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► **To cite this version:**

Simiyu Samuel Mwanga, Benoit Gaudin, Kioli Felix. Family and its Influence on Kenyan Athletes' Performance: The Role of Social Environment. Benoit Gaudin. Kenyan and Ethiopian Athletics-Towards an Alternative Scientific Approach , IRD Editions, 2017. hal-01427745

**HAL Id: hal-01427745**

**<https://hal.science/hal-01427745>**

Submitted on 6 Jan 2017

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# Family and its Influence on Kenyan Athletes' Performance: the Role of Social Environment

Simiyu Samuel Mwangi<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Benoit Gaudin and Dr. Kioli Felix Ngunzo.<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

*The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of family on Kenyan runners' performance. These family attributes included: the influence of significant others such as parents, brothers, sisters, uncles, grandparents and others; reasons for specializing in distance running; motives for participation; and the type of family support in promoting athletes' talent development. Questionnaires were administered to 246 runners drawn from Iten in Elkeyo Marakwet County, Eldoret in Uasin Gishu County and Nandi Hills in Nandi County between April and May 2015. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies and percentages. Results indicated that the family play an important role in the development of athletic talent as well as influencing their performance. The study recommends that sports personnel involved in the nurturing of local talent rethink, design and implement talent identification and nurturing programmes with the involvement of family for the successful development of sports population.*

## Introduction

Sports are now a multi-billion dollar business.<sup>3</sup> With the promise of lucrative careers looming large, parents often encourage young children who have some athletic promise to hone their skills early on. In communities all across the country, parents encourage and sometimes force their children to specialize in one sport. Furthermore, it has become rather common for children to be turned over to professionals for training for future athletic careers.<sup>4</sup>

Distance running has always served as a source of tremendous pride in the Kalenjin community. Victory is especially sweet because it represents something larger than the athlete herself or himself; it symbolizes the values and aspirations of the entire people.<sup>5</sup> Sports often heighten parent-child involvements, they may lead to parental expectations for participation and sometimes to unrealistic hopes of success. Sports bring together members of a community (supporting local athletes and teams) or even a nation (as seen during World Cup matches and the Olympics) and promote an overall feeling of unity and social solidarity.<sup>6</sup>

There are many factors that are associated with successful athletic performance in different athletic contests. These factors include the genetic constitution of the players, technical and tactical preparation, physical and psychological attributes. The career orientations of elite athletes are constructed by the socialization process in which socialization agents (significant

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<sup>1</sup>MA in Sociology (Social Development and Management), Maseno University, Kenya.

<sup>2</sup>Dean, College of Social Sciences, Maseno University, Kenya.

<sup>3</sup>Greene, M.F., Sandlot summer: hyper scheduled overachieving children learn how to play, *TheNew York Times Magazine*, Nov 28, 2004.

<sup>4</sup>Newman, D.M., *Sociology: exploring the architecture of everyday life*, Los Angeles: Sage, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>Rhoden, W.C., *Forty million dollar slaves. The rise, fall and redemption of black athletes*, New York, NY: Crown, 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Schaefer, R.T., *Sociology. A brief introduction*, Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004.

others), socio-cultural influences, the self and the environment all have significant roles to play.<sup>7</sup> The interaction between an athlete and socializing agents' "changes over time as is evident in the different phases of becoming involved and committed in a quest for sporting excellence".<sup>8</sup> Athletic identity could be developed and maintained by the influence of others as well as the athlete himself/herself and it shows how one's athletic involvement and experience can affect the person psychologically and cognitively.<sup>9</sup> The role of significant others (kin, teachers, coaches and peers) in sport socialization has been a topical issue in sport sociology. Numerous research studies have alluded to the fact that for athletic ability to be translated into good performance, the athlete must get support and encouragement from significant others.<sup>10</sup>

According to Rameshon,<sup>11</sup> poverty in Kenya has driven some to succeed in running and to be successful in life. For a Kenyan, it is an avenue to travel and seize opportunities. Poverty makes the runners to work very hard to do well in running. Both propositions point towards an assumption that most people, particularly the Kalenjin, engage in sports to improve their socio-economic status. However if poverty was the only factor then why is it that the poorest Asian and African nations are not producing Olympic champions? Why are the marginalized people in northern Kenya not producing Olympic champions? This shows that other social conditions in the family play a role. These factors could involve family support and goal setting, as well as values that determine the physical activities that children engage in.

In view of the relationship raised above, the family should be seen as playing two main functions; primary socialization and personality stabilization. Primary socialization is the process by which children learn the cultural norms of the society into which they are born. Personality stabilization refers to the role that the family plays in assisting adult family members emotionally.<sup>12</sup>

Though the family is a pool for genetic inheritance, continued focus on genetic and physiological endowment by western scientists ignores the role of family in nurturing talents through powerful role models, social and physical support. One sociological explanation is that such domination results not from innate physical superiority alone but from a complex set of social conditions that channels a disproportionate number of physically talented young Kenyans into athletic careers.<sup>13</sup>

As far as nutrition and diet are concerned, several scientific studies have shown that Kenyan runners simply rely on food to fuel their work outs and races. However this is true in most parts of Kenya and these communities do not produce elite athletes. It is also true that many parts of

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<sup>7</sup>Stevenson, C.L., The early careers of International athletes. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 7(3), 1990; pp.238-253; Phillips, J.C., *Sociology of Sport*, Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1990.

<sup>8</sup>Rintaugu *et al*, Psychosocial attributes of Kenyan university athletes: social learning and observational theories perspectives, *American International Journal of Contemporary Research*, vol.2, no.12, Dec.2012, pp 124-135.

<sup>9</sup>Anderson, C. B., Athletic identity and its relation to exercise behavior: Scale development and initial validation, *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology*, 26 (1), 2004, pp.39-56.

<sup>10</sup>Mcpherson, B.D., Curtis, J.E. & Loy, J.W., *The Social Significance of Sport: An Introduction to the Sociology of Sports*, Champaign: Human Kinetics, 1989; Ipinmoroti, O.S., & Ajayi, M.A., Effects of motivation of significant others on sport involvement of athletes in Nigerian tertiary institutions, *Journal of ICHPER-SD XL*, 4, 2003, pp. 20-26; Rintaugu, E.G., *Socialization of secondary school athletes into sports in Kenya*, Unpublished Ph.D Thesis, Kenyatta University, Nairobi, Kenya, 2005.

<sup>11</sup>Rameshon, The training secret of Kenyan runners, *Business Daily*, Sat June 26, 2010.

<sup>12</sup>Parsons T. and Bales R., *Family, socialization and interaction process*, Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1955.

<sup>13</sup>Edward N., The source of black athletic superiority, *The Black Scholar*, 3, 1971, pp.32-41.

the world and Kenya's not-so-great health record suggests the country has not discovered the secret to great nutrition. This focus fails to account for the role of family in developing and maintaining athletic identity through socialization process.

Rintaugu et al.<sup>14</sup> investigated psychosocial attributes of Kenyan university athletes and their findings indicated that the student athletes came from families of higher socio-economic status. That is, parents have university education and are involved in good or white-collar jobs. The study further indicated that university athletes are influenced by themselves, team mates and coaches. In general parents transmit attitudes and values about physical activity by paying activity fees, are powerful role-models and provide physical and emotional support to their offspring.<sup>15</sup> This study sought to establish if the same attributes hold for elite Kenyan runners or if the conclusion of this study is only valid for university athletes who are not the best runners in the nation.

Therefore the purpose of this study was to find out the influence of family on athletes' performance. Understanding the role of the family in promoting Kenya distance running culture is critical to the development of runners' sporting careers and will enable stakeholders to provide meaningful assistance as well as create an appropriate nurturing environment. This is consistent with the need to study Kenyan runners and unearth such factors as family and other complex social conditions that influence performance. Thus, the study is guided by the objectives of finding out the family support systems that maintain and promote athletic identity.

The study employed cross-sectional survey research design and collected data from 246 Kenyan elite and upcoming runners, ten families, six county sports officials and seven coaches. Questionnaires were administered to 246 runners drawn from Iten in Elgeyo Marakwet County, Eldoret in Uasin Gishu County and Nandi Hills in Nandi County between April and May 2015. Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, i.e. frequencies and percentages.

A self-administered questionnaire was utilized for data collection. The questionnaire sections sought from participants' parents' education level, type of parental support given to athletes, running experience, family members engagement in running and athletes' opinions of whether family support played a key role in their success. Interviews sought the same information from coaches, family members, retired athletes and sports officials due to their prior experiences and expertise in management of running activities.

## Presentation of results

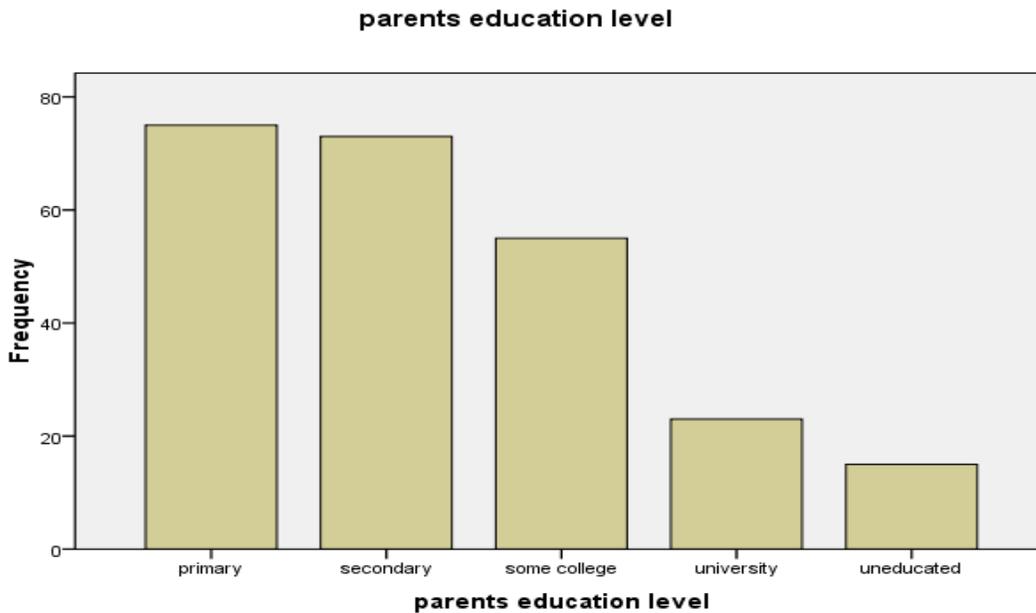
### *Parents education level*

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Primary	75	30.5	31.1	31.1

<sup>14</sup> Rintaugu *et al*, *op. cit.*, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Grevis, M., Children in sport, in Bull J.J. (ed.), *Sport Psychology, A Self-help Guide*, London: The Crowood, 1991; Wasonga, T.A., Childhood sport socialization in development of competitive sports and talent in Kenya, in Amusa L.O., Wekesa M. & Toriola A.L. (eds), *The Making of An African Athlete: A Multidimensional Approach*, Gaborone: AFAHPER-SD, 1996.

Secondary	73	29.7	30.3	61.4
some college	55	22.4	22.8	84.2
University	23	9.3	9.5	93.8
Uneducated	15	6.1	6.2	100.0
Total	241	98.0	100.0	
Missing	9	2.0		
Total	246	100.0		



This study shows that 31.1% of the parents had primary school education, 30.3% secondary school education, 22.8% some college education, 9.5% university education and 6.2% did not attend school. Out of 246 respondents 5 did not respond to this question. Most of the Kenyan runners come from the families that had basic education.

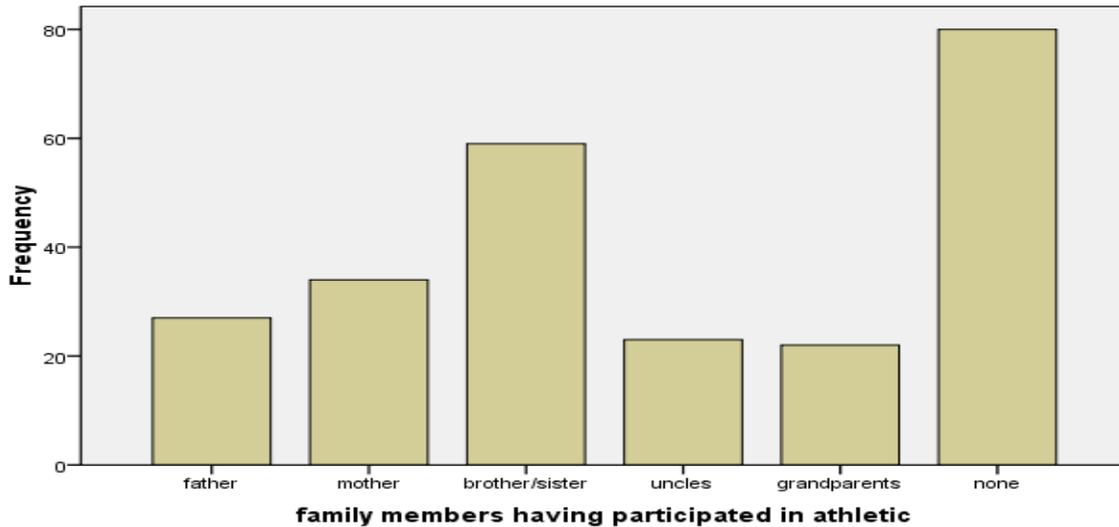
***Family involvement in running***

Family members having participated in athletics

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Father	27	11.0	11.0	11.0
	Mother	34	13.8	13.9	24.9
	brother/sister	59	24.0	24.1	49.0
	Uncles	23	9.3	9.4	58.4

Grandparents	22	8.9	9.0	67.3
None	80	32.5	32.7	100.0
Total	245	99.6	100.0	
Missing 9	1	.4		
Total	246	100.0		

**family members having participated in athletic**



The table shows that two third of the Kenyan runners one family member who had participated in running or was currently taking part (32.7% had no family members who had been runners). 11% had their fathers being a runner, 13.9% their mothers, 24.1% their brothers and sisters, and 9% their grandparents. Out of 246 respondents one person did not respond to this question.

### Results of family encouragement

Does family encourage you to participate in running?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Yes	181	73.6	74.2	74.2
No	63	25.6	25.8	100.0
Total	244	99.2	100.0	
Missing 9	2	.8		
Total	246	100.0		

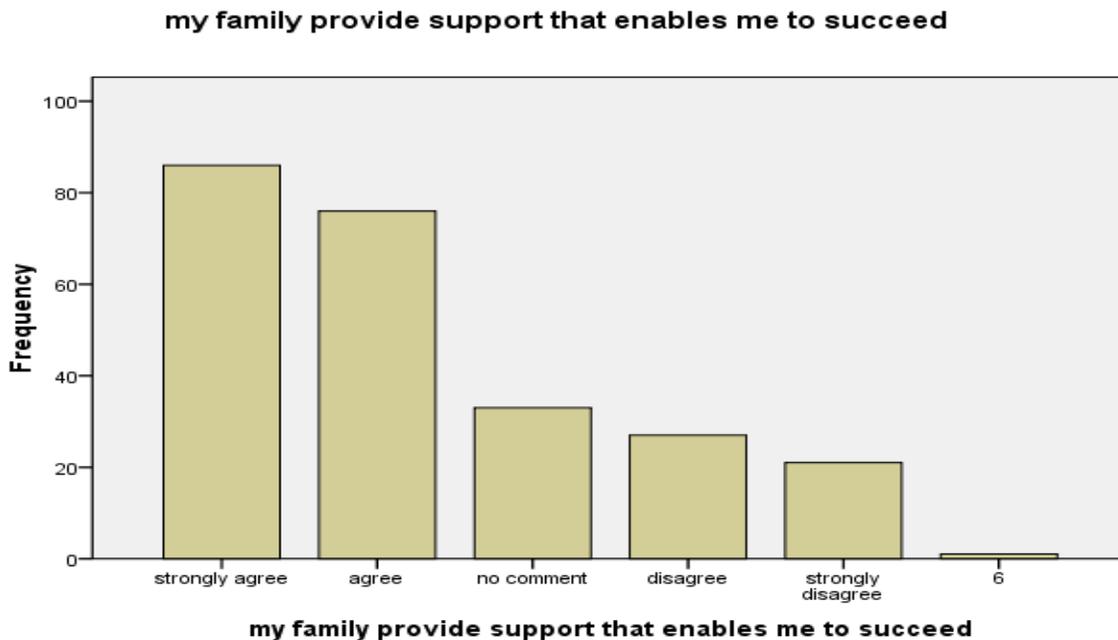


These findings further show that most of the Kenyan runners were of opinion that their family encouraged them to participate in athletics. 74.2% asserted that their continued participation was largely due to parental encouragement and support accorded to them in the course of training. 25.8% did not agree to this and said that their participation is influenced by their friends, self-motivation and role models.

***Opinions on whether family support plays a key role in the runner’s success***

My family provides support that enables me to succeed

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	86	35.0	35.2	35.2
	Agree	76	30.9	31.1	66.4
	no comment	33	13.4	13.5	79.9
	Disagree	27	11.0	11.1	91.0
	strongly disagree	21	8.5	8.6	99.6
	6	1	.4	.4	100.0
Total		244	99.2	100.0	
Missing	9	2	.8		
Total		246	100.0		



The results show that two thirds (66.3%) of Kenyan athletes agree that the family provides support that enables them to succeed as runners. Another 19.7% disagree while 13.5% did not express any opinion.

Other findings of the study show that in the early stages of athletic development in Kenya the family did not play any significant role in the development of the running culture. The first child exposure was in school through their teachers and physical education program. It was here that pupils' talents were identified and nurtured through a series of interschool competitions.

Many years back the family did not have exposure to sports and running was only considered as a hobby, a physical fitness program, recreational program or an academic program at school. It is only in the last 25 years when sport became professional that families started to show interests because they now considered sport as a career choice and therefore begun to see their children as fantastic sources of income. It is during this time that the family begun to realise that their sons and daughters are financial assets as a result of the achievements of the elite runners who had gone to become professional runners.

The findings of this study are aligned with previous studies that show that athletes are significantly motivated by their parents and peers to become involved in sports.<sup>16</sup>For many years running was not seen as important apart from a few cases where young men and women (and especially men) left schools to join programs that had athletic influence such as the armed forces, the police, the Kenyan prison system, and government parastatals such as the Kenya railway, the Kenya port authority and Kenya power and lighting.

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<sup>16</sup> Rintaugu, *op. cit.*, 2005.

The only way the family has come in is if another member of the family happens to have been a runner or a sports person. The family generally began to show interest in the last 20 years. Some athletes such as David Rudisha, Mark Keino, Billy Konchellah and others started following the footsteps of their families. It has been reported that a significant number of successful athletes come from families where family members are involved in sport.<sup>17</sup> This study established that their family provided them with financial support to buy training equipment such as shoes and clothing, and to pay for gym training, provide food, and pay for rent when athletes stayed in camps. Parents also exempt them from duties at home so that they can concentrate on training, provide medication in cases of injury during training, instilled discipline, provided encouragement, moral support and social support where athlete faced stiff competition, acted as role models and coaches by providing advice on the best way to succeed in sports through hard work and perseverance and persistency, provide psychological support through motivation and spiritual support through prayers towards success and achievement. According to Brother Colm and Mucche Richard those who succeed in their career by winning, the family came in to seek investment advisors to help their children invest their earnings because now they see their running as a career.

These findings agree with other research studies that have shown that parents transmit attitudes and values about physical activity in general and sport in particular, pay activity fees, are powerful role models and provide physical and emotional support to their offspring.<sup>18</sup> Indeed Côté<sup>19</sup> found that families, particularly parents, play an important role in elite athlete development as athletes progress through what were identified as sampling, specializing, and investment years providing important sources of social support, especially when their child faced adversity or had to deal with setbacks.

These findings also agree with the findings of Gould, Dieffenbach and Moffett<sup>20</sup> that the ways in which parents and coaches influenced athletes were both direct, such as teaching or emphasizing certain psychological lessons and indirect, involving modelling or unintentionally creating certain psychological environments. These results also support Bloom's<sup>21</sup>, Côté's<sup>22</sup> and Csikszentmihalyi et al.'s<sup>23</sup> talent development research, demonstrating the important roles parents play in athletic talent development.

A good deal of consistency was found across domains in terms of the investments of tangible and intangible resources found to be essential in nurturing promising individuals with talent. In addition to financial support and transportation to numerous competitions and performances, parents found ways to provide social-emotional support (e.g., facilitating a disciplined involvement while avoiding excessive expectations and pressure). The parents also served as

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Grevis, *op. cit.*,1991; Wasonga, *op. cit.*,1996.

<sup>19</sup> Côté, J., The influence of the family in the development of talent in sport, *The Sport Psychologist*, 13, 1999, pp.395-417.

<sup>20</sup> Gould, D., Dieffenbach, K., & Moffett, A., Psychological characteristics and their development in Olympic champions, *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 14, 2002, pp.177-209.

<sup>21</sup> Bloom, B.S. (ed.), *Developing talent in young people*, NY: Ballantine, 1985.

<sup>22</sup> Côté, *op. cit.*,1999.

<sup>23</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, M., Rathunde, K., Whalen, S & Wong, M., *Talented teenagers: The roots of success and failure*, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1993.

models for disciplined independence and fostered disciplined independence in their talented children. That is, parents often modelled hard work while supporting their children; they reinforced their children's tendency to work independently and expected those behaviours from them. These findings were in agreement with Bloom's<sup>24</sup> results that clearly showed that talent development is a long-term process that involves more than just the talented person, but also a strong support system with parents playing a primary role.

Results also revealed that a number of individuals and institutions influenced the athletes' psychological development including the community, family, the individual him or herself, non-sport personnel and sport environment personnel. Coach and family influences were perceived to be particularly important. Those that don't have family influence were encouraged to participate in athletics by their teachers, friends, coaches, community, sponsors and were self-motivated due to a love of running. These findings were consistent with Ericsson's<sup>25</sup> concern that without developing the love of the game children will not have the motivation to sustain the effort needed to pursue excellence that has been found to take as many as 10,000 hours or 10 years of deliberate practice to develop. Indeed Rintaugu's<sup>26</sup> findings showed that university athletes are influenced by themselves, team mates and coaches. The same scenario seems to be replicated in Kenyan elite runners who are not supported by the family, where some of them especially in private sponsored training camps, and church sponsored institutions such as St Patrick high school use excellence in sports as a way of life to fuel further achievements both academically and economically. However as Gould, D, & Carson, S.<sup>27</sup> put it, the most interesting finding was that parental support and commitment was critical to athlete development motivation, love of the game and ability to succeed.

The findings also revealed that culturally, social life in Iten allowed women to participate in sports. For example, before 1990s daughters only sought education and got married; their family received dowry as the only source of wealth from their daughters. This attitude changed when in 1991-1997 girls made a breakthrough in the professional ranks with financial rewards. The parents realised that their daughters could become significant sources of income. Susan Sirma was the first Kenyan woman to win a medal in 1992 Barcelona Olympics and Sally Barsosio became the first Kenyan woman to win a world title when she won the 10,000m at the World Championships of 1997. Parents then started to encourage their daughters to become athletes so that they could make money. As a result subsequent women such as Pauline Konga, Tagla Lorupe, Catherine Ndereba, Pamela Chelimo, Janeth Jepkosegei, Nancy Lagat, Edna Kiplagat, Prisca Jeptoo etc. have been produced. Parents now see athletic as a career for their daughters. These findings are in agreement with Akpata and Gitonga's<sup>28</sup> findings that parental social economic status plays a key role in children's socialization into sport.

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<sup>24</sup> Bloom, *op. cit.*, 1985.

<sup>25</sup> Ericsson, K. A. (ed.), *The road to excellence: the acquisition of expert performance in the arts, sciences, sports, and games*, Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 1996.

<sup>26</sup> Rintaugu, *op. cit.*, 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Gould, D, & Carson, S., Myths surrounding the role of youth sports in developing Olympic champions, *Youth Studies Australia*, 23(1),2004, pp.19-26.

<sup>28</sup> Akpata, D.O., & Gitonga, E.R., Social Economic status of secondary school interscholastic athletes in Nairobi province, Kenya, *Journal of International council for physical Education, Recreation sports and Dance*, 353, (2), 2002, pp.28-30.

The results revealed that the parents of most of Kenya's elite athletes and upcoming athletes had basic education of primary, secondary level or they are not educated at all. These results contradict findings of Rintaugu<sup>29</sup> which indicated that the student athletes came from families which can be labelled as upper social economic status i.e. parents have university education and are involved in "good"/white collar jobs. But these results showed that that most parents were of middle and low socio-economic status involved mainly in farming and small-scale business and a few were employed as civil servants.

The study also revealed that beside positively contributing to childhood athletic development and success, parents also at times contribute to the downfall and eventual disappearance of athletes from the world of running. This is particularly true when a child fails to make a breakthrough in running after years of training. Overemphasis on winning, holding unrealistic expectations, criticizing or pampering their child too much and withdrawing support were attributes considered to hurt the athletes and contribute to their downfall. This in one way leads to feelings of inferiority, failure or at times pride, which can make the child develop arrogance, and even failure to attend training. These findings were consistent with Gould, L. Rolo, Jannes & Sie-Pennisi<sup>30</sup> and Hellstedt<sup>31</sup> that a young athlete's emotional response was shown to be related to his or her perceptions of parental pressure. Parents can influence their children's emotional responses through evaluation, particularly unfavourable evaluations, and the expectations they have for their children. Indeed Hellstedt<sup>32</sup> found that the "degree of parental pressure is related to the type of affective reaction from the young athlete", with high levels of parental pressure related to negative athlete response. The athletes were also shown to be apprehensive about how their parents would react emotionally, such as with disappointment or disapproval, when they did not perform well. In addition, according to these young athletes, continued sport participation was due, in part, to the desire to please their parents, further emphasizing the strong influence parents have on their children's sport participation as well as their emotional responses to such participation.

## Conclusion

The findings of this study revealed that the career orientations and paths of elite Kenyan runners are constructed by the socialization process in which socialization agents (significant others), socio-cultural influences, the self and the environment have significant roles to play. Interactions between an athlete and socializing agents change over time, as is evident in the different phases of becoming involved and committed in a quest for sporting excellence. Athletic identity could be developed and maintained by the influence of others as well as the athlete him/herself. This contributes to the view that socialization into sport is rather a continuous exercise. From the sociological point of view the self emerges as a product of society through the process of socialization, so that the relationship between groups lead to the fusion of individualities into a feeling of wholeness so that one's self becomes identified with the beliefs, values and purpose of

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<sup>29</sup> Rintaugu, *op. cit.*, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> Gould, D., Lauer, L. Rolo, S., Jannes, C., & Sie-Pennisi, N., The parents' role in junior tennis success and failure, *Final Report*, U.S. Tennis High Performance Sport Science Grant, 2004.

<sup>31</sup> Hellstedt, J. C., Early adolescent perceptions of parental pressure in the sport environment, *Journal of Sport Behavior*, 13, 1988, pp.135-144.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

the society. Man is a group-related being from the very beginning of life. Indeed man is not born human; he becomes human through the process of involvement in social life. The aspects of the self are developed in us as children through our relationships with others. They are developed as we come to perceive ourselves as the objects of actions towards us, and others as the objects of our actions towards them.<sup>33</sup> The career choice of an individual is largely influenced by the family from which s/he comes. Then for proper talent development of an individual, there is a need to involve the family as the primary agent of socialization into a sports career. Factors such as the family's socio-economic status, opportunities for success and inequalities propel individuals to choose a career that will help them overcome these hurdles, and this is largely influenced by the ability of people to make use of the social environment to achieve the mentioned success. It is also evidenced that children often follow the career paths of their parents, especially when it comes to sports and therefore parents love and participation in certain sports is essential for the sports socialization of their children.

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<sup>33</sup> Lowry R.P. and Rankin R.P., *Sociology: The Science of Society*, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.