Complicating the “Soccer Mom:” The Cultural Politics of Forming Class-Based Identity, Distinction, and Necessity

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Using Pierre Bourdieu’s theories of social class differentiation and class reproduction, this paper provides an analysis of class-based identity politics in contemporary suburban America. Through a critical ethnography of the emergent, American, upper-middle-class “soccer mom” phenomenon, this study contributes to a growing body of research that interrogates class-based, cultural practices of status differentiation. As part of a larger, longitudinal ethnographic study, this paper specifically focuses on the ways in which women, who are driven by upper-middle-class habitus, contest and construct their identity as mothers of young, soccer-playing children.

Key words: habitus, social class, suburban America

According to Vavrus (2000), the “soccer mom” label represents “a demographic category characterized by women’s relationships to their children” (p. 194). Therefore, use of this term to generally refer to white, suburban women simplifies who they are and homogenizes their experience. “Soccer moms” are portrayed as living a hectic and demanding lifestyle and have been described as “harried-but-concerned suburban homemakers” (Argetsinger, 1996, p. B1) and as “masters of multi-tasking, nurses by nature, taxi-drivers in training and can coordinate a family schedule without a Palm Pilot” (National Got Milk, 2002). While today’s “soccer moms” may have been the “supermoms of the 1980s,” they nonetheless have lost major power as women and individuals and are now simply recognized for their power as a consumer group (MacFarquhar, 1996, p. 1). According to Vavrus (2000), women during the early 1990s (before “soccer mom” labeling) were gaining power in the political arena and were well represented and supported in the media. However, women’s portrayal and representation in the media and politics turned completely upside down a few years later as the “soccer mom” phrase was thrown around by politicians in an attempt to gain support from voters. According to MacFarquhar (1996), “Susan B. Christopher may well have coined the first political usage during Denver’s 1995 municipal elections with her slogan ‘A Soccer Mom for City Council.’ It was, she thought, a way of denoting herself as every neighbor” (p. 1). Women were suddenly no longer characterized as strong individuals on the verge of making significant inroads as political figures, instead they were undermined by this labeling, which relegated them to merely a specific type of domestic role. According to Vavrus (2000), “rather than engaging a substantive critique of the domestic and professional expectations of soccer moms, the label and the ensuing media discussions tend to diminish them in importance, make them seem trivial or cute, and/or link them with consumer products—as if a minivan or organic rice cakes could address the cultural and structural inequities that conspire to make even middle class women’s lives difficult” (p. 209).

The use of the “soccer mom” label erroneously simplifies the lives of mothers with soccer-playing children, and therefore is symptomatic of a cultural shift toward conservatism and the further entrenchment of patriarchal ideology in the United States. As indicated by Lakoff (2004), America’s right-wing politicians have framed discussions around a belief in “strict father values,” thereby affecting the ways in which the public thinks and behaves (p. 43). Through my analysis in this paper,
I complicate the “soccer mom” trope by understanding the behavior of these mothers as a class-driven struggle over the formation of identity amid the overarching, neoliberal standards invading contemporary American life. This work builds on the research within sociology of sport that utilizes Pierre Bourdieu’s theoretical material on the cultural politics of class-based lifestyles.

Review of Literature: Locating the “Soccer Mom”

According to Wacquant, “The wide-ranging work produced by Pierre Bourdieu over the past three decades has emerged as one of the most imaginative and fertile bodies of social theory and research of the postwar era” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 2). Through his far-reaching and insightful work on a variety of subjects such as language, lifestyle, and social class, Bourdieu has greatly influenced our understanding of the social world and has been “considered one of the world’s leading social theorists” (Bourdieu, 1993a, p. 479).

In analyzing specific class practices, I relied on Bourdieu’s writings concerning capital, habitus, and cultural fields, as well as recent sociological literature influenced by Bourdieu’s theories. Bourdieu developed social theories beginning with the identification of the various forms of capital. His concepts were forged theoretically through a Marxian concern with social reproduction, a Weberian concern with the particular styles of life and attributions of honour or dishonour that define status groups, and a Durkheimian concern with the social origin and function of symbolic forms, classifications, and representations (Shilling, 1992).

Capital “refers to the active properties that structure social space” (Laberge, 1995, p. 133). Capital, as described by Bourdieu (1986, p. 241), is labor in either a “materialized” or “embodied” form. Different types of capital include economic, cultural, social, and physical forms. It is the analysis of these various forms and their distribution within a social structure that allows Bourdieu to develop an understanding of social “reality.”

The term habitus, first introduced by Marcel Mauss in 1966 (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988), was expanded by Bourdieu to mean “a system of lasting unconscious dispositions and acquired schemes of thought and action, perception, and appreciation, based on individuals’ integrated social experiences under specific sets of objective social conditions” (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 5). Individuals embody their habitus; as Wacquant explained, “Habitus consists of a set of historical relations ‘deposited’ within individual bodies” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 16).

Habitus, therefore, works “from within agents” (p. 18). Bourdieu and Wacquant indicated that while habitus is “durable” it is not “eternal” and that it is only in “relation to certain structures that habitus produces given discourses or practices” (p. 135).

Each class or class fraction has its own distinct habitus “which retranslates the necessities and facilities characteristic of that class of (relatively) homogenous conditions of existence into a particular life-style” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 208). It is a class habitus that greatly impacts a class member’s practices and patterns of behavior.

The impact of capital and the embodiment of habitus take place in what Bourdieu (1993b) described as the field of cultural production. “Fields” are sites where struggle exists over “social formation and social relationships. . . . A field is characterized by a specialized activity area stemming from a sort of division of labor and centered on a specific issue (e.g., literature, art, sport, etc.).” Defrance, 1995, p. 126). A field can be understood only in terms of power relations, which is why capital is so “tightly interconnected” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 99) with the concept of field, since the distribution of capital among agents in a field directly relates to the distribution of power.

Bourdieu’s work has inspired a number of researchers within the sociology of sport discipline to apply his social theories and concepts of capital, habitus, and field to the area of sport (e.g., Kay & Laberge, 2002; Light & Kirk, 2001; Wacquant, 1992; Zwick & Andrews, 1999). These previous applications of Bourdieu’s theories relate to this paper due to their focus on class-based or lifestyle-based identity struggles. For example, Kay and Laberge examined Adventure Racing (AR) as a “lifestyle sport” and applied Bourdieu’s concepts to the power and identity struggles it now faces. The researchers’ analysis of the struggle over AR’s legitimate form reflected their use of Bourdieu’s concepts of field and symbolic capital. They noted that “the ‘players’ are the driving force of the field’s development, forming the corps of specialists who try to develop, transmit and control their own particular status culture, forming organizational and professional interests that constantly restructure and redefine the field” (Kay & Laberge, 2002, p. 44). By extending this focus on the struggle of agents using symbolic capital within a specified field to the “soccer mom” phenomenon, my research will contribute to the understanding of how class-based identity is formed through complex forms of class-driven behavior.

While there is sociology of sport research specifically on mothers’ experiences, little of it is informed by Bourdieu’s theoretical work. For example, Chafetz and Kotarba’s (1995) examination of the role that mothers play during a Little League season is certainly informative, but the analysis in such studies could be taken further by examining the behavior as linked to class habitus and
recognizing extensive use of capital within sport-related fields. This can further increase our theoretical understanding of the impact of class on specific gendered practices within sport. Thompson’s (1999) book, *Mother’s Taxi: Sport and Women’s Labor*, was a start in recognizing the need to analyze mothers’ sport-related behavior through the lens of Bourdieu’s theories of social class differentiation. Thompson discussed the maintenance of “gendered divisions of labor and how they are reproduced within and by sport” (p. 7). She explained that the connection between sport and women is one of labor. The women contribute labor so that others may play. Thompson found them to be “unrecognized, undervalued, and mostly invisible” (p. 2). My study continued Thompson’s effort in this direction. In the research results below, the labor that “soccer moms” put forth to enable their children to play is described, as well as their class-based reasons for contributing the labor.

In recognizing that these women live an American, suburban lifestyle dominated by expectations of consumerism and a belief in strict-father family values, it becomes necessary to locate the mothers’ labor within the context of the current neoliberal movement (Lakoff, 2004). The United States, particularly in the last decade, has experienced major cultural and political shifts. The culture of fear, religious fundamentalism, and inequities between the wealthy and the poor are all on the rise, while opportunities for dissention against this neoliberal order have been suppressed (Giroux, 2005). As indicated by Giroux (2005), there is a need for contributors to analyze how neoliberal policies work at the level of everyday life . . . such a project must employ a language of critique and possibility, engagement and hope as part of a broader project of viewing democracy as a site of intense struggle over matters of representation, participation, and shared power. (pp. 14–15)

The results of the following study allow for insight into “everyday life” impacted by a broader political ideology; and more specifically how it affects a particular group of women to negotiate self-representation in their role as mothers of young, soccer-playing sons.

**Method**

**Overview**

I used an ethnographic methodology to produce extensive data on the participants’ daily practices as “soccer moms.” According to Tedlock (2000), “ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (p. 455). Ethnography allows the researcher to gain insight into human behavior that not only varies by culture, but expresses the multiple perspectives and meanings associated with social life within a culture (Hammersley, 1989). By compiling ethnographies within marginalized areas, the knowledge base on social behavior not only expands but shifts its center. Ethnography provides an effective means by which previously ignored voices can be heard and understood within a context (e.g., women and particular racial or class groupings; Tedlock). As sociologists of sport (e.g., Silk, 2001; Wacquant, 1992) further incorporate ethnographic methodology into their research, the discipline will benefit from the rich data on behavior affiliated with sport and activity. Sociology of sport will expand its understanding of the varied meanings associated with activity and gain an insider’s view of sport-related environments. According to Maguire (1991), “…general taken-for-granted assumptions and the outdated philosophy of science guiding sport science thinking…is seen as problematic” (p. 191). He suggested that “a bolder and more imaginative view of sport sciences would center on its potential to tell us something about human beings generally, not solely relating to their performing in elite sport events” (p. 191). Ethnography can provide that “bolder and more imaginative view,” as sociologists of sport recognize the need for further studies focusing on the complexities of sport-related behavior in context.

**Participants**

The participants for this study included 14 mothers. The research received institutional review board approval, and all participants provided informed consent. Each of these 14 women had a son on the Atlantic Breakers’ soccer team, an “under 13” youth soccer team located in an affluent suburb in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The women’s ages ranged from 37 to 51 years, with a mean age of 44 years. All the participants identified themselves as either “white” or “Caucasian.” Seventy-one percent of the women had earned a bachelors degree or higher, but during the time of this study only three women worked full time outside the home. The family income range of this group was $75,000 to over $200,000, with a mean income of $130,000 per year. The vast majority of the women’s spouses had earned advanced degrees beyond high school and were in what Gilbert (2003) has described as upper-middle-class occupations. The mothers reported that their husbands held positions such as engineer, lawyer, and salesman. Fifty percent of them identified themselves as upper middle class. The other 50% identified themselves as either middle class or middle/upper middle class.
Procedures

Data Collection. The role of the ethnographic fieldworker is to immerse him or herself into the participants’ culture. The fieldworker must enter what Van Maanen (1988) called the participants’ “home ground.” On entering the field, the ethnographer must gain rapport and key informants. From this point the ethnographer can move through a variety of data collection methods, including interviews and participant observation. My techniques for gathering data included extensive fieldwork, formal and informal interviews, survey, group discussion, and participant observation. In an attempt to approach what Atkinson and Delamont (2005) referred to as a systematic ethnography, I tried to be as thorough as possible in methodology, taking into account the participants’ “places and spaces” (i.e., suburban location, homes, and soccer fields) as well as their words (both discussions with me and discussions they had with each other; Atkinson & Delamont, p. 827). I also observed their actions as key, informative pieces to understanding them. The study took place over an 8-month period, during which I entered the participants’ “home ground” by performing the fieldwork on the soccer field and in the participants’ homes.

Data Analysis. According to Denscombe (1999), “Data do not exist ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered, but are produced by the way they are interpreted and used by researchers” (p. 208). To accomplish my interpretations, I followed a five-stage framework for analyzing unstructured, qualitative data. The five interconnected stages composing the framework were familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and finally mapping and interpretation. These stages were developed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994) with the understanding that the researcher can conceptualize his or her own data and how best to relate the interpretive process. Overall, following this five-stage framework enabled me to develop an analysis rich in the participants’ words.

Results

Ethnographic material and analysis are provided below, under two sections. The first section provides insight into the participants’ class-based identity struggle as a negotiation among themselves, as well as between themselves and other groups of mothers. The second section describes the labor and sacrifices provided by the participants along with the interpretation that this is done in reaction to their upper-middle-class experience with what Bourdieu (1984) referred to as absence of necessity. Whenever possible I have inserted representative quotes from the participants to provide the reader with the voices of the mothers involved.

Social Class Standing and the Resulting Negotiation of Identity

The mothers in this study desired status differentiation from others in the same suburban field, thereby indicating their specific social class and more precisely their class habitus. The upper-middle-class habitus has been summed up in the following way: “They stress planning for the future and not too much regard for the past; they stress activity, accomplishment, practical results; they stress individualistic achievement within the framework of group cooperation and collective responsibility” (Booth and Loy, 1999, p. 13). Based on my exposure to the words and actions of the participants, this description of upper-middle-class habitus effectively captures their values and lifestyle practices associated with suburban, youth soccer. They often tried to disassociate themselves from behavior that could easily be viewed as middle class (e.g., displays of anxiety over a need or desire to advance economically and socially). Instead they would take on more of an upper-class approach and engage in activity without the angst.

As Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, and Ambrose (1997), noted sport does not exist in a vacuum unaffected by surrounding social structures; instead the activities associated with sport are a part of the larger social system at work. The experience the participants in this study had in relation to their suburban youth soccer program was the result of a negotiation among each individual, their class habitus, and their location in the American suburban landscape. As indicated by Andrews (1999), suburban, youth soccer programs represent subfields within the larger field of upper-middle-class, suburban areas. Bourdieu’s concept of field “consists of a set of objective, historical relations between positions anchored in certain forms of power (or capital)” and “is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, pp. 16–17). The participants’ self-presentation, consumption patterns, and child-rearing practices located them as part of the larger, upper-middle-class, suburban field, but at the same time produced conflict for these women as they attempted to establish distinction through their own subfield—the Atlantic Breakers soccer team.

Most of the participants in this study differentiated themselves from other mothers of young soccer players. They expressed a definite view on what constitutes a “soccer mom,” but most did not identify with the descriptions they provided. They agreed that the true “soccer mom” has only a singular focus—intense dedication and sacrifice. They often tried to disassociate themselves from behavior that could easily be viewed as middle class (e.g., displays of anxiety over a need or desire to advance economically and socially). Instead they would take on more of an upper-class approach and engage in activity without the angst.
Their process of negotiating a social class identity distinct from behavior that might be of a lower status and more common. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), "...[p]articipants in a field... constantly work to differentiate themselves from their closest rivals in order to reduce competition and to establish a monopoly over a particular subsector of the field." (p. 100). In this case, the mothers continuously gave indications that they were different from other mothers of soccer-playing children. At times they even referred to other mothers on the team as "soccer moms," yet those mothers did not accept the label either. For example, after Karen turned to her oldest son and asked, “You don’t think I’m a ‘soccer mom’ do you?” she then said:

Jenny indicated that K.T., another team mother, should be included in the research. “She’s a real ‘soccer mom’.” Jenny went on to identify another: “Who’s a real ‘soccer mom.’ Another friend of mine, Susan.” Susan then encouraged me to talk with another mother she identified as different from herself. “I’ll tell you somebody you might want... she definitely is your true ‘soccer mom’... is Barb” (Susan). Jill joined in on identifying other mothers from the team as “soccer moms,” saying, “Jenny to me is like a prime example of a ‘soccer mom.’” While avoiding the label personally, participants continuously pointed to other mothers they felt were “soccer moms.”

Although some of the women identified “soccer moms” on their own team, the strongest reactions came when they compared themselves to mothers from other teams. Early in the research, K.T. said, “I do think there are probably groups of parents who take it way beyond that. But see we’re not one of those of groups.” Here again, this group can be viewed as attempting to “differentiate themselves” from other teams’ parents (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). Class and status distinction were at stake; these upper middle class women desired recognition for the differences between their own mothering practices and those of other “soccer moms.” The mothers clearly disagreed with a lot of the parental behavior they were exposed to at games and especially at tournaments. The participants saw themselves as mothering in a more positive way than parents from opposing teams and had a negative view of parents who had their children in soccer programs at an even more elite level than the Atlantic Breakers. They disagreed with the intense focus on competition and such extensive travel. The participants’ behavior on the sidelines during games was markedly different from parents across the field. The group was
usually loosely formed, not a big, tight, cheering mass of parents appearing to live vicariously through their kids. I was unaware of the mothers’ class status on the other side of the field, but I understood my participants’ negative reaction as an attempt to differentiate themselves from what appeared to be a reflection of middle class habitus. Instead of being overly concerned about competition, they portrayed themselves as more relaxed and interested only in competitive activity as it could be used to develop cooperation and leadership skills among their boys. The mothers in this study had a shared understanding of acceptable behavior for their own long-standing group. Unfortunately this need for distinction caused divisiveness among them. According to Tardy (2000), the “idealized notion of motherhood has tended to pit women against each other rather than join them against the structures that have created the idealization” (p. 440). In this case, the “idealization” is a negative stereotype about suburban mothers. By individually pointing fingers at other mothers who are “soccer moms,” the participants ended up contributing to the negative labeling that homogenizes their mothering experiences.

Through their affiliation with one another, the mothers of the Atlantic Breakers team had developed social capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), social capital is basically a “credential” gained as a result of affiliation with a particular “durable network” (pp. 248–249). As part of this network, members (i.e., the team mothers) share in their recognition and behavior. Capital is only “effective” within a field in which agents recognize its meaning, and therefore, value (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 247). This group of mothers recognized their shared values in one another and their distinctions from opposing team mothers. In developing a social network through the creation of and affiliation with the Atlantic Breakers team, the mothers were participating in the “territorialization of life” (Rose, 2000, p. 1398). According to Rose, much of the Western world has been shifting toward a “politics of life” (p. 1396) known as the Third Way (p. 1396). While framed by politicians in a manner to seem less extreme right-wing than neoliberalism, the Third Way is still a permeating political movement with key neoconservative values at its core. The mothers’ understanding of themselves was indicative of the politics of the Third Way. They saw themselves “as citizens, not of societies as national collectivities, but of neighborhoods, associations, regions, networks, subcultures, age groups, ethnicities, and lifestyle sectors—in short, communities” (Rose, p. 1398).

Creating Necessity Through Self-Sacrifice and Commitment

According to Nicolson (1993), the socially constructed role of motherhood is narrowly defined and results in constraining the continuation of a woman’s own development. Many of the mothers in this study either quit their job or cut back on hours to dedicate themselves to caring for their children. Even mothers who were not working full time told to me that they did not have time for themselves. Dropping their children off at school and activities, organizing family schedules, and preparing meals left most of them with little, if any, down time. They did not have weekends off because they attended games and tournaments at that time, they rarely ever watched television, and opportunities for exercise were minimal. When asked about their own activity levels, several of the mothers said that their husbands were active (apparently husbands were free to go running after work or golfing on weekends), but that they usually exercised only if it was a family activity.

The mothers’ focus was on the commitment it took to play the role of a mother of a youth soccer player. This dedication became evident while I observed their behavior throughout the season.

But most of these parents, and this is really true about this group of parents and I’d say most parents, they are very committed to what their kids are doing, and they expect their kids to be committed. I mean if they make a decision to be part of this team and want to be part of this team, they’re where they’re supposed to be when they’re supposed to be there…. The parents [of the Atlantic Breakers] are the kind of people who, I mean they’re all kind of, we’re all kind of at the same mind set to begin with, that you know when you make a commitment you stick with it. If you’re going to do something, you’re gonna do it well and do the best you can. (K.T.)

These mothers, as Bourdieu would put it, were “playing the game” (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 98). The game in this case is survival (i.e., keeping up) in their upper-middle-class, suburban field. Additionally, the mothers were attempting to reproduce their upper-middle-class standing and habitus in their sons (Swanson, in press). Position within this field comes with certain expectations assigned to the mothering role. Dedication and activity were part of these participants’ upper-middle-class habitus, which made these women feel that commitment to this team was the right thing to do.

The mothers expected a great deal from themselves. They put in a tremendous number of hours. This information coincides with Thompson’s (1999) findings from her research on Australian mothers of tennis-playing children. Thompson indicated that her participants took on a labor-intensive role maintaining their children’s status as a youth tennis player. Among my participants I
found that there was a constant need to organize, to get the "grunt work" done as Sarah put it, and quickly move from one event to the next in order to have their children remain committed to the team.

Well if we figure for the most part Tom has practice three days a week, that’s two hours, that’s six hours of practice time. And then once school starts it’ll break down to two. But then they’re playing on the weekends. So it would be a Saturday and a Sunday game, and we add on another 45 minutes prior to that they have to be there. Because they spend, you know, it’s not just the hour that they’re playing, they spend time preparing before they get on the field and all that other kind of stuff. So that’s six, seven, eight, nine and a half hours right there. That’s just, that’s not even travel time when you get to and from. (K.T.)

So that’s where it gets tricky, because if they’re all playing on soccer teams, Saturday and Sunday looks like three games on Saturday and three games on Sunday. We don’t do anything [outside of soccer] on the weekends in the fall. (Chrissy)

Right, and this team that they’re on, I mean they’re beautiful soccer players and they are awesome. But the trade off is the only way to get there is to...a lot of practice and a lot of games and a lot of this and a lot of weekends and a lot of that stuff. So you know there’s a trade off. (Terry)

The Atlantic Breakers’ coach, Tom, set this tone of commitment at the beginning of the season. Tom met with the parents in order to express his need for them to commit to the team. His expectations for dedication from the parents to get their children to every practice and game on time coincides with what the mothers believed should be done. The participants pointed out to me that there were other non-Atlantic Breaker mothers who were not willing to make the effort or just did not understand why they would.

Despite the overwhelming amount of work they put into the development of another person, this lack of focus on themselves did not seem to upset them much. A few mothers occasionally mentioned they would like more time for themselves, but no one did any serious complaining. In fact they usually laughed a bit when mentioning their lack of time for themselves. No one seemed to be truly unhappy about putting their child’s needs before their own. This differed from Thompson’s (1999) results; her participants came across as somewhat more frustrated. The mothers I studied insisted that this is what they wanted to do.

This self-representation by the mothers as wanting to take on this role should not be overlooked. The women in this study had a clear and united representation of their social reality. Their stance overall was that they want to be participating in the role of mother (and specifically nurturer/supporter of their soccer-playing children). These mothers had a specific “appropriate” means of behaving in their role and were agents struggling to represent themselves as different from other agents in the field (i.e., highly competitive and pushy parents of other teams). According to Bourdieu (1984), “The reality of the social world is in fact partly determined by the struggles between agents over the representation of their position in the social world and, consequently, of that world” (p. 253). These participants reflected the middle class preoccupation with the symbolic by expressing great concern over their representation as mothers of young soccer players (Bourdieu 1984). They continuously followed their team’s own accepted behavior and avoided “soccer mom” values and practices. The accepted behavior can be further understood within the context of America’s neoliberal rationale. Their degree of commitment to this role indicates their commitment to “good” citizenship (Lakoff, 2004; Rose, 2000).

The mothers’ role required a great deal of flexibility on a monthly, weekly, and daily basis. Commitment to the Atlantic Breakers team meant being available at a moment’s notice to support their sons’ activity. Bourdieu (1984) pointed out that as one’s economic capital increases so does his or her distance from necessity. The flexibility and commitment demonstrated by the mothers in this study was an indication of their high level of economic capital and distinct distance from necessity. Without these, the mothers would have been unable to devote the amount of time and labor they do. The transformation of their wealth (i.e., economic capital) to membership on the Atlantic Breakers team (i.e., social capital) required a great deal of labor and manipulation by the mothers.

Overall, the absence of necessity plays an important role, because it facilitates the mothers’ opportunity to be flexible and invested. These mothers were ready to go at a moment’s notice. It is as if they were constantly on call for their job as “soccer mom.” While recognizing the participants’ explanation that their efforts on behalf of their sons’ soccer participation were done for the child, I would like to entertain the idea that the mothers were motivated by more than just expected mothering practices. Instead, I view these women as agents possibly taking on a proactive role in situating their lifestyle practices. Based on average income level, educational background, and location of residence, the mothers in this study belonged
to a relatively privileged class. It is because of this privilege that these mothers are able to play out their role in the way they desired. It is my belief that the mothers’ behavior and expressed values were not only a result of their distance from necessity but also partially due to their attempt to create necessity. Many of these women may have experienced a need to feel needed, or fill a void in their lives, as a result of their extensive distance from necessity. If they perceived their reason for experiencing distance from necessity (i.e., for many participants who were not working full time outside the home) as a result of being married to financially successful men, then they may have felt that they were not making any contributions, or more specifically any contributions that were recognized. As indicated above, most of these women rejected the “soccer mom” label. They were clearly aware of how they may be perceived or recognized by others and fearful of this negative labeling. According to Vavrus (2000), “Media discussions tend to diminish them [soccer moms] in importance, make them seem trivial or cute, and/or link them with consumer products” (p. 209). Based on these media depictions and the majority of the mothers’ expressed understanding of the “soccer mom” role as having a negative connotation, it is understandable that the mothers emphasized to me that what they did was a lot of hard work and not what was depicted in the media. The youth soccer environment, partially produced by the mothers themselves, is a field where their presence and labor is necessary.

A couple of the participants said they accepted the “soccer mom” label and that their behavior, at least to some degree, fit the stereotype most of the mothers had described and rejected. When Anne was asked whether she thought advertisements portraying “soccer moms” with minivans and kids was realistic, she responded, “Absolutely, no question.” She was then asked how she responded to that type of advertisement. “That’s me,” she said. She explained that she has been called a “soccer mom.” “Yeah, people have said that … Yeah, I laugh and say yeah you’re right, I’ve got the van and the flavor, the sport of the day. Yeah that’s what we’re doing” (Anne). Debbie also accepted the “soccer mom” label. She explained, “I think that we all are soccer moms, I think we are all. When I went looking for a van this weekend, they were talking about “soccer moms” … I mean you have to, everybody’s busy, everybody’s looking, nobody’s gonna miss a game, but if you have to, you’re constantly searching for the carpool. And a four-seated car is not gonna cut it anymore, cause you can’t bring anybody.” It is interesting that both of these mothers mentioned the stereotypical “soccer mom” minivan. They perceived this form of cultural capital as establishing them as mothers of soccer-playing children and perhaps what they perceived to be the appropriate behavior for an Atlantic Breakers’ mother. Other team mothers did not do this; in fact, the other participants often emphasized that they drove a car and not a sport utility vehicle or van.

These two mothers, Debbie and Anne, both worked full time outside the home; therefore, each had an identity beyond that of “soccer mom.” Neither was concerned about any negative association with this label. I believe their willingness to be referred to as “soccer moms,” unlike the others, was a reaction to being working mothers. Perhaps guilt over not being at home like the others left them feeling as though they needed to fit in with a dominant ideology. By accepting the “soccer mom” label, they could show they were following the “good mom” standard or norm (i.e., maintaining a status consistent with patriarchal constraints). Anne was even described by another mother as having a “high power job.” This kind of identity certainly puts her at odds with patriarchal expectations, so negotiating the perception of her mothering status becomes vital in her presentation of self. These two full-time working mothers were also the two participants least frequently sighted during the season. To see either of them at a practice or an entire game was quite rare. When they did attend practices or games, they behaved in a manner similar to the other mothers of the Atlantic Breakers. So while they accepted the label of “soccer mom,” they still did not take on what was considered “over-the-top” behavior; therefore, they fit well with this team overall. For example, after a particularly physical game, when parents from the opposing team came down off the bleachers yelling at the referees and making remarks about the boys from the Atlantic Breakers, these two mothers remained calm and stood with the rest of the participants who were disgusted by such behavior.

In the majority of the participants’ minds, they are not “soccer moms.” As noted by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), “Social agents are determined only to the extent that they determine themselves” (p. 136). By placing their children in a youth soccer program and then insisting on commitment to that program via their labor, their mothering role then becomes even more arduous. Their upper-middle-class habitus fuels this need to gain distinction for their achievement and labor in the mothering role. Ultimately, the more hectic their mothering role becomes, the more necessary they become. They believe the role of mother is what they are effectively playing by valuing their son’s participation in soccer and sharing that value with this group of participants (i.e., Atlantic Breakers team).

Discussion

The current research allows for some insight into the cultural politics of women cultivating a class-based identity via sport-related experience. As these women
struggle to produce class-appropriate behavior, as well as attempt to create necessity for themselves, they are allowing themselves to be even more fully immersed in a pervasive dominant ideology that relegates them to a specific gendered role, thereby limiting their potential for producing change. Their continued and unquestioned contribution to this lifestyle leaves them with little if any power to alter the oppressive social structures currently in place. Enormous energy and effort is expended by these women in their creation of necessity through the role of mothers of young, soccer-playing sons. These parents are creating a particular social reality for themselves through the constructs of youth soccer and “soccer mom,” but they have the potential to create instead a different reality for themselves. Just as everyday life provides opportunities for the dominant political movement to be played out and reinforced, everyday life also can be viewed as providing opportunity to dissent against current social structures if democracy truly is, as Giroux (2005) puts it, “a site of intense struggle over matters of representation, participation, and shared power” (p. 15). As mothers, they could have the potential to alter the next generation if only they were cognizant of the hegemonic forces at play on the American, suburban, soccer field.

To further understand the complexities of a mother’s role in relation to her child’s sport experience, future research must be undertaken. Similar studies of upper-middle-class parents would help to ascertain whether this is a unique group of participants whose understanding of their role in their children’s sport experience differs from other team parents. Mothers with various social class backgrounds could be studied with the intention of comparing and contrasting habitus and lifestyle choices. This would further contribute to the body of critical research on class-based cultural practices of status differentiation. But perhaps more importantly, future research should entail the further examination of this behavior. This could be accomplished by exposing the women involved in these practices to the kind of analysis discussed above, to see whether there is any recognition of their part in contributing to the situation and whether there is a desire for change.

The mothers I studied tried to carve out a space for themselves as distinct from the suburban norm that surrounds them. Subjected to the public/political/mediated view of “soccer mom,” these mothers attempt to empower themselves by rejecting the label and/or redefining the term. But the extremely supportive role that the participants played left them dependent on their children for the formation of their identities, which in turn caused them to wonder what they would do when they no longer played the “soccer mom” role. With some of the participants’ older children heading off to college, they were left on the soccer field openly discussing with one another this concern, questioning how they would fill their time. The comments from the sidelines regarding their “retirement” indicate that the struggle would continue to play out as they search for some meaning, purpose, and identity beyond the soccer field.

References


Notes

1. The term “soccer mom” is placed in quotation marks throughout the text of this article. Since the participants of this study are contesting their identity as “soccer moms,” the quotation marks are necessary to emphasize that the understanding of this label is not concrete. The intention of this article is to question this term and recognize the publicized/politicized/mediated definition versus the private/subjective reality.

2. Pseudonyms have been used for the team name and all participants’ names.

Author’s Notes

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