

Soccer Fields of Cultural [Re]Production: Creating “Good Boys” in Suburban America

Lisa Swanson
Towson University

Zwick and Andrews (1999) argued that suburban American soccer fields merit critical academic attention because they highlight the practices of a dominant class. To gain an understanding of this specific field of power and privilege, I employed a multifaceted ethnographic approach to studying a group of upper-middle-class mothers whose children played youth soccer. I used Pierre Bourdieu's (1984, 1993) sociological theories regarding the interplay between habitus and capital to analyze how the mothers shaped their sons' youth sport experience to reproduce class status and social advantage in the next generation.

Zwick et Andrews (1999) ont suggéré que les terrains de soccer des banlieues étatsuniennes méritent notre attention critique puisqu'elles mettent en relief les pratiques d'une classe dominante. Pour obtenir une compréhension de ce champ spécifique de pouvoir et de privilège, j'ai utilisé une approche ethnographique multidimensionnelle pour étudier un groupe de mères de la classe moyenne supérieure dont les enfants jouent au soccer. J'ai utilisé les théories sociologiques de Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1993) concernant l'interaction entre l'habitus et le capital pour analyser la façon dont les mères modulent l'expérience sportive de leurs fils et reproduisent le statut de classe et l'avantage social de la prochaine génération.

As upper-middle-class Americans intensify their practices of consumption under the auspices of the contemporary suburban lifestyle, their children have been successfully folded into such practices. Worried about being “good parents,” suburban mothers and fathers work hard to make sure their children share in the commodity experiences of their peers (Andrews, 1999; Schor, 1998). In turn, it can be argued that children desire products that have high status so they can be like their peers. Parents use this peer pressure to justify the money they spend on their children. Schor noted that “what stands out about much of the recent spate of spending is its *defensive* character. Parents worry that their children need computers and degrees from good colleges to avoid being left behind in the global economy” (p. 19). Middle and upper-middle-class parents use concerns about the education and safety of their children to defend placing them in private schools. Schor

The author is with Towson University, Kinesiology Department, 8000 York Road, Towson, MD, 21252; lswanson@towson.edu.

went on to explain, “education is only the most expensive of the ‘goods’ that make American parents feel a need to keep up. There are also costly extracurricular activities, such as lessons and sports teams” (p. 86). Rosenfeld and Wise (2000) described the investment made by middle-class parents to do the right thing by their children in their aptly titled book *The Over-Scheduled Child*. According to their account, today’s suburban lifestyle is leaving parents overextended, overworked, and overwhelmed. The authors of this popular book attempt to stimulate readers to question why having an average child is not good enough, why winning matters so much, why children’s schedules are so packed, and ultimately, with good intentions, attempted to get parents to reign in their zeal for hyperparenting. Although the authors encouraged their readers to tackle this problem by focusing instead on values and ethics, they left out a very necessary discussion of the suburban, upper-middle-class-based issues driving such a lifestyle.

The sport of soccer has been successfully interwoven into the privileged lives of the upper-middle class. Ultimately, “[y]outh soccer represents an effective sublimation of the very real social class relations, . . . through which a suburban landscape of the powerful (white middle class) is both structured and experienced” (Andrews, 1999, p. 50). The site for my research was one such suburban landscape in the mid Atlantic region of the United States. Analysis of the practices of white, upper-middle-class mothers as they mold the development of their sons contributes to the understanding of how the structure of the suburban landscape is experienced. In the following analysis I draw on the sociological theories of Pierre Bourdieu to show how upper-middle-class mothers in this study, who were fully immersed in a suburban lifestyle, attempted to reproduce their class standing via the sporting bodies of their sons.

This article is part of a much larger study on the experiences of mothers whose sons play soccer. Elsewhere, I have analyzed mothers’ attempts to use capital to develop and essentially legitimize an identity for themselves via the “soccer mom” role (Swanson, 2009).¹ My main goal throughout was to immerse myself in a group of mothers who publicly seemed to fit the stereotypical, mediated “soccer mom” image. In this article I shifted my attention from a focus on the mothers’ development of self to the mothers’ development of their sons. My analysis provides an examination of how the soccer experiences of the boys serve the purposes of members of a privileged class beyond the soccer field (i.e., the mothers’ passing on of their upper-middle-class habitus). My focus on the efforts of mothers to handle and reproduce their privilege should contribute to an understanding of “how systems of domination co-construct one another, and how we are ‘enlisted,’ materially and ideologically, in their continued operation” (Frankenberg, 1994, p. 75). I therefore examined how upper-middle-class mothers take part in the process of transforming capital to pass on their class habitus to their children—perhaps in an attempt to secure them a position in the next generation of upper-middle-class Americans.

The Suburban Field of Cultural Production

Bourdieu (1984) indicated that a member of a particular social class is conditioned by his or her cultural and economic capital, and that this is the first step that members of a social class undertake in the process of production and embodiment

of their perceptions (i.e., *habitus*) and the formation of their lifestyle. Chin (2000) provides an example of this kind of conditioning in her study of parents who manage their children's private high school application process with the intention to pass on cultural capital to them. Light and Kirk (2001) used Bourdieu's theoretical work in a similar manner, but they applied his concepts specifically to experiences associated with physical activity. Light and Kirk examined how members of the social elite in Australia used school rugby as a means of gaining class distinction for their children. The researchers noted that previous studies successfully revealed that upper-class families used educational institutions to reproduce their class standing in their children, but that the studies did not take into account the role children's physical experiences in school play in this reproduction. Light and Kirk's examination of the social meaning of rugby in an elite independent school helped to fill this void. They noted the important role *habitus* plays in the development of physical and social capital: "through the capital passed onto them by their families most of the boys in the firsts brought with them a *habitus* that was in tune with that of the school and the GPS [Greater Public Schools] rugby community" (p. 96). This in turn helped these boys gain social capital and perform well in school.

Bourdieu (1986) described cultural capital as existing in several forms. One of these forms, "embodied," consists of "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body" (Bourdieu, p. 243). Shilling (1992) referred to this as "physical capital" and noted that this particular form of cultural capital has been neglected within the literature on Bourdieu's theories (p. 3). He went on to explain that physical capital is too important to be considered just a subcategory of cultural capital. In his work "Schooling and the Production of Physical Capital," he emphasized the need to apply Bourdieu's understanding of physical capital to the sociology of education. Shilling explained that students experience the formation of physical capital within school through not only physical education classes but also in an overall attempt by the school to "internalize in pupils socially acceptable ways of managing and maintaining their bodies" (p. 11). In my research I used Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and capital in a similar manner to Light and Kirk (2001) and to Shilling, but I took their work a step further by contributing to an understanding of how physical experiences (i.e., youth soccer) outside the school environment also account for the reproduction of social class in children.

Bourdieu (1984) indicated that *habitus* affects the bodily dispositions of a class and described this "body schema" as "the depository of a whole world view and a whole philosophy of the person and the body" (p. 218). A particular awareness or treatment of one's body, therefore, coincides with an overall lifestyle formed as a result of a distinct *habitus*. Wacquant (1992), in his study of boxers in Chicago, emphasized the central role that the concept of body *habitus* can play in understanding the social behavior of those under study. Wacquant performed a 3-year ethnography in a boxing gym located in a poverty-stricken, segregated Chicago neighborhood. Participation in the pugilists' lifestyle kept the men in this gym, as one respondent described it, "out of trouble" (p. 230). Wacquant described the boxers' incorporation of the necessary bodily *habitus* within the context of their ghetto locale. According to Wacquant (p. 237):

“The culture of the boxer . . . is formed of a diffuse complex of postures and (physical and mental) moves that, being continually re-produced in and through the functioning of the gym, exist only *in action*, as well as in the traces that this action leaves within and upon the body.”

Wacquant found that only the men entering the boxing gym with an already established habitus conducive to the lifestyle were successful. The men from the poorest and most unstable backgrounds could not survive in this environment, which demanded commitment to an intense training schedule. Like Wacquant, I was especially concerned with the incorporation of a particular bodily habitus. However, unlike Wacquant, whose research participants were developing a body schema within themselves through their own sport experiences, I studied how the mothers in my research shaped the development of a body schema in their sons, not themselves.

Bourdieu's work on capital, habitus, and cultural fields greatly influenced the course of the current study. Similar to Chin (2000) I used Bourdieu's ideas about the development of cultural capital to explore the role and exchange of various forms of capital in the upper-middle-class experience. My focus, however, was on the use of body schema. Bourdieu indicated that class habitus guides a class member's practices and patterns of behavior. Therefore, the identification of the upper-middle-class habitus and its impact on activity took place as part of my research to gain a fuller understanding of the participants' perspective(s) and experiences. The lifestyle of the participants, as a product of their upper-middle-class habitus, was notable as I paid particular attention to their appreciation and support (i.e., taste) for their sons' involvement in soccer (Bourdieu, 1984). I understood the research participants as acting within a particular cultural field in which capital was transformed in ways meaningful to members of their social class. Bourdieu (1993) called this the “field of cultural production.” The field where the impact of capital and the embodiment of habitus took place for the upper-middle-class mothers and their sons in this study was primarily the suburban youth soccer field and the surrounding community in which they live.

The majority of the U.S. population lives in suburban areas (Thomas, 1998; Andrews, 1999). Andrews described this American suburban landscape as a “site of class-based power, prestige, and privilege” (p. 43). Soccer was initially viewed in the United States as part of the ethnic “other” and not part of the privileged, suburban lifestyle. Soccer carried a non American (i.e., in some cases non White) and working-class attachment. Early perceptions of soccer as something different and external to the American suburban experience changed when a number of attempts to produce professional leagues were made after World War II (Andrews). According to Andrews, “each targeted at taking advantage of the increased discretionary income being earned by the American populace” (p. 36). From the late 1960s to the mid 1980s, one of these professional leagues, the North American Soccer League (NASL), attempted to infuse youth soccer programs in the suburbs. Also during this time period, the suburbs began to experience the impact of Title IX on sport. This governmental legislation indirectly led to the production of more youth sport programs for girls in particular. The NASL's production of youth

soccer programs, along with the mandatory increase in opportunities for girls in sport in educational institutions, stimulated the massive growth of soccer participation during the 1980s and '90s (Andrews, 1999; Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, & Ambrose, 1997).

According to Andrews (1999), another reason soccer has found a home in the American suburb is that upper-middle-class parents find soccer to be quite appropriate (especially when compared with the perceived values and behavior occurring in other sports) for their suburban boys and girls. Their claim is that it is "good for the kids." Organized youth soccer has the "right type of corporeal aesthetic" for the upper-middle class, and it emphasizes competition, teamwork, and achievement—all while providing a "safe" after-school activity (Andrews, p. 48). Any sport can be practiced within any social class as long as it fits within that class's "body schema" (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 218). Bourdieu argued that the expectation that sports require high energy, physical contact, and even pain is part of the working-class habitus. Although soccer is energy demanding, and therefore suits working-class expectations of the body in sport, it is not perceived by upper-middle-class Americans as a dangerous sport because of the errant belief that it lacks any harsh, physical contact between opponents. As a result, soccer is able to fit into upper-middle-class expectations of appropriate bodily practices.

Method

My research entailed an 8-month ethnographic study of 14 women. The women were all mothers of boys participating on the Atlantic Breakers,² an "under 13" youth soccer team, in the mid Atlantic region of the United States.

Ethnographic researchers uniquely combine "research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, and representations of human lives" (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). Ethnographic methodology enables the researcher to become exceptionally close to the natural environment under study, and in the case of participant observation, become part of that environment. To perform an ethnography of this particular suburban subculture, I conducted extensive fieldwork, including individual and group interviews, surveys, participant observation, and informal discussions. As an ethnographic researcher I had to enter the "home ground" of the research participants to accomplish my fieldwork (Van Maanen, 1988). This required that I spend an extensive amount time not only on the participants' home soccer field, but also on soccer fields for away games around their county and state, as well as outside their state. I also spent a great deal of time talking with the participants individually; these discussions often took place in their suburban homes. I transcribed my recorded conversations with the participants, as well as my recorded observations of their behavior. I used these transcriptions to repeatedly review and verify the themes that developed out of a combination of my theoretical understanding of Bourdieu's work and my ethnographic process. I followed Ritchie and Spencer's (1994) stages for framing qualitative data. As I worked through each of the stages, which are familiarization, identifying a thematic framework, indexing, charting, and mapping/interpretation, I was able to develop a thick description and rich analysis of the participants' experiences.

The mothers participating in this study best fit the category of upper-middle class. The mean family income was \$130,000 per year. The vast majority of the participants, as well as their spouses, held advanced degrees beyond high school, but most of the women either worked part-time or did not engage in paid work. The spouses held occupations such as engineer, lawyer, and salesman. Gilbert (2003) has described these jobs as upper-middle-class positions. The American suburban landscape is understood as a "site of class-based power, prestige and privilege" (Andrews, 1999, p. 43). The participants in my study all lived in this suburban world and most followed the expected consumer practices associated with their social class and residential location. The particular taste of my participants was noticeable through their displays of appropriated objects such as high-end cars and large-sized homes or discussions of particular practices such as conversations about vacations outside the country. These things served as distinctive signs symbolizing their upper-middle-class habitus (Bourdieu, 1984).

The participants lived in an area approximately 10 miles north of the city. This residential area included several newly developed neighborhoods, in which many of the research participants lived. Their area was about 5 miles north of a densely populated suburban location in which many of them did their shopping and sent their children to school. Whereas the location allowed them easy access to malls, museums, and restaurants, the area still maintained a quiet atmosphere and was bordered by a more rural area to the north. The soccer games the boys played were held in a variety of locations throughout the season. Occasionally the boys played on their home field, but most games were held in other areas of the same county, other counties in the state, or in other states entirely. The typical distance that the participants traveled for games was about 30 minutes, but a 2–3 hour drive was not unheard of. Game sites were either on public school grounds or at county parks. Some locations were large enough for several games to occur at once and for several hundreds of parents, including the research participants, to stand on the sidelines.

Although there was some individual diversity among the lifestyle practices of the participants, the majority of the mothers were living in relatively large, single-family, detached homes, sent their children to either private schools or only the most well-regarded public schools, and believed in keeping their sons busy with after-school and summer activities. While some participants lived in newly built homes with gourmet kitchens, others lived more modestly and drew my attention to some subtle variations among the mothers such as differences in vacation destinations and the amount of time spent at soccer practices. While there was some minor diversity in the amount of economic capital each family held and in their conspicuous consumption patterns, the mothers were all remarkably similar in their reasons for involvement with the Atlantic Breakers.

The consensus among this group of mothers was that the Atlantic Breakers team consisted of a "good" group of boys. Once I ascertained this information, I determined that my research needed to include an understanding of how these mothers produced this group of "good kids" and whether soccer, in their minds, had anything to do with it. I attempted to understand the meaning these upper-middle-class mothers associated with "good boy." Below I show how these mothers reproduced their upper-middle-class habitus in their children while producing

“good boys.” The mothers accomplished this through a commitment to particular corporeal practices associated with their youth soccer team within the American suburban field.

Commitment

Over the course of this ethnography project, I came to realize that “good” or “nice” boys were being discursively, if not disciplinarily, constituted through a certain type of commitment to soccer. The mothers themselves maintained a commitment to the team; they also expected this same level of commitment from their sons. The successful status of the boys was partially determined by their ability to maintain their position within the subfield—the Atlantic Breakers team. Affiliation with this team enhanced the ability of the mothers to infuse a particular form of cultural capital in their boys (Bourdieu, 1986). The mothers, therefore, insisted on commitment to this team from their boys in order for their sons to reap the benefits of this particular social network.

The mothers were quite direct with their sons about what was expected of them. The boys were to affirm their dedication to the soccer team before beginning the season. The mothers emphasized that their sons made the choice to participate. Although the boys would not be forced to play, the decision to play was not to be taken lightly; they would be making a commitment to the team and to their coach, Tom. They were told to commit because it was what they had chosen. Activities these 12 year olds participated in were not to be done halfway. The mothers, while not completely focused on pushing a win-at-all-costs attitude, did insist on commitment in order for the boys to be good at something. This was clearly a requirement for the boys as indicated in the following representative quotes from two of the participants:

This age group of kids is borderline now where they're gonna [sic] have to make a choice. Some kids and their parents don't want them to make that choice so they juggle two spring sports which is extremely hard to do. . . . I mean you get to a certain point where a kid balances his time and energy on two different things and can't give 100% to either so they're both suffering. . . . The parents expect them to work hard. You know what I mean. Being lazy is just not something they would be . . . happy with. So the kids have bought into for the most part, I mean there are personality differences and stuff like that, but for the most part they all want the same thing. (K.T.)

I want him to be happy. I want him to play something he really enjoys playing. I hate for him to have to make a choice, because right now I know he wants to play . . . all three [sports] again next year. But it's just too hard. It's too hard because you know he couldn't. He can't. We told him [at] . . . 13 he'd really have to start focusing cause then you're not going to be really good at anything, you're just going to be pretty good at everything. (Anne)

Being good at something, in this case soccer, equals success. The boys were expected to find their niche and stick with it. Here the broader field of cultural production is evident because these values reflect dominant American notions

about the importance of specialization and individual achievement, but this does not yet explain why there is such dedication to soccer in particular.

Suburban Homogeneity

The participants informed me soccer was “huge” in their area and that everyone plays. They stated that soccer was an easy sport because children at any age can run around and kick a ball and can begin playing soccer at age four or five. They therefore did not worry about the initial adequacy of the skill level of their sons. Although they were not concerned about the costs of equipment (ball, shin guards, and cleats), they did note that the costs had increased as their boys advanced.

The popularity of soccer was clearly related to the lifestyle choices made by these members of the upper-middle class. As one mother explained:

He has played since he has been four years old. [Why did he start?] I think it was just . . . the peer thing, again everybody else was doing it. You know, and it's just all of our friends have had older kids they had always played soccer. . . . It's like okay he's old enough we can sign him up. It was just something we didn't even think about. (Melissa)

The choice to place a child in soccer was hardly “made” by the parent. Placement appeared to occur automatically. Although my field notes on the decision process to place a child in soccer are somewhat limited because this choice occurred years earlier, it was clear that these suburban mothers felt certain pressures to follow the cultural norm of placing their sons in soccer. As a result, their sons needed to meet certain expectations that were embedded in dominant cultural norms. Andrews (1999) has indicated that suburbanites look to one another for insight into lifestyle choices; this, in turn, homogenizes experience. The results of this study support this understanding of the American suburban landscape. These upper-middle-class suburban mothers internalized this external factor to such an extent that placing a child in youth soccer was naturalized; therefore, the social structure of the participants was contributing to the formation of their habitus. This reflects the argument made by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), that there is an “ontological correspondence between habitus and field” (p. 127). According to Bourdieu and Wacquant, agents are partially products of a social structure because their field conditions their habitus. This habitus, as a result, “is the product of the embodiment of the immanent necessity of a field” (p. 127). These mothers ultimately embodied the suburban soccer landscape because of the dynamic relationship between field and habitus.

For these participants, placing their children in youth soccer was not only the thing to do, but the *right* thing to do. The mothers explained their boys received numerous benefits from participation in youth soccer. Some of these benefits included exercising, gaining leadership skills, and being part of a team.

Well, the most important thing is he likes it. . . . It gives him exercise. It gives him a chance to work as a team. It gives him a chance to be out with his friends. So it's social. (Terry)

For me it's more a sense of the teamwork that he gets from soccer. . . . I've seen him mature on the soccer field, um, realizing that that there's no sense in complaining. I mean it used to be he'd come off field and say, "Oh the ref made a horrible call." . . . It got to the point where we wouldn't listen to him. (Barb)

Well, they get a lot of things. Working with other kids [and] developing your leadership skills because some of these positions . . . require you to take a very active role in leading the team. (Anne)

The upper-middle-class habitus incorporates an emphasis on "individualistic achievement within the framework of group cooperation and collective responsibility" (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 13; Kahl, 1957, p. 201). These upper-middle-class mothers wanted the boys to experience working together as a team so they would learn that teamwork was an effective means to achieve something. The "collective responsibility" went beyond just the boys on the soccer field, and extended to the mothers and coaches. As a result, the bond created within this soccer program was formed not only among the boys on the team but between the boys and their mothers.

You have to be involved 'cause they can't drive themselves to the soccer field. So you have to be there, and you have to be involved. And it's a mechanism to keep you involved and the kids know that you're involved. (Chrissy)

I think it's a good bond for the kids, too, with the parent, you know. It's like also, "Oh yeah my parents are here." . . . You know I think it helps to have a better relationship. . . . When they're older and they look back, they're gonna be like, "Oh god, my parents were great supporters, you know, they took me to all those games." (Jill)

Beyond just emphasizing what can be gained from soccer participation, the mothers also stressed the point of what can be avoided. The proverbial "keep them out of trouble" was mentioned over and over again. This goal for their boys was in line with the upper-middle-class habitus that emphasizes "planning for the future" (Booth & Loy, 1999, p. 13; Kahl, 1957, p. 193). These mothers set their sights on ensuring their boys would make the high school soccer team. The mothers were following their upper-middle-class habitus and using their labor to produce cultural capital in and through their sons. As a result, these well-respected, skillful, team-oriented soccer players could then effectively gain what the mothers believed to be necessary social capital, that is, placement on the high school team (Bourdieu, 1986).

Surprisingly, the intended goal of becoming part of the high school team's social network did not appear to be for status or recognition purposes; instead, it was the means by which these mothers were planning to keep their boys out of harm's way. Keeping the boys involved in soccer was seen as a way to give them a safe track into adulthood.

It's a good place to . . . keep them out of trouble. (Jenny)

I want my kids involved in sports now so that they can be good enough to play in high school. So the ultimate goal is that my kids will be busy and active in

high school, so that they're not, you know, hopefully to avoid some bad situations is what the real goal is. (Terry)

We're there to support our kids to keep them out of trouble . . . make the high school team so he stays out of trouble. (Anne)

I would like him to play high school for one reason, because I think that staying in team sports in high school keeps you out of other trouble. (Chrissy)

These mothers believed involvement in soccer provided the social safety they deem necessary for today's youth. Another issue regarding the physical safety of the boys came up as the research participants discussed why they chose soccer over football for their sons.

The Habituated Body

Although the mothers found a few sports other than soccer (e.g., basketball and lacrosse) acceptable for their boys to play, they rarely deemed American football appropriate for their sons. On a whole, these boys loved football. I often saw footballs in their backyards. The boys played pick-up football games at soccer tournaments and watched college and professional football games. Several had asked to play on organized youth football teams.

He loves football. . . . Oh, when there are these tournaments what do they play in their free time—football. They played football the whole time in Cape May on the beach. Tom [the coach] said I thought we didn't have a prayer's chance in this tournament because these boys, they didn't have a game until, like, that afternoon. They played football from [the] moment they got up until their game, and he let them. (Susan)

He enjoys football. They play tag football. They play it at school. They play it in the back; as you can see there's a football [we look at the backyard]. There's no soccer ball, but there's a football, see there you go. (Barb)

So why was their fall season sport soccer and not football? Discussions with the mothers made it clear why these boys were not on youth football teams:

I steered him away from it [football]. He wanted to [play football] really bad last year. (Jenny)

He has asked to play football, but I just don't pursue it. (Jill)

I'm not fond of football. . . . I just think it's a waste. I think it's a waste, cause he's got a lot of [soccer] skills. (Debbie)

Why would you go to football? Everybody's playing soccer. (Susan)

The reason the boys were not playing football was that their upper-middle-class mothers did not approve of it. The mothers' control over the direction of their sons' activities clearly limited the boys' experiences. This is ironic considering, based on their available resources, the boys could participate in any number of activities. However, only the *right* upper-middle-class-appropriate activities

were usually allowed. According to Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), “habitus contributes to constituting the field as a meaningful world, a world endowed with sense and value, in which it is worth investing one’s energy” (p. 127). Whereas the upper-middle-class habitus of the mothers enabled the successful incorporation of soccer into their boys’ lives, it did not allow for investment into football. The mothers portrayed football in a negative light and avoided having their sons in any organized youth football programs. They acted as agents contributing to the formation of their field and, at times, had to work against the desires of the boys who wished to play football. The sons’ resistance to the dispositions of the social class standing of the mothers indicated that soccer was a learned appreciation.

The mothers’ conditioning was intended to impress upon the boys a particular taste or preference for soccer, which was all part of the cultural reproduction process. Part of the problem the mothers had with football was a concern over the possibility their sons might be injured. This point will be examined in a discussion on body deportment. Perhaps more importantly, football seemed to stand for something in opposition to the habitus that these participants were trying to reproduce in their boys. In the last quote noted above, Susan expressed the general consensus among the mothers, that “everybody’s playing soccer.” In reality, not everyone is playing soccer, and the mothers knew this. They indicated that children in other counties and even in other parts of their own county played football, but not in their predominately White, upper-middle-class, well-educated area. “Everybody” in their world represents those following the same habitus, using similar forms of capital, and understanding how best to navigate their specific cultural field.

The mothers knew other geographic areas were different from their own. The promotion of football required a different perspective on what was acceptable behavior for boys. The mothers indicated that in these other, less affluent areas where football was heralded as *the* sport, masculinity was understood in terms of toughness and heterosexuality. The mothers asserted that in these middle-to-lower-class locations, soccer was seen in opposition to this and dubbed a “wuss sport”:

I think if you took some of these boys to maybe over [named a lower class town on the other side of the city] area whatever and even high school, I think they even laugh at the soccer kids. (Susan)

Football has a different mentality to it. I mean it’s a lot more, you know [holding her arms up in front of her with fists balled up]. You know you get out there, and you’re out there to hurt somebody. (Melissa)

All the football guys will say that soccer’s gay. . . . They think they’re . . . much more macho [than the soccer players]. (Sally)

Here the mothers articulated what they assumed boys outside their field and sport thought of soccer players. They knew that such boys would use homosexual labels to describe their White, soccer-playing sons. Pascoe (2005) discussed this use of labels by boys to describe some of their peers as “fag” discourse. Pascoe argued that boys label other boys who are perceived to show common understand-

ings of weakness, incompetence, and femininity as “fag” despite knowledge that a boy is heterosexual. In addition, Pascoe considered race to play a role in the likelihood of a boy receiving such a label. “The fag discourse is racialized. It is invoked differently by and in relation to white boys’ bodies than it is by and in relation to African American boys’ bodies” (p. 330). White boys are more likely to be labeled as “fags” than are African American boys despite participation in the same behavior. The Atlantic Breakers consisted of only White players, its members might have been more likely to be labeled “fags” for their soccer participation by those outside the field than mixed race teams might have been. I believe Pascoe’s understanding of fag discourse as it intersects with gender and race can be extended to include social class. Although I did not study this aspect in my research, the mothers’ comments indicated that such remarks come specifically from individuals in lower class areas. Not only does being male and being White influence the likelihood of receiving such remarks, but being of a higher class standing has an impact as well.

Soccer in the United States has come to be associated with the upper-middle-class suburban experience and is seen as a sport appropriate for females. In most countries soccer is the most popular sport and gives male players the opportunity to define themselves as “real” men (Sugden, 1994). Football serves this role in the U.S. As a result, when American boys or men play soccer, their participation may be devalued. (Knoppers & Anthonissen, 2003; Andrews, 1999; Andrews et al., 1997; Sugden 1994). Because the mothers in this study were not only upper-middle class but also female, their acceptance and even appreciation of having their sons in soccer is understandable. However, outsiders to this group of women (i.e., specifically boys from lower class backgrounds as identified by the mothers) might view the behavior of these boys differently.

The participants recognized that football was popular in other places, but explained to me that it was not as popular in their local public high school. This school was considered the best in the county; it was academically challenging, and mothers explained that it was not uncommon to see mothers remove their kids from private schools in order to take advantage of the offerings at this public facility. The schools the participants chose for their boys were in upper-middle-class areas where the habitus of the mothers could be further reproduced. This was in opposition to the other areas and schools the mothers spoke of, where, because of class differences, parents likely had different expectations for their children.

When talking with the research participants, I heard about how the team had “lost” four boys this past season to football.

These four boys . . . I think are all playing football for their middle school and just quitting soccer totally. So that’s why we lost those four. . . . Their heart wasn’t in it as much and they want to try football. They may hate it. (Susan)

Mother, after mother, after mother used the term *lost* in their descriptions. I received the impression that the four boys and their mothers had done something wrong. Football was viewed as keeping them away from soccer and, ultimately, from the right track in navigating from youth into adulthood.

Many of the mothers explained that they did not want their boys in football because they thought participants could be easily injured.

In a lot of the rec leagues, with football there is no weight limit, and if you look at the sixth grade class, which is just what he just finished, the weight differential between Steven at 72 pounds and another kid . . . I just think it would have been dangerous—a dangerous situation. (Barb)

I think he's not quite that rough and tumble kid. I don't think he enjoys getting hurt. (Sally)

A lot of parents probably just didn't want to get involved in all that, and plus you think they're gonna [sic] get hurt much worse in football. (Jenny)

Um, from my standpoint it's always been, like, the injury. Football just is too much of a contact sport. And in this area football with the kids hasn't been as popular. (Melissa)

Although the participants feared having their boys in football because they saw it as a dangerous sport, they also felt that the sport was inappropriate for their sons' bodies. Soccer provided this upper-middle-class group of mothers an activity that required their sons to use their bodies more appropriately than football would. Bourdieu (1984) noted that "a sport is in a sense predisposed for bourgeois use when the use of the body it requires in no way offends the sense of the high dignity of the person, which rule out for example, flinging the body into the tough and tumble of 'forward-game' rugby" (p. 218). The following quotes from my participants indicate their satisfaction with the use and appearance of an athlete's body in soccer and lack of suitability in football:

Because my son is a very big boy, I know when he gets to high school, they're going to want him to play football because he's a big kid. . . . Well [lowers voice], some of these boys are little too. . . . They know they're not going to be big boys. . . . You can be small and be a soccer player. It's hard to be small and be a football player. (Susan)

I'm not sure he has got the build for being a really good football player. (Melissa)

I think he's actually growing to like soccer more as time passes. Well, I would prefer he doesn't play football because I don't think he'd be good at [it], he doesn't have the, uh, brute strength that football, I think, requires. (Terry)

Nicholas has never played football because of his size and because it interferes with the soccer season. (Carrie)

Well, for Rich, you know soccer's better than a contact sport. . . . Rich is slight in stature and weight. (Sarah)

You don't see any soccer player with a gut, there's no way anybody isn't in awesome shape. Incredible thighs and just, I hope Jake stays. (Sally)

The corporeal deportment required in soccer, as well as the resulting aesthetic form, were agreeable to these upper-middle-class women. The bodies of the boys were "habituated" by their youth soccer experience in the same way that the professional boxers Wacquant (1992) studied were "habituated" into the boxing cul-

ture. According to Wacquant, “to learn how to box is imperceptibly to modify one’s bodily schema, one’s relation to the body and to its uses so as to internalize a set of dispositions that are inseparably physical and mental” (p. 246). The participants in my study were effectively using youth soccer to ensure not only what they believed to be appropriate use of the body but also to ingrain in the bodies of their sons characteristics of the upper-middle-class habitus. Through their experience with soccer, the participants’ sons were exposed to what Wacquant referred to as “a diffuse complex of postures and (physical and mental) moves that . . . exist only *in action*, as well as in the traces that this action leaves within and upon the body” (p. 237). The mothers desired this “habituated” body for their sons and were relying on the embodied habitus of the boys to cross over from the soccer field to the much larger field of the upper-middle-class, suburban landscape.

In addition to finding soccer an appropriate sport for their boys’ bodies, these mothers also believed soccer was the right choice for the mental abilities of their sons.

It’s a mind game. . . . Some kids, you know, they’re just not focused enough to think about it. . . . Soccer, yeah, I mean, . . . you have to play smart, you have to know, you have to have good field sense. (Anne)

He has a brain that I think is perfect for soccer. . . . He’s got, somebody who can look at a field and make decisions pretty quick. You know he has to do that in football, too, but I think that soccer is such a dynamic sport requiring judgment and decision making every second of the game. (Terry)

He’s got a good field sense of where to be and what to do, and he’s got a real sense of teamwork. He will set something up. Um, one of the things he has that I envy is that field sense. (Debbie)

The mothers believed that soccer promoted a connection between the correct use of the body and desired use of the mind. They believed soccer requires a certain intelligence and analytical ability that they claimed their boys possessed. This made the boys capable soccer players. Basically, their understanding was that it took more mental ability to play soccer than football, and therefore soccer participation gained further distinction for their upper-middle-class sons.

Not only was soccer the best choice for the boys, according to the participants it was the best choice for themselves as well. Most of the mothers despised the long hours associated with others sports, especially baseball. The required 2 to 2 1/2 hour pregame and game time for soccer was far less taxing. Games are time limited and though their sons were required to arrive 45 minutes ahead of the scheduled game time, the mothers were pleased that a game never took all day. Understandably, the mothers did have patience for the demands of soccer, not only because games were less time consuming than some other activities but also because soccer was contributing to the formation of “good boys.”

A Team of “Good Boys”

Positive comments about individual boys on the Atlantic Breakers team such as, “He’s [Kevin] a really great kid” (Sarah), and, “Timothy and Andy are very good friends. He’s a really good kid. . . . We took him overnight down to [a major

amusement park]” (John), were commonly made by the participants. These mothers knew the boys as more than soccer players. Most of the boys were friends with one another and had spent time with each other’s families. The boys went to other team members’ homes, out to dinner with other team parents, and traveled with other team families.

The mothers also approved of the boys overall as a group. Besides being pleased with their quality of play on the soccer field, they were happy with the values and behavior of the team outside of soccer. The boys, with few exceptions, were very friendly with one another. Most had played together for years and had developed a strong bond that pleased the mothers.

And he has been asked by other teams, “Would you want to try out for us?” And, you know, my son and Ethan, they’ll say, “We want to be with our friends.” (Susan)

So, you know, having a group of kids, pretty much the same kids, is great because you can see their progress over the years; I mean, it’s just really neat. And how they rely on each other and stuff, it’s pretty cool. (K.T.)

It’s almost like our team’s been together so long that they must know what each other are [sic] thinking or what they’re gonna do before they do it. (Jill)

Many of those boys are Rich’s hopefully life long friends; good, good boys. (Sarah)

The mothers enabled their sons to develop durable social networks via the Atlantic Breakers. This finding is similar to Light and Kirk’s (2001) analysis of boys who played rugby for an elite school in Australia. The researchers found that the boys gained social capital as a result of their team affiliation, leading them to perform well in school and later in life.

The mothers expressed their satisfaction with the boys on the Atlantic Breakers, explaining that they considered them nice boys because they were respectful, well-mannered, worked well together as team, and did not take the games too seriously.

I think this is a great group—if they lose a game it’s okay. Within a half an hour they’re talking about something totally different and goofing off. I mean they’re just good kids. Nobody takes it so seriously that, you know, that they’re bawling their eyes out. (Sally)

I think that they develop a lot of skills, leadership telling each other, talking to each other, where to be, and they recognize that in each other. And usually they take turns being leaders out there . . . seemed to make them look around and look to each other and see what they did well that game. I mean they look for good things in each other instead of complaining how, you know, don’t pass to him he always loses the ball. (Debbie)

Well, you picked a good team with [the Atlantic Breakers]. Really, I mean it’s nice, a lot of nice people. Well, we [her son] were on another team just

for indoor, and it wasn't this like relationship what we [she and her son] have [with the Atlantic Breakers] . . . where Tom and Dan are so good with kids, you know, they're don't down on them. . . . He's with . . . a good group of kids. Their parents are all stable people. You know, it's no, like, real dysfunction there. (Jill)

The participants believed their boys' involvement in soccer contributed to the production of such good-natured kids, but they also indicated that they were involved with a good group of parents. The participants all had the same goals for their sons and clearly recognized that in each other. Their mission was to produce good boys, and they felt they were successful in doing that. The fact that one of the fathers was also the coach enhanced the ability of these mothers to reproduce their upper-middle-class habitus in their sons. These mothers were very positive about Tom, the coach.

The Good Coach

The main coach is just terrific. (Karen)

Tom's a very good coach. (Susan)

Tom's . . . excellent. He's really worked really well with the boys. (Anne)

He is the greatest. I love Tom. (Jill)

Tom is a phenomenal coach. (Melissa)

Why such high praise for the coach? The accolades never ceased. I heard how the coach, Tom, was a draw for parents to want to switch their sons to the Atlantic Breakers. The mothers spoke with great enthusiasm about his approach to dealing with the boys, his unique coaching style, and, most importantly, his reinforcement of the expectations of the mothers.

The coach was the reason many mothers chose the Atlantic Breakers as the team for their sons. He had a strong reputation within the soccer community, and the mothers indicated they were attracted to what they had heard. The Atlantic Breakers in essence was Tom; in fact, I heard the team referred to as "Tom's team" far more often than the "Atlantic Breakers team":

Tom just has a very good reputation, and we know him personally, too . . . basically, that's why we wanted Sam to be on the team. And we've been trying every single year. . . . That was hard-core practice, and I think that tightened him up a little bit to be able to make Tom's team this year. (Melissa)

So he went and played with Tom in the winter. . . . And then he made this [spring] team with Tom. (Terry)

Plus I think, well, we've heard very good things about Tom. . . . They say Tom is just, you know, incredible. (Chrissy)

We chose Tom. We chose Tom because we like him. This was a very different team. (Debbie)

The social capital of the mothers and their sons was not only strengthened by the participation of the boys in soccer but was further enhanced by the way Tom was perceived. Although these mothers thought that their son's membership on a competitive team was important, their push to have their sons play for Tom was not based on the belief that he would make their sons winners. The behavior of the mothers suggests they had little interest in a winning record. Perhaps behavior contradicting this understanding would have occurred if the team had performed poorly more frequently than it did. The mothers strongly approved of Tom's approach to coaching. They liked how he dealt with the kids, how he tried to get to know them, and how he spent time with them individually if necessary. He and the assistant coach went beyond just interaction with the kids on the playing field. They took the boys on excursions such as visits to a World Cup match and college games. As indicated by the following statements, the mothers were pleased with Tom's dedication to the boys:

Tom does sheets on schedules. He's really good about that. He even does like [to give a] little [what] he calls . . . homework. He'll give him [son] little hints of what to work on. (Karen)

That's Tom's philosophy, and that's what he tries to teach the kids, that you know, all I ask of you is to do everything you can to work together as a team and do what you know you can do. . . . Sometimes, you know, personalities are all different, which is understandable, but Tom knows the kids well enough, he really knows how to work with them. (K.T.)

He just is very good with the kids. He's got the soccer skills, but he is just very good with the kids. I mean, he always has seemed to draw the best out of all the players. (Melissa)

Where Tom and Dan are so good with kids, you know, they don't down on them, they don't yell at them. You know, very supportive to them. (Jill)

So he has a really good philosophy, and he plays everybody. I don't know that he plays everybody equally, but he makes an effort to play everyone. There's a real sense of teamwork. (Debbie)

The mothers were clearly aware of Tom's coaching style. His approach to coaching mattered to them because he served as a further means to legitimize the placement of their sons in soccer. His approach was *their* approach; he encouraged the embodiment of upper-middle-class habitus in these boys. Tom molded the "habituated" bodies of these boys (Wacquant, 1992, p. 237). The mothers were not necessarily going to receive assistance in reproducing this in their sons if they were involved with any other team (i.e., subfield). I rarely asked the participants any questions about what they thought of the coach, but they continually brought it up in my conversations with them. Much of their satisfaction with Tom came as a result of their experiences with other coaches who did not share the mothers' view on how best to run a team. Not only were the mothers enthusiastic about Tom, but the boys were as well. Tom's approach was described as unique within the youth sport realm.

I began my fieldwork approximately a week after tryouts occurred, and therefore cannot give a first-hand account of this initial step in the soccer season. But the mothers explained to me the importance of tryouts and Tom's selections. Being part of "Tom's team" provided the mothers with distinction within the suburban field. To maintain the boundaries of this subfield (Atlantic Breakers team), Tom acted as a gatekeeper (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). The elimination of boys who did not "fit" maintained the team's distinction. For example, participants explained to me that one boy was not asked back this last season because he was a "ball-hog" and did not follow Tom's directions to pass the ball. Tom determined each spring which boys made the team, even boys from the previous season had to tryout. Tryouts were a stressful time for both the boys and the mothers. Mothers well established within the Atlantic Breakers who exuded upper-middle-class practices worked with Tom in determining the team by suggesting particular boys. For example, Susan informed Chrissy of the Atlantic Breakers and recommended to Tom that he include Chrissy's son. Chrissy had just recently moved into Susan's neighborhood. Susan had known Chrissy previously because their two sons played together on the same basketball team the previous winter. During basketball season Chrissy and her son had clearly proved themselves to be Atlantic Breakers material. Susan knew Chrissy's son as a hardworking, nice boy who was certainly worth Tom's attention.

Mothers like Susan worked alongside Tom as gatekeepers. Their contribution to the selection process was clear. They were not only exposed to soccer in their suburban field but also to other mothers and their expressions of upper-middle-class habitus. This is what drew the mothers to initiate contact between certain boys and their parents and Tom. The connection between Tom and the mothers was strong because they all maintained their commitment to the boys.

The dynamics between the coach and the parents is really important. 'Cause they have to buy into what he's doing and this group of parents seem to feel very comfortable with whatever Tom was doing with the kids. Now if they didn't, I'm sure they would let him know [laughs]. . . . Now Tom has talked to the parents a little bit about, um, you know, because what he's trying to do is get these kids ready to play for high school. (K.T.)

Tom and the mothers believed that if they provided enough of their time and energy, they could assure that their sons would end up on the high school team—an appropriate and safe place for their upper-middle-class "good boys." They supported one another in their continued attempt to transform capital and reproduce their upper-middle-class habitus in their sons.

Conclusion

The mothers in this study believed that their sons' participation in youth soccer, and on the Atlantic Breakers team in particular, was the "right thing" to do. These women were using their economic capital, upper-middle-class habitus, and labor to produce, in their words, "good boys." The mothers' efforts resulted in the reproduction of their lifestyle patterns and habitus in their boys. These women shared a

vision for what their sons should be; their common habitus contributed an understanding of what constitutes a “good boy,” and their suburban lifestyle set the tone for the challenge of producing this quality in their sons.

According to these mothers, a good, upper-middle-class son is a boy who “stays out of trouble,” shows commitment, works hard individually and with a team, exudes sportsmanship, displays—even if modestly—his heteromasculine prowess, and is not too physically aggressive. These mothers, if successful in their mission to produce “good boys,” would reproduce their own class habitus in the next generation. Although this understanding of the mothers’ behavior as class-related provides insight, future research should take into account the intersections of gender and race within the production of class habitus, as well as within parents’ reproduction of habitus in their children through their sporting practices.

The mothers’ idea of the appropriate manner in which to reproduce their habitus in the boys was informed by their suburban surroundings, and it was clear that these participants believed that this way of being in their field was correct. The mothers’ belief in the desirability of their sons’ participation in youth soccer programs was reinforced by others in their surroundings who believed and did the same. According to Andrews (1999), the suburban identity is formed in relation to the urban identity. Whereas cities represent ethnicity and diversity, the suburban landscape gains distinction in opposition to difference. The suburbs contain individuals who look to one another for appropriate consumption patterns and values (Schor, 1998; Slater, 1997). The last five decades of continuous conforming have left suburban neighbors with what has been described as an “unimaginative, bland and monotone culture” (Andrews, p. 43). This culture contributes to suburbanites’ creation of a myopic sense of self for their children. The view of the mothers participating in this study was that “everybody’s kids play soccer.” By *everybody* they meant those sharing the same cultural field and class habitus. Their suburban location and upper-middle-class habitus normalized the soccer experience for them, and they, in turn, normalized it for their children. According to Andrews, Pitter, Zwick, & Ambrose (1997), “youth soccer participation has become an integral part of a normalized culture that marks suburban status and sameness, as the antithesis of urban depravity and difference” (p. 272). The participants did recognize that not everyone plays soccer. As noted above, they mentioned that boys in other counties and other parts of their own county played football instead. The specific upper-middle-class, suburban habitus of these mothers influenced them to incorporate soccer into their sons’ lives and to reject football. Ultimately, the soccer field provided a space in which upper-middle-class mothers could perform a class-appropriate use of their sons’ bodies and, in so doing, reproduce the upper-middle-class habitus.

Notes

1. Fathers, though not a focus of the study, were present during my research and clearly contributed to their sons’ involvement in soccer. Their involvement went beyond my initial expectations, and I believe their role is worthy of future academic attention.
2. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants’ names and the team name.

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