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## Chapter THREE

### Parenting in School-based Sailing Programs: Gender and Social Class Reproduction

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### **Abstract**

Significant research has shown that gender and social class relationships can be problematic within the context of water-based leisure activities such as surfing, windsurfing, and sailing (Wheaton, 2003; Olive, 2016). More specifically, it has been argued that sailing is traditionally practiced and dominated by upper-class males who can determine social codes that exclude and devalue others (Créac'h & Sébilleau, 2004). We develop these critical ideas about broader water sport activity through the lens of family involvement within the context of an international comparative qualitative study of sailing projects based within secondary schooling sites in California and France. A key line of analysis involved investigating how various forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1979) were reproduced through gendered and social class hierarchies. We found that parents played key roles in reinforcing gendered stereotypes and divisions that were operating in youths' daily practices and competitions (middle school and high school). Additionally, our data show that sailing was regularly utilized by families to maintain upper-class values and distinctive social status (Friedman, 2013). Thirty interviews and 113 hours of field observations with stakeholders such as coaches, teachers, youths (14 to 17 years old), and their parents frame these various lines of analysis around sailing activity.

**Keywords:** Sailing, gender equity, social class, sports parenting, school sports, international comparison

In windsurfing, surfing and sailing, significant research has shown that gender and social class relationships can be problematic (Olive, 2016; Wheaton, 2003). Indeed, these water-based activities have conventionally been practised and controlled by upper-class men who shape social norms that ostracise and diminish others. (Créac'h & Sébilleau, 2004).

In this chapter, we develop these socio-critical ideas about water sport activities, including sailing, in relationship to family involvement. This analysis emerges from an international comparative qualitative study of light sailing<sup>1</sup> projects based within secondary schooling sites in coastal regions of California and France. In this examination of light sailing cultures, we pay attention to the influence that parents have to promote social values, identities, and practices in this type of environment. Our perspective is that parenting is an integral aspect of youths' sporting experiences and outcomes, in the sense that parents themselves have particular attitudes and ways of being that influence youth sport contexts, including school-based sailing. Scholars have indeed noted that there is a "cultural script" that underpins contemporary parenting in which parents prioritize doing what is best for their individual children so that parenting ultimately becomes a personalized responsibility requiring intensive strategizing (Faircloth, 2014). It thus follows that as part of this parenting approach, families seek out "cultivating experiences" through children's sporting endeavors. Youth sports, including those originating in school environments, are thus sites where parents are becoming increasingly involved, and their involvement is viewed socially as a determinant of their parenting abilities.

Under this contextualization, it also remains the case that parents involved in their children's sports are beholden to particular gendered value systems and concomitantly take an active role in determining the gendered nature of their children's participation. The idea that thus underpins this chapter is that sailing parents actively install specific gendered values, beliefs, and perspectives in their own children that can then subsequently be

reproduced amongst peers at the micro level of sailing. This type of parental influence mirrors gendered values within broader society, establishing the social expectations and responsibilities of young men and women and the types of participation that they should engage in or avoid.

We also describe how certain parents in our study intended to install competitive traits and other abilities, such as leadership and decision making, to obtain familial advantages over others, thereby reinforcing social class divides. These traits that adults seek to promote among youths in their sporting endeavors inevitably lead to the reproduction of social class norms. Indeed, sailing involves confronting a dangerous and unstable environment and as such requires courage, adaptation, and an intelligent perception of this environment; a sailor must learn to make correct decisions when necessary. These intellectual and character traits that are prioritized within sailing are often associated with members of higher social classes (Pociello, 1999), particularly within emerging water activities “where the work of the senses can prevail over that of the muscles” (Vigarello, 1988, p.44).

These upper-class sailing attributes are simultaneously considered masculine. Créac'h and Sébilleau (2004) aver that sailing is traditionally practiced and dominated by upper-class males who most frequently establish norming social codes that determine access and legitimacy in this activity. Therefore, looking ahead to our main analysis in this chapter, an intersecting view of social class and gender implies that a dominant form of upper-class masculinity dominates sailing, including the youth version of this activity. Specifically, we shall demonstrate how school sport sailing is used by parents and their children to construct idealized versions of upper-class masculinity that reflect normative social and economic values found in both French and Californian societies.

## **Methods**

The study that frames this chapter took place from February 2017 to July 2018. Qualitative research involving semi-structured interviews and ethnographic field observations were implemented (Beaud, 1996). We conducted 60 interviews across California and Western France, encompassing approximately 200 hours of ethnographic observation. This chapter involves interrogation of data that was collected from the sailing portion of this study, which included 25 participants and 113 observation hours with coaches, teachers, and students. We conducted some interviews with two or three participants at a time and interviewed multiple participants twice.

We kept field observations of water and shore activity in an ethnographic field notebook. The first author observed coaching and teaching activities in addition to the relationships among all sailing participants. All members of the school sailing cultures, including youths (from 14 to 17 years old), coaches, teachers, parents, and program leaders, are represented in the data. Californian school sports sailing occurred within a local yacht club, and in France the sailing occurred through community centers.

We initially coded the data to identify themes and patterns (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) that aligned with the main research thrust of analyzing how sailing could reproduce gendered and social class norms and privilege. Next, we coded key events, phrases, wordings, and patterns within the data set to construct higher-level analytical themes (Miles and Huberman, 1994; Stake, 1995). In the findings section below, we outline the gendered and social class themes that eventually arose through the data analysis process.

## **Findings**

In both France and California, most of the young sailors, coaches, and parents involved in the junior sailing programs in came from communities located on or close to wealthier coastal areas. As such, they possessed significant economic capital and cultural

capital. Upper-class parents considered themselves to be heirs to the coastal areas and culture (Créac'h & Sébilleau, 2004). For example, Allan<sup>1</sup>, 46, American dock manager and Gavin's father, proudly recounted the generational roots of sailing in their family:

Jimmy Buffett has a song "Son of a Son of a Sailor," I'm the son of a son of a sailor. And I'm glad Gavin can say that's his song. He is the son of a son of a sailor. That means it's natural for me. I grew up doing this and my dad grew up doing this and his dad grew up doing this, so it's our natural state. It's our normal environment; we're completely comfortable with it.

We can see that a similar viewpoint of nautical origin is held in France, where most of the sailing parents likewise came from established sailing families. These parents often referred to the fact that sailing was something "natural" to them, since they had all been on a boat from a young age. Antoine, 39, grew up sailing on a family boat. He worked in finance, his wife worked in real estate, and their only son, Fanch, 14. Antoine had sailed for many years and owned a small, light, and fast sailboat. Antoine and Fanch regularly go out on the family boat and this serves as an opportunity for Antoine to pass on what he knows about sailing to his son: "It's usually a fairly pleasant trip; we go for a walk, more or less. It's an opportunity to learn things and to test what we can do on the boat."

This orientation to family and the closeness between parents and children during sailing practice paint a picture of what Créac'h and Sébilleau (2004) consider the inheritance process among sailing members. Sailing parents particularly wanted to transmit this type of sailing identity to their children by taking them sailing on the family boat; learning to sail was not all about developing a skill per se, since it also involved families' cultural reproduction.

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<sup>1</sup> All participants' names mentioned in this chapter are pseudonyms.

Californian parents from these privileged backgrounds explicitly wanted youths to achieve what these adults “perceive as richer, fuller lives” to “gain access to elite networks and succeed in a wide range of formal and informal assessments by upper-class gatekeepers” Stempel (2019, p. 31). In keeping with Stempel’s reasoning, we illustrate here that Californian adults who encouraged their child’s sailing practice also promoted reproduction within the economically dominant class (EDC) (Bourdieu, 1979; Stempel, 2019). Through this concept of EDC, Stempel (2019) evokes the capitalist aspirations of parents whose careers fit the liberal market conception of success in American society.

For example, according to Denise, a director of a sailing program whose daughter is also a sailor, sailing is a competitive and tactical activity that prepares high school students for their academic and professional futures. Her words evoke what Fletcher (2008, p. 318) describes as intensive participation in outdoor or adventurous activities, which is considered a “standard entry ritual” into professional class endeavors:

When my kids have gone on job interviews, they’ve always done presentations on sailing, [or] when they have to do a presentation at school, because it’s so complex. My daughter works in the field of genetics, and she was asked, “Do you know how to explain complex topics easily?” She said, “Yeah, sailing. It’s like, yeah, it’s so much a part of their life that they don’t even realize how much you can transfer those skills to other things. Plus, you solve problems all the time. You look at the wind. You look at the water. You look at the current. It’s a physics problem.

Many other Californian parents echoed Denise’s opinion that school sailing provided children with skills and ways of being that would give them advantages in their future life plans outside of sports themselves (Friedman, 2013). For instance, many parents explained that the risky sailing conditions their children sometimes faced were challenging and thus were crucial in preparing them for the future; it would teach them about what they might

encounter in “real life.” When asked how confronting a potentially dangerous environment could benefit their children, Mia, 43, a Californian mother, detailed the benefits of sailing in an unpredictable and risky environment:

So it teaches them autonomy, fighting spirit.... Like what’s going to happen in St. Martin’s [a future regatta], four days of racing, with winds, currents.... All alone in the middle of the sea. With sea lions, maybe whales, cruise liners and boats in every direction. You see, they learn a lot of things. They don’t realize it, it’s not conscious, but they learn not to be afraid, to deal with the unexpected, to be safe, to be self-sufficient, to support each other, etc. So it’s really great.

Sailing regattas thus were seen as creating the educational conditions of adversity where controlled risk taking coupled with careful consideration of the environment is rewarded. The program director and most of the other parents we interviewed characterized light sailing as a place where young sailors learn to navigate a potentially hostile environment and acquire the skills necessary to optimize their academic and professional careers.

Unlike Californians, who were more focused on performance and competition, French parents tended to value the development of their child through a healthy activity that was considered beneficial for the overall physical and psychological development of the child; this has been found to be an objective regularly put forward by parents from a privileged social class (Court et al., 2014). Parental goals in California also revolved around their children acquiring sailing skills so that young people could become leaders of the local marine culture. Carole is a teacher and has long served as secretary at a French sailing school. It was there that she met her husband, Phillipe, who was a sailing instructor at the school. Carole had always sailed and regularly surfed. She explained that she wanted her son to be healthy through sailing and enjoy the coastal environment in which he lives:

If he's good and having fun in this sport and that's what I see ... I'm not going to look any further, actually. Also, it fits with what we live in: it's a healthy environment.... For me, the practice of sports is important; as they say, a healthy mind and a healthy body.

Sophie, a cultural center director who sometimes sails, supports the idea that light sailing is a tool for immersing oneself in the marine culture present on the Atlantic coast. She wants her two sons and daughter to enjoy this prominent activity in the region where they live:

Well, let's just say yes, because it's a great opportunity, for sure.... Really, to live in this area and not take advantage of it, I find that almost — it's almost anachronistic. If there is a sport to be done, it is this one.

Becoming immersed and agentive within this marine culture resonates with the unconscious strategies these parents put in place to help their children acquire a certain preferred habitus (Créac'h & Sébilleau, 2004). Through sailing, then, children could construct a habitus reflecting a mind-body relationship typically found in the privileged social classes (Boltanski, 1971).

Much like in broader society, sailing activity in our international study reflected a sexual division of labor that was reinforced by parents, who differentially invested with their children according to prevailing norms. We found that the respective Californian and French families' socialization processes were used to acquire socio-economic competitive capital and marine-oriented cultural capital, and led to various gendered practices and viewpoints.

Coakley (2006) reports that in the context of youth sports, fathers tend to consult with coaches, scout opponents, provide strategic advice to their sons and generally reinforce masculine values through competitive youth sports, whereas mothers typically oversee caring aspects of their children's sports practice. Thus, there is a gendered division between fathers and mothers whose children are involved in sports; they are "shaped by gendered language

and belief systems and are seen as ‘natural’ extensions of gendered divisions of labor in families and workplaces” (Messner, 2009, p. 25). This gendered division of tasks among parents was also apparent in the school sailing domain in terms of their practices and gender relations.

Our observations revealed that the mothers were involved in logistical and relational tasks related to the child’s health, such as providing sun cream, preparing and organizing picnics, putting water bottles in the boat, bringing snacks, organizing their children’s schedule, and indeed all of these tasks were menial and “behind the scenes.” Consider the following statement from Lise, 41, a French mother of a sailing boy: “I think he thinks that I can’t help him. Well, afterwards, I’ll be there, I’ll encourage him... I’ll help him if he needs to prepare and clean, manage his bag and his picnic!” Lise said that her husband was frequently giving technical advice and providing debriefings.

Fathers, on the other hand, tended to invest their time, energy, and focus on productive tasks linked to technical and sporting issues: discussing the best race strategy to adopt, advising on the placement of the boat at the start of the regatta, providing information about sailboat and equipment regulations, intervening in the verification of the rigging and the hull. It was clearly the case that these tasks were perceived within this environment as quite important on a symbolic level. Allan, for instance, described the role he played during his son’s racing:

My role has changed over time, from the beginning when I helped Gavin rig his Optimist boat for him, I put it in the water for him and I pushed him out there and between every race I tried to talk to him and tell him what I think he needed to do, to do better and, you know, to not be frustrated since he rarely did what I thought he needed to do.

Antoine attaches great importance to Fanch’s technical progress under his guidance:

When we come back, every time, from sailing, I ask [Fanch] ‘What did you do? What did you do? And that’s it.... What kind of exercise? I want to know everything.’ (Laughs.) Because... I’m interested in this sport, on the one hand, and then I’m interested in knowing what he learned, how he did it. And if he succeeded in performing well in what he did, so.... I’m interested to know if he succeeded in being first place for the day, or if he missed three starts, to understand that.

Thus, these two fathers tend to invest a coaching role during their son's regattas.

In both research contexts, we also found that there was also a sexual division at work among the young male and female sailors. This finding reflects an international patriarchal structure that underpins broader sailing culture. The gendered division is particularly visible in the distribution of the positions of helmsman and crew member, contributing to the perceived inferiority of young female sailors and the perceived legitimacy of young male sailors on the boat and in the water. There was a consensus among many of the boys that not all positions were equal and that having control over the helm of the boat legitimized their power status over others. Bryan, 16, said:

I like being in control of the situation in general. I decided to be a helmsman because I want to be in control of the operation. I want to have a crew member who works well with me, but I just want to be the person who gets the final say.

Indicating a lack of trust in others, Pierre, 14, said, “When there’s a lot of wind, I’d rather be at the helm.” Jared, 15, echoed both Bryan and Pierre’s desire to be in control: “I really just being able to be in control of this boat and just being able to go really fast and knowing it’s me doing it and it’s not random.” Our observations confirmed that in a context of mixed crew sailing in both countries, there was a clear

overrepresentation of boys in this skipper position, which was considered more prestigious than crewing. The notion of control and mastery of choices to which Bryan refers in the role of helmsman clearly positions him in a dominant posture.

Both French and Californian parents understood the hierarchy of sailing roles and thus encouraged their children to take the helm. Mia, for example said: “Especially in FJ [a type of sailing racing class], the crew is useless... [interrupted herself], really the crew is not really useful.” Lise, a French mother, added:

I know that if my husband would have been here — he is a sailor as well — I know that he used to say to Marin [their son, 15] — when Marin crewed, he told him ‘you should drive the boat.’ I have the feeling that, for Marin, being a skipper is a little better than being crew.

There was a further convergence among the male sailors who sought to reach the position of helmsman along with the attitude of parents who tended to push their sons to helm. In this way, they transmitted and reinforced this hierarchy in the division of roles on the boat. Skippering the boat offered the opportunity to manufacture and assert a dominant masculine identity. Furthermore, this type of male-dominated sailing practice socialized these young men into ways of being that aligned them with upper social class norms and behaviors. Their sailing practice became integral to the boys’ future entry into elite society.

Concomitantly, this type of gendered and social class reproduction meant that the girls internalized these masculine hierarchies and developed docility as a result (Schmitt et al., 2020a) already shown in education, girls tend to put themselves in secondary position in class (Duru-Bellat, 2004). Meryl, 46, a Californian mother, regretted that her daughter disengaged from this sailing position on the boat: “We were disappointed that she didn’t want to be a coxswain; she always wanted to confine herself to this secondary role.” The role of crew member is perceived as a secondary role, devoid of responsibility and risk-taking. The

female sailors in our study frequently recounted their fears and inhibitions regarding taking the helm of a boat. June, 17, said that she was anxious about trying to lead the boat: “I’m an anxious person and jumping into something that’s going to scare me is a little bit of, like, maybe I’ll take a backseat on this one and go later on.” Emma, 14, said:

I have never asked [about taking the helm], but I’m not sure that Fanch would like to let me do it. And he is a better skipper than me, so I let him do it ... it is easier ... I would like sometimes but, well ... I won’t be comfortable to make mistakes with them [boys] on board.... They are much stronger... I think they would react [if we were skippers of the boat].

This type of self-exclusionary behavior practiced by the girls is not limited to sports; it is also present in many social contexts dominated by men (Bourelly, 2010; Buscatto, 2010).

This internalization of a subjugated role was likewise promoted by the boys, who believed that the girls were prone to mistakes due to their lack of experience. Here, Marin explains that he would find it difficult to turn over the helm to someone less experienced than him: “I wouldn’t want to leave the helm to someone who makes mistakes, who doesn’t move forward and all that.” Thus, driving the boat is mostly invested by boys who want to be in charge and do not want someone less skilled than them to drive.

In our study, both parents and the young sailors continued to justify this gendered division of labor on the boat, sometimes based on a naturalistic ideology that supported male dominance. The words of Christian, a Californian father, illustrate this idea that physical differences meant that girls and boys should have different roles on the boat:

Sometimes girls are preferred as crew, just because they tend to be lighter than boys once they start to get [older] — especially in the [the sailboat]. As he gets to his size, he’s going to need to have a lighter crew. A smaller crew. He’s just is going into high school now. Next year, he’ll be a freshman in high school.

Part of the struggle is starting up a high school team. I said, ‘what you need to do is recruit some girls for crew’.

Christian’s son Jared, 15, added to this idea: “They’re a lot more flexible, so it’s a lot easier in that current crewing position....” Thus, a logic of natural physical difference was drawn upon to divide tasks during sailing, further reinforcing the idea that boys should lead while the women should play support roles.

### **Discussion**

Social class distinction is a critical element in broader sailing culture, since this activity caters to upper-class participants and occurs within wealthier coastal areas. It requires expensive equipment and participation fees that preclude others from participating (Créac'h, 2003; Pociello, 1999). In terms of social class reproduction of sporting habitus, it has been claimed that sailing is generally a “sport of the monied classes” and this activity arose during the rise of industrial capitalism (Crawley, 1998, p. 35). Moreover, scholars have explained that the distinction of one’s authentic sailing habitus usually relies upon being socially integrated within an upper-class sailing culture. Sailing thus implies a relationship to the body that is specific to privileged social groups (Pociello, 1999).

This specific social class contextualization of sailing thus compelled us to analyze how adults, including parents and school program members, reproduced certain social class belief systems and ideologies in the context of school-based practice. In France, parents tended to value the reproduction of a marine cultural habitus through school sailing. French school sailing remains an activity perceived as culturally distinctive by and for coastal families with a high cultural status; these parents wanted their children to be exposed to both this cultural and natural context so that they could access this distinction reserved for sailing heirs (Créac'h & Sébilleau, *op. cit.*). Therefore, sailing is seen as a way for French families to

transmit distinctive cultural capital that reflects a healthy relationship between mind and body (Bourdieu, 1979).

In our study, the Californian parents' investment in their children's sports was guided by the belief that sports maximizes young people's personal development. This parental belief is consistent with an ideal of "personal responsibility" born of the advent of neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s (Stempel, 2019). This parenting strategy is particularly present in American youth sports, which is typically "highly expensive and performance-oriented, and heavily dependent on parental involvement" (Coakley, 2006, p. 159). Under these conditions, "where competition and individualism are highly valued, some people become competitive when they claim their moral value as parents" (Coakley, op. cit., p. 160). Thus, Californian sailing has been viewed and used in the same way as other sports activities that have been researched in the United States. Friedman (2013) suggests that in these environments, parents prioritize learning to compete to ensure the presence of sometimes limited academic and professional opportunities in neo-liberal American society. Risk-taking in adult-controlled competitions is thus particularly valued. For example, Fletcher (2008, ) identifies risk-taking and perseverance in adventurous activities as a key attribute of the "professional class:" "for one can never be certain that the long road from education to employment will ultimately prove fruitful, but one must undertake the journey anyway" (p. 318)

Displayed sailing attributes such as risk-taking, leadership, and perseverance are also frequently considered desirable masculine traits. This type of positioning of desirable attributes as masculine, can also be found in other fields of activity outside of sport, for instance, jazz band, cooking chefs and the air transport industry, where women are often considered as secondary participants and lack full participation (Barnier, 2010; Bourelly, 2010; Buscatto, 2010).

Going back to sailing, we can see that this activity largely exists as male-dominated in terms of actual practice and its accompanying symbolic representations (Bricknell, 1999; Crawley, 1988; Le Bars & Lacombe, 2011). Here, men are most often considered as capable of handling the technical duties and mental stresses of this activity (Bricknell, 1999, p. 430). Autonomy, initiative, risk-taking, technical mastery of the elements related to navigation, in addition to combativeness and tactical finesse during regattas, are dispositions with strong masculine connotation.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, sailing in a potentially dangerous marine environment remains a man's world still built around an ideal of seemingly masculine characteristics (Bricknell, 1999; Lacombe & Le Bars, 2011). Given this masculine characterization of sailing, Bourdieu's writing (2001) around masculine domination that is reproduced through institutionalized endeavors such as sports and education became useful to analyze gendered sailing practice. A Bourdieusian perspective implies that "roles are not biologically determined but result from a social construction, systematically ranking the masculine and the feminine (Guérandel and Mennesson, 2007, p. 168). Sporting and educational organizational cultures, such as school sport sailing programs, have particular social features and interactions that influence the nature of gendered participation and identity formation (Mennesson, 2000). The findings presented in this chapter revealed that the position of helmsman is strongly valued by male sailors and parents, and it is also associated with the role of captain, having full powers and taking responsibility for his crew. This hierarchy underpins light sailing in California, where sailing is considered preparatory activity for the eventual economic and professional ascendancy of young people, especially boys, within a patriarchal society. Further analysis could include analysis of how carnal knowledge is understood within this context, and thus shed light upon how sailing is specifically embodied and reproduced amongst wealthy

families (Wacquant, 2004). This approach allows children to acquire social dispositions in line with the liberal socio-economic ideal (Stempel, 2019). Differentiated parental and gender roles were observed across both study sites, in the fathers' investment into everything linked to the technical, logistical, and organizational elements of their child's sailing activity, while the mothers remained on the periphery doing menial tasks. This gendered division of tasks on the boat was also reinforced by girls eliminating themselves from the function of helmsman while the boys took over this position, which is symbolically associated with decision-making power. In France, masculine-dominated sailing was considered a way for local children to appropriate and become leaders within a distinctive local marine culture in terms of cultural capital (Créach, 2003; Stempel, 2019). At the same time, future study is warranted to understand the phenomenon of cultural blurring as it pertains to sporting activities such as sailing, as symbolic and practical differences that we observed could now be shifting due to the increased globalization of sport discourses.

### Notes

1. Dinghy and catamaran sailing are often characterized as “light” sailing, in contrast to activities such as yachting, and we refer to this description throughout this paper.

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