potential. The second aim was to explore the impact of gender stereotyping in conjunction with the role of the media on the sportswomen in sport. A qualitative approach was utilized where 40 high level sportswomen completed a questionnaire that was specifically developed to identify the reasons why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers and to explore the role of gender stereotyping and the media. Results indicated that five of the most important reasons for sportswomen terminating their sporting careers are decreased motivation and interest in sport, coaching problems, academic pressure, injuries and politics in sport. A significant number of the subjects agreed that gender stereotyping in sport does exist and that the media contribute to gender inequalities in sport.

Keywords: Elite sportswomen, terminate sporting careers, gender stereotyping and the media.

How to cite this article:

Steyn, B.J.M. & Slattery, C.C.O. (2013). Termination of sporting careers among South African sportswomen. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 19(1), 1-11.

Introduction

One of the most crucial issues that have been debated heavily in World Conferences and other important platforms over the last few decades in the broader context of Human Rights are gender equality, gender equity and empowerment of women and specifically gender mainstreaming as key drivers of promoting women's quality of life and creating sustainable social change (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). Sport has been identified as one of the most essential areas where women can cultivate their intellectual and physical abilities and enhance their human potential (Goslin & Kluka, 2007). This led to a number of intergovernmental organizations within the United Nations, as well as international and national policies and frameworks on women in sport that have been created within the framework of Human Rights. The main drive behind these normative frameworks and policies worldwide can be seen as a collective effort to create equity for women in all sectors of life and specifically to attain mainstream equal opportunities for women in sport (Kluka, Goslin, & Steyn, 2012). The Civil Rights Act in America was formulated in 1965 and changed in 1972 in Title IX to make provision for gender equality in all areas of life including athletics (Curtis & Grant, 2006). Recent research revealed that inequality in sport is not only in terms of participation of sport, but also in terms of

leadership and gender representation in key positions in the management of sport in general (Kluka et al., 2012; Pfister & Radtke, 2009). Within this global movement to create gender equality in sport, the South African Government also took the initiative with the White Paper on Sport and Recreation to institutionalize gender equity and align itself with global initiatives to establish human rights for everyone (South African Government, 2004).

Within this framework, the crucial issue of premature termination of sporting careers among women arises. If women terminate their sporting careers before they can reach their full potential, it will be imperative to determine the underlying factors that may have a significant impact on the women in sport and result in the premature termination of their sporting careers. These psychosocial and cultural factors may be so deeply imbedded in societies and may even function on a subliminal level where women are indirectly affected on a deeper psychological level. Stereotyping through the media may be one of these subtle and even unconscious forces that steadily erode the confidence and overall position of the women in sport, in such a way that it seriously undermines the principle of gender equity and equality in sport. According to George (2001), the mass media is one of the most important and powerful institutional forces that shape perceptions, values and attitudes in modern culture. For example, the underreporting of women in sport in the media can seriously affect general perceptions and insufficient knowledge of women in sport in general and their accomplishments. In an extensive study commissioned by the Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles that spanned from 1990 to 2005, the researchers made use of content analysis to determine the reporting status of gender, children and gender stereotyping in televised sports and daily newspapers. The results of this study confirmed the pattern of underrepresentation of women in sport (Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles, 2005a, 2005b). This problem of underrepresentation of sportswomen is an international problem and has been corroborated in similar studies in Australia (Australian Sports Commission, 2000), as well as the United Kingdom (Women's Sports Foundation, 2003).

Many talented young women in sport apparently terminate their sporting careers prematurely before they reach their full potential. According to existing research of more than a decade ago by the Sports Information and Science Agency (SISA), indicates that the dropout among sportswomen is much worse than among sportsmen (Sports Information and Science Agency, 1997). It seems that the fact that women somehow find it difficult to continue their sporting careers and reach full potential this problem is not only a South African problem, but also an international phenomenon (Leonard, 1996). The primary aim of this study was to determine the reasons why sportswomen compete at a high level in sport and terminate their sporting careers after school during the tertiary phase and prior to reaching their full potential. The second aim was to explore the impact of gender stereotyping in conjunction with the role of the media on the sportswomen in sport.

Methodology

A qualitative approach was followed and a questionnaire was designed with the specific aim to uncover the reasons why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers and to explore the impact of gender stereotyping and the role of the media on the sportswomen in sport. A questionnaire was specifically developed after consultation with experts in the field to target the intended selection of information pertaining to the aims of this study. A pilot study was conducted on five subjects who fulfilled the inclusion requirements for this study to ensure that the questionnaire was understandable and clear. This procedure helped to identify whether the questionnaire was customized for the identified sample and “ensures the data that is collected is suitable for the purpose of the study and a dry run data analysis be conducted” (Gratton & Jones, 2004, p. 127). The questionnaire was specifically developed to uncover a broad range of factors that may affect the sportswomen and the scope of this research included the role of the coach, parents, peers and strategies that women employ to cope with difficult obstacles in their development of their sporting careers. This article only focuses on the core problem of why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers and the consequent effect of stereotyping in conjunction with the media is targeted in this article. The questionnaire consisted of open-ended questions, as well as closed-ended questions where the subjects had to react on statements about women in sport on a five-point Likert scale that varied from ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’, ‘not sure’, ‘agree’ to ‘strongly agree’. The questionnaire was circulated to 150 sportswomen of whom only 64 completed questionnaires were returned. Finally, only 40 questionnaires were selected that fulfilled all the inclusion criteria for this study.

The inclusion criteria for this study was that the subjects have to be women that competed regularly at an intense level in first teams in school, provincial, national or international level in their high school or university years. Another inclusion criterion is that they terminated their sporting careers after school or within their years of tertiary education that followed and the common denominator in the inclusion criteria was the fact that they felt that they terminated their sporting careers before they reached their full potential. The subject’s age varied between 20 and 31 years of age. Some of the subjects recently terminated their sporting careers, while other terminated their sporting careers a few years ago. There were also subjects in the vicinity of 30 years of age that were willing to reflect on their sporting careers and why they terminated their sporting careers at an early stage. The social networking system (Facebook) was also utilized to get into contact with elite sportswomen, in order to involve the most subjects possible in the study. The use of snowball sampling was used in order to get the most suitable subjects that fulfilled the inclusion criteria for this study. This type of sampling technique works through the process of recommendation. After identifying the initial subject, the researcher asks for help

from the subject to identify other individuals with similar traits and interests (Castillo, 2009). The advantages of the snowball sampling are that the process of recommendation allows the researchers to extend to populations that are challenging to identify, because of the unique characteristics that the researchers are looking for. Another advantage is that the process of data collection is inexpensive, simple and cost-efficient. A disadvantage of the snowball sampling method is the fact that the researchers have less control and are more dependent on the recommendations from subjects that are already included in this research. Therefore, sampling bias is possible and the already selected subjects tend to recommend individuals with whom they are acquainted, thus it is likely that the subjects share similar behaviours and characteristics (Castillo, 2009).

The qualitative component of this study made use of the interpretive and thematic content analysis (Gratton & Jones, 2004; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002). Within this analysis there are five steps: the familiarisation and immersion phase, themes-inducing phase, coding phase, elaboration phase and the interpretation and checking phase (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002). The data selected from the Likert scale closed-ended questions will be reflected in frequency figures (Thomas, Nelson, & Silverman, 2005).

Results

Reasons for terminating sporting careers

Only the first five major reasons why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers will be elaborated on and explained by making use of verbatim statements from the sportswomen that terminated their sporting careers. The first main reason why sportswomen terminated their sporting careers prematurely is due to the fact that they lose motivation and interest in their sport. The second main reason for terminating their sporting careers is due to coaching problems that are followed by academic pressure, injuries and politics in sport as five of the most important reasons for termination. Figure 1 clearly indicates other significant factors that impact on the sportswomen's decision to terminate their sporting careers.

The number one reason for terminating sporting careers among South African women according to Figure 1 is decreased motivation and interest. However, this main reason may be strongly linked to the other factors that are listed that impacted heavily on the young women in sport and the loss of motivation and interest may have eroded, because of a combination of the factors that are listed in Figure 1, such as coach problems, academic pressure, injuries and politics in sport and other factors that are listed.

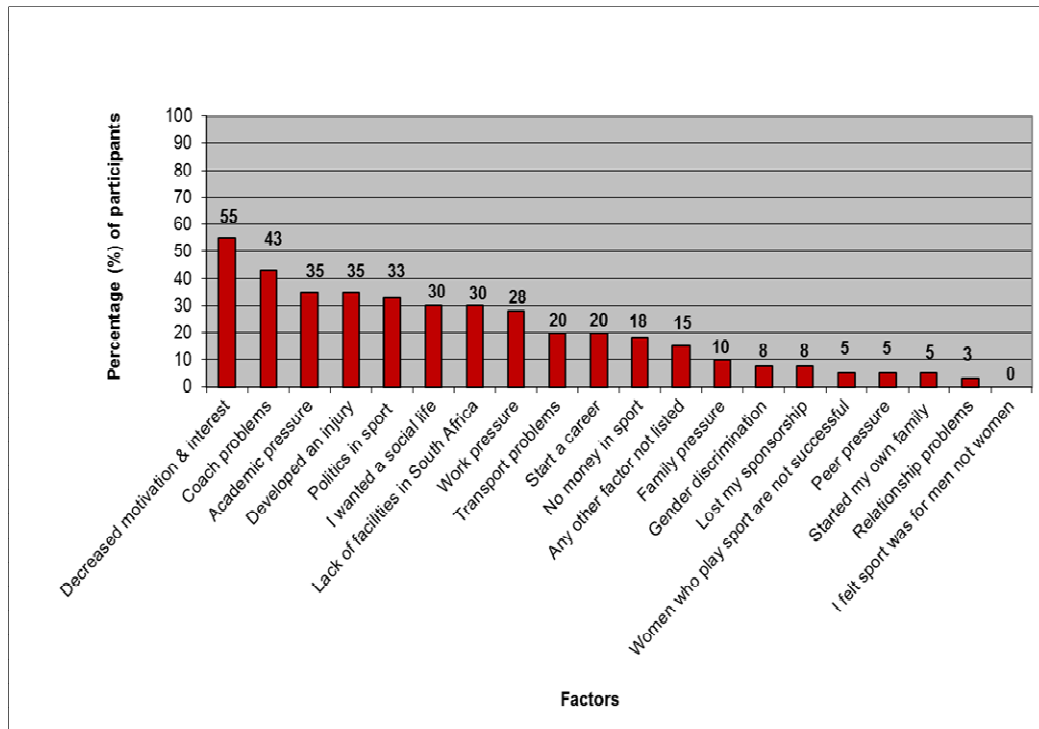


Figure 1: Reasons why sportswomen terminated their sporting careers

The qualitative statements revealed that the subjects lost motivation and interest in sport, because of the changing environment and the new demands that were made on them. The following verbatim statements of the subjects explain the decrease of motivation and interest: “By leaving school I left behind my competitive spirit”, “the change of environment had a terrible effect, I completely stop training and I think the lack of routine was a major factor”, “there was not much support and guidance after school and you had to motivate yourself with which I really struggle.” The second reason why sportswomen terminated their sporting career can be attributed to coaching problems. The following statements explain the difficulties the subjects experienced with their coach: “The coach was unsupportive of any problems out of the sports arena”, “the coach was very manipulative in his training methods and we had to fall in with the brutal hard training without complaints”, “I feel he lacked the maturity to help us beyond our current level and he was not easy to satisfy”, “the coach was difficult to build a relationship with and in a way she was a perfectionist.” The third reason that heavily impacted on the decision to terminate their sporting careers was due to the increase in academic pressures. The lack of time and the complexities of the tertiary environment significantly increased the pressure on the sportswomen that eventually resulted in the reason why they stopped with their sport. “I realized I needed to focus on one thing only and unfortunately it was my studies”, “I did not have time to practice or to compete”, “tertiary

education is a lot more serious and you need to build a career and sport and academics are very expensive”, “it is harder to compete after school, because life’s demands are higher and costs are too high.” The fourth reason that may have devastating effects that could have resulted in forced termination of sporting careers where there was no choice left to continue with their sport due to severity of the injuries. The following statements of the subjects explain the extent of the problem: “I have had several injuries and needed professional help to overcome them”, “I have attended many hours of rehab with an occupational therapist and a physiotherapist to sort out my injury”, “I suffered so many injuries that I was forced to give up my sport.” The fifth major factor that affected the sportswomen to continue or not continue with their sporting career is also related to the political interference in the sport setting. Statements such as “I tried to ignore the politics involved in sport and selection and I only want to retire”, “unfortunately, politics does play a major role in athletics and it was just recently that I experienced it firsthand”, “the politics in sport really affected me psychologically and it was very hard for me and I am still trying to deal with it.” All the other listed factors in Figure 1 can also be highlighted by examples of verbatim statements, but the limited space of an article of this nature does not allow for extensive descriptions of all the possible factors.

Stereotyping and the media

The selection of data pertaining to stereotyping and the role of media were selected by making use of statements that the subjects had to respond to a five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’, ‘disagree’, ‘I’m not sure’, ‘I agree’, to ‘I strongly agree’. On a statement that “girls/sportswomen who play sport lack femininity”, 57% of the subjects strongly disagreed, 32% disagreed, and only 8% was not sure and 3% did not answer. One can state that 89% did not agree with the statement that sportswomen lack femininity. On a statement that “only beautiful model-like sportswomen get endorsement and sponsorships”, 25% of the subjects strongly disagreed, 25% disagreed, 29% was not sure, 13% agreed and 3% strongly disagreed, while 5% gave no response. In total, 50% of the subjects did not believe that appearances play an integral part in sponsorships and only 16% agreed with this statement. In terms of the role of media, the subjects were asked to respond yes or no to the following question: “do you watch sportswomen competing on television?” The majority (87%) answered yes to the question and only 8% said no, while 5% did not answer. On the question “do you feel there is enough coverage of women’s sport?”, only 13% answered yes and 79% answered no, while 8% did not answer. On the crucial question to the subjects “how the participants feel about how the media portrays the sportswomen”, is revealed in Figure 2. It is interesting to note that 51% of the subjects feel that the sportswomen are played down in the way that the media portrays the women in sport and only 4% feels that women in sport are exploited.

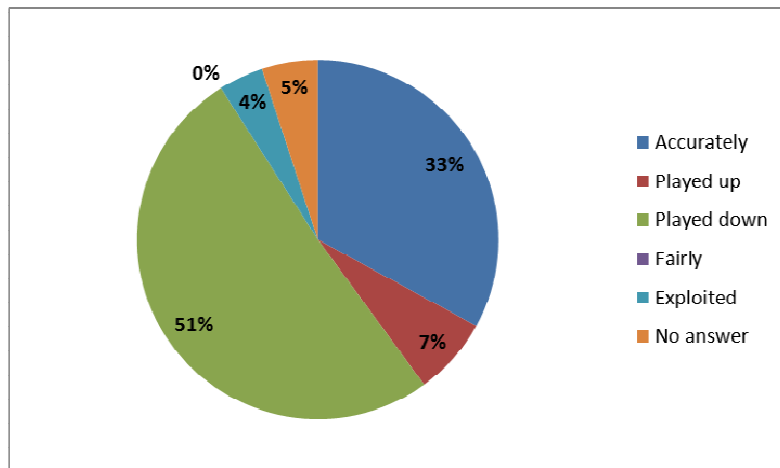


Figure 2: How the South African media portrays sportswomen

Discussion

The termination of sporting careers among sportswomen is seldom due to one factor and most of the time the termination of sporting careers are due to cumulative effect of different factors in combination. The main reason may be attributed to the loss of motivation and interest in their sport, but there may be other factors contributing to this problem. The reoccurrence of injuries, problems with the coach and other problems as listed in Figure 1 may aggravate the situation that eventually results in the termination of sporting careers. According to Wann (1997, p. 53), as soon as an athlete starts to experience the following factors “no longer having fun, they are feeling they are failing to fulfil their need for achievement, failure to gain self-esteem benefits, conflicting activities or poor coaching”, the chances that the athlete may terminate their sporting careers may increase. In an intensive literature search on all the main electronic data basis, no research pertaining to the specific focus on reasons why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers in the tertiary phase (after school) could be found. Therefore, this research is highly exploratory and a novel contribution to the ambit of research on gender in sport. However, recent researches on the reasons why participation of girls in sport decrease in the adolescent phase (12 – 16 years) are reported.

Slater and Tiggemann (2011) uncovered important factors why girls participate less in organized sport than boys. Due to the fact that girls reported that they are teased by boys and that body image concerns may contribute to the fact that adolescent girls reported reduced rates of participation in organized sport and other physical activities. The same researches also uncovered why adolescent girls experience the problem that it is “uncool to do sport” (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010, p. 169). Girls reported that they felt that they might cross traditional gender boundaries by participating in sport, which was traditionally classified as

'masculine'. Other contributing factors were teasing and the problem of image and appearance while participating in sport (Slater & Tiggemann, 2010). According to this research, it seems that the adolescent phase plays a crucial role in the development of sporting careers of women. This notion is corroborated by the longitudinal study that was done by Scheerder et al. (2006) that determined that the late adolescent sport experience, as well as the quality of the sport program in which the young adolescent is involved, may be the crucial factor that determine sport involvement later in life. This significant research contribution by Scheerder et al. (2006) underlines the importance that termination of sporting careers and reasons why sporting careers are terminated in the tertiary phase may be traced back to the crucial sporting experiences of the adolescent phase in the development of meaningful sporting careers.

Narrow stereotyping roles for men and women are sometimes deeply engraved in the psychosocial constructs of society, where gender inequalities are accepted as the norm and unfair gender practices are not even questioned (Holtzman, 2000). The concern that girls may cross traditional gender boundaries particular in those sports that are traditionally classified as 'masculine', have been reported by Slater and Tiggemann (2010) and could not be corroborated by this research. On the statement that "girls/ sportswomen who play sport lack femininity", a total of 89% did not agree with this statement. However, the media plays a crucial role of representing the women in sport. On the crucial question "do you feel there is enough coverage of women's sport" on television, a total of 79% did not agree with this statement. This finding is not only corroborated by research that was done by Goslin (2008) in the South African context, but is also reported in numerous international research projects. For example, the Australian Sports Commission (2000) reported that there was not consisted long-term coverage of women in the media. This inequality in representation of women in the sports media in the United Kingdom are also supported by the research findings of the Women's Sport Foundation (2003).

Results in this research revealed that 51% of the subjects felt that the media are played down in the way that women are presented in the media and only 4% felt that women are exploited in the media. This trend that the majority of women felt that they are played down by the media and that they are not accurately represented are reinforced and supported by rather disturbing findings by Lowe Morna and Ndlovu (2007) that the representation of different roles of the women are in sharp contrast with the roles of men as featured in media advertising in South Africa (Figure 3). The five most prominent roles in order of frequency in advertisements in the media in South Africa are listed from most frequent to less frequent in advertisement. The roles of men are firstly seen as a sportsperson, followed by business person, entertainer, politician and professional. Women's roles are contrasted sharply by the fact that advertisements represent them firstly as domestic workers, followed by model and beauty contestant, parent and care

giver, student and youth and as partner or spouse in order of frequencies. If the notion is true that the media has become a powerful institutional force in the shaping of people's perceptions, attitudes and values, then the representation of gender roles in the media and especially in advertisements may deeply penetrate the conscious and unconscious levels of the consumers of the media and subtly create the intolerable gender inequalities of our modern day society.

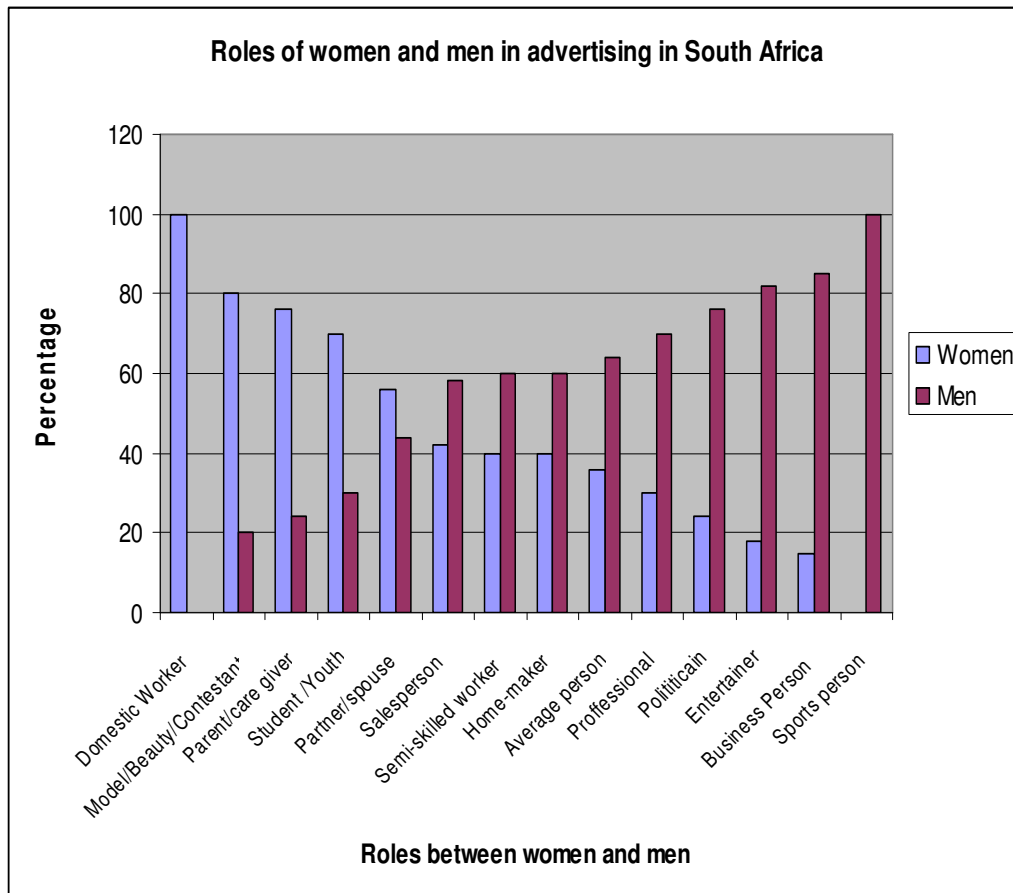


Figure 3: The roles of women and men featuring in advertising in South Africa

Conclusion

Within the framework of gender equality and the main drive for gender mainstreaming in sport, as an essential component to establish a fair situation where women can empower themselves, the crucial question arises whether women in sport reach their full potential to fulfil their rightful place in society. This leads to the essential question why do sportswomen terminate their sporting careers prematurely before they reach their full potential. The five main reasons why sportswomen terminate their sporting careers in the tertiary phase (after school) are due to loss of motivation and interest, followed by coach problems, academic pressure, injuries

and politics in sport. Currently there is no research available in this important research area to corroborate or to compare these results with. This research is therefore highly novel and exploratory of nature. Available research on young adolescent girls in sport indicated that the quality of experience of sport and sport programs on schools have a major impact on their involvement in sport later in life (Scheerder et al., 2006). Stereotyping and gender inequality in the representation of women in sport may also be aggravating factors that can contribute to the premature termination of sporting careers among South African sportswomen.

References

- Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles (2005a). *Gender in Televised Sports: News and Highlights Shows, 1989-2004*. Los Angeles, CA: Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.
- Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles (2005b). *Coverage of Women's Sports in Four Daily Newspapers*. Los Angeles, CA: Amateur Athletic Foundation of Los Angeles.
- Australian Sports Commission (2000). *An Illusory Image: A Report on the Media Coverage and Portrayal of Women's Sport in Australia*. Melbourne: Australian Sports Commission.
- Castillo, J. J. (2009). Snowball sampling. From experiment resources. <http://www.experiment-resources.com/snowball-sampling.html>. July 2011.
- Curtis, M., & Grant, C. (2006). About Title IX. <http://www.bailiwick.lib.uiowa.edu/ge/pdfciteRE.html>. May 2007.
- George, J. J. (2001). Lack of news coverage for women's athletics: A questionable practice of newspaper priorities. Women's Sports Foundation Media Spotlight. <http://www.womenssportfoundation.org/cgi-bin/iowa/issues/media/article.html?recor> January 2008.
- Goslin, A. E. (2008). Print media coverage of women's sport in South Africa. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 14(3), September 299-309.
- Goslin, A. E. & Kluka, D.A. (2007). Affirmative action as a dimension of diversity management: Perceptions of South African sport federations. *Journal of Global Initiatives: Policy, Pedagogy, Perspectives*, 1(2), 14-17.
- Gratton, C. & Jones, I. (2004). *Research Methods for Sport Studies*. London: Routledge.
- Holtzman, L. (2000). *Media Messages*. Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe.
- Kluka, D. A., Goslin, A. E. & Steyn, B. J. M. (2012). Brighton declaration of women and sport: Perceptions of management process quality. *International Journal of Sport Management*, 13, 1-22.
- Leonard, W. (1996). The odds of training from one level of sports participation to another. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 13(2), 288-299.
- Lowe Morna, C. & Ndlovu, S. (2007). *Mirror on the Media. Gender and Advertising in Southern Africa*. Johannesburg: DS Print Media.

Malhotra, A., Schuler, S. R. & Boender, C. (2002). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and attentional control. *Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy*, 14, 449-463.

Pfister, G. & Radtke, S. (2009). Sport, women, and leadership: Results of a project on executives in German sports organizations. *European Journal of Sport Science*, 9(4), 229-243.

Scheerder, J., Thomis, M., Vanreusel, B., Lefevre, J., Renson, R., Vanden Eynde, B. & Beunen, G. P. (2006). Sports participation among females from adolescence to adulthood. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 41(3-4), 413-430.

Slater, A. & Tiggemann, M. (2010). "Uncool to do sport": A focus group of adolescent girls' reasons for withdrawing from physical activity. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 11, 619-626.

Slater, A. & Tiggemann, M. (2011). Gender differences in adolescent sport participation, teasing, self-objectification and body image concerns. *Journal of Adolescence*, 34, 455-463.

South African Government (2004). *White Paper on Sport and Recreation*. Pretoria: Government Printer.

Sports Information and Science Agency (SISA) (1997). *Research on the Participation of Women in Sport in South Africa*. Pretoria: BMI-Sportinfo.

Terre Blance, M. & Kelly, K. (2002). Interpretive methods. In M. Terre Blanche & K. Durrheim (Eds.), *Research in Practice* (pp. 123-146). Cape Town: UCT Press.

Thomas, J. R., Nelson, J. K. & Silverman, A. L. (2005). *Research methods in physical activity* (5th ed.). Canada: Human Kinetics.

Women's Sports Foundation (2003). *Campaign for Coverage*. London: United Kingdom Sport.

Wann, D. L. (1997). *Sport Psychology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.