THIS IS YOUR BRAIN ON FOOTBALL: MAKING SENSE OF PARENTS' DECISION TO ALLOW THEIR CHILD TO PLAY TACKLE FOOTBALL

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Parents make decisions on behalf of their children on a daily basis. Some parents in the United States face the unique decision of whether or not to allow football participation for their child at a very young age. Using sensemaking theory, I examined how parents assessed the risks involved in making the decision to allow their child to play tackle football. I interviewed 24 participants in the form of 12 parental couples who had children playing middle school football and coded their responses to identify themes and strategies for risk assessment. Themes that emerged were decision-agency (parent and child agency), risk assessment (downplaying risk, acknowledgement of risk with rationalizations, zero risk assessment), and decision-making concepts (cultural influence, familial identity, social influences, information sources). I expanded on the sensemaking supposition of individual identity by arguing that familial identity can also impact decision-making. A key finding to this study was the typology of parents that emerged including football families-parent agency, hesitant family- parent agency, and child focused family-child agency. The type of family reflected families' reception to community culture, impact of social influence, and openness to information sources. Family type also impacted the risk assessment process and belief of control over outcomes in football participation.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 2012, former National Football League (NFL) star Junior Seau took his own life with a gunshot to the chest becoming one of a growing number of professional and college football players who have committed suicide (Carlson, 2014). Upon his death, Seau's family donated his brain to the National Institute of Health (NIH) for examination. Medical examiners found evidence of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) in the brain tissue of Seau consistent with damage caused by concussions (Pilon & Belson, 2013). CTE is a degenerative brain disease that can only be diagnosed posthumously and occurs as the result of multiple head impacts consistent with concussions. Medical examiners have found a high number of CTE cases in athletes, such as Seau, who played high contact sports that involve multiple impacts to the head. Since the Center for Disease Control (CDC) defined concussions as a growing health concern (Rapp, 2012) reporters at national newspapers such as the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* have contributed to the public's education on concussions by doggedly investigating and reporting the latest findings. Ward, Williams, and Manchester (2017) reported findings of a recent study performed by neuropathologist Dr. Ann McKee, where CTE was confirmed in 110 out of 111 brains of former NFL football players. Additionally, Mez et.al. (2017) found occurrence of CTE was diagnosed neuropathologically in 87% of cases studied. Players who participated in tackle football at advanced levels had evidence of CTE with severity ranging from mild (high school) to severe (college, semiprofessional, Canadian Football League, and NFL) (Mez et.al., 2017). While the subject of sports related concussion and CTE continually garners attention at the national level, we know little about how much attention is paid to the risk at a local, familial level.

Despite the frequency of concussion occurrence and increased media coverage due to high profile cases such as Seau's, researchers found parents and players uneducated about concussion details (Moser, 2007; Manasse-Cohick & Shapley, 2014; Kroshus et.al, 2015; Nelson et.al., 2016). This lack of knowledge is concerning considering the large number of children and young adults participating in football. In 2015, the National Center for Catastrophic Sport Injury Research (NCCSIR) reported an estimated 4.2 million tackle football participants in the United States each year (Mueller & Colgate, 2012), including about 1.1 million high school players and about 3.0 million youth football players. While research on symptom recognition and occurrence of concussion has increased over the past decade, the majority of the focus is on athletes at the professional or collegiate level with high school students included more recently. In studies focused on younger athletes, Moser (2007) found that youth brains (up to the age of 21) show a different recovery profile than older athletes. Omalu (2017) reports a child's brain is not fully developed until between the ages of 18 and 25. In studies done on animals, younger brains tended to be more vulnerable and take longer to recover, suggesting that human brains are also more susceptible to long lasting damage if sustained at a younger age (Giza & Hovda, 2001). Therefore, "Every position on the [football] field puts a child at risk" (Omalu, 2017, p. 275). While college and NFL players have the agency to decide for themselves to play tackle football, the decision for youth lies solely in the hands of their parents. With a significant number of young children playing full contact sports, research is warranted to investigate how parents make sense of the decision to allow their children to play risky sports such as football.

Through the act of sensemaking, individuals process and reconcile reality to decisions that have already been made (Weick, 1995). The connection of sensemaking to decision-making is one of importance because one does not exist without the other. In this study, I will explore

sensemaking of decisions already made by parents. Decision-making is a communicative phenomenon (Jabs, 2005). Individuals, couples, and groups routinely collect information, discuss and process it, argue, and utilize a variety of communication processes in making decisions (Miller, 2012). With the advent of the internet and social media and an ever present "information" stream, parents are constantly bombarded with information about what is beneficial or damaging for their children. For every claim that enlisting kids too young in sports is bad for their physical well-being (Emery & Tyreman, 2009), parents are met with a counter argument that sports help discipline, motivate, and develop children (Zarrett et.al., 2009). Faced with the onslaught of contradictory information, parents and guardians are left to make sense of decisions made on behalf of their children. We know little about parents' decision-making with regard to letting their kids play tackle football. Through this exploratory study, I will gain insight into how parents make sense of their decisions to allow their children to play tackle football. By better understanding this process, we gain insight into what information parents rely on, who they talk to, and what sources they trust in making these decisions.

Theoretical Framework

Considering that we know little about how parents understand their decisions to allow their children to play a risky sport such as tackle football, sensemaking theory seems an appropriate framework for the present study. Researchers (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Hermann, 2007; Bryant & Sias, 2011; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) use sensemaking theory as a theoretical lens to analyze how participants reconcile problematic information to a livable reality. Weick (1995) posits that sensemaking is "literally the making of sense" (p. 4). When faced with uncertain, ambiguous, or equivocal events,

individuals engage in sensemaking (Bryant & Sias, 2011). Sensemaking is used to understand the *why* things happen.

The process of sensemaking is highly communicative (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004) and involves individual and collective processes with an emphasis on trying to make things rationally accountable to oneself and others (Weick, 1993; Hermann, 2007; Patterson et.al., 2010). Communication is central to the sensemaking process as people make sense of new information and then create a collective sense of meaning (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Research indicates these processes can happen individually (Hermann, 2007; Patterson et.al., 2010), in a group setting (Bryant & Sias, 2011), or between two people (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004), suggesting sensemaking theory is applicable to two parents, the focus of this study. The sensemaking process is *retrospective* in nature which allows people to understand *why* an event happened (Bryant & Sias, 2011). This retrospective nature suggests reconciling what has happened is only done after the fact and is achieved through looking at what has been done (Weick, 1995; Craig-Lees, 2001; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Weber, Thomas & Stephens, 2015).

Several dimensions of sensemaking theory align with the purpose of the present study. These include *equivocality* which describes the many different ways in which information input can be interpreted (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). The property of *extracted cues* involves the selection of certain pieces of information attended to by individuals when constructing reality (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). People tend to choose cues that are consistent with existing assumptions (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006). Consequently, sensemaking allows people to return from an equivocal state to a more stable state of being (Dogherty & Drumheller, 2006). Individuals structure who they are by how and what they think (Patterson et.al., 2010).

Interwoven in individual, dyadic, and group sensemaking are *social* and *identity* properties. Sensemaking is social, meaning an individual's reality is influenced by the implied, actual, or imagined presence of others (Craig-Lees, 2001). Relatedly, identity is a core preoccupation in sensemaking (Craig-Lees, 2001) and is formed by how individuals see themselves based on interactions with others (Craig-Lees, 2001, Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Bosma and Kunnen (2001) iterated that identity development occurs in each person-context transaction. Identity is interwoven in each decision that a person makes and the resulting sense made of decisions. In this exploratory study, parents will be asked to look back on decisions made (retrospective) to reconcile uncertain information (equivocality) and the pieces of information they chose to pay attention to (extracted cues) when discussing it with family and friends (social) and likening those cues to their personal beliefs (identity). The practicality of sensemaking theory as a guiding framework is exemplified by the difficulty involved in witnessing decisions as they are made between the parents in real time. Weick (1995) asserts the usefulness of sensemaking in that when people make decisions, they first act on a decision they have made and then analyze that decision later.

Purpose

Thus, the purpose of this study is to understand how parents make sense of their decisions to allow their middle school aged children to play tackle football. By understanding sensemaking around this important decision, we can learn what information is most relevant to parents, who they talk to about it, how they calculate risk, and what sources are most credible. Results will provide a pathway for scholars, doctors, and athletic administrators to most

accurately appeal to parents' desire to make informed choices for their children by identifying those properties that hold most credibility.

Next, I review literature to provide a deeper understanding of sensemaking theory on an individual and collective level. The subsequent section describes the study's methodology. Then, I will review the results of data collection. Finally, I will synthesize the review of literature and results in the discussion section.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Three million youth are enrolled annually, by their parents, in tackle football (Mueller & Colgate, 2012). Parents are increasingly challenged in making this decision due to the influx of contradictory information about the safety of this high impact sport. There are a few theories that are appropriate for analyzing decision-making involving risk assessment including Ajzen and Fishbein's (1980) theory of reasoned action (TRA) which utilizes a person's attitudes toward a behavior and the social norms related to the behavior. Another theory useful for analysis is Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB) which is an extension of theory of reasoned action. TPB includes attitudes and social norms but adds the element of perceived behavioral control as a level of analysis.

For this study, I utilize Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory for investigation of parents' decisions to allow participation in tackle football. One of the foundational tenants of sensemaking theory states that when people make a decision, they go through the process of making that decision and then reflect on what they have done later. Next, I address the existing theoretical knowledge that applies to this study and identify gaps in previous research that I aim to address.

Football

Football, Morris (2007) noted, is "everything that is right (or wrong) about American culture and society" (pg. 1). Football is woven into the identity of millions of Americans. When the decision is made to allow a child to play football, parents' identities shift a little to incorporate the new reality of being a "football parent." With 4.2 million participants in tackle

football in the United States, education about risk, including concussions, involved in playing the sport is of utmost importance. Scholars (Cournoyer & Tripp, 2014; Register-Mihalik et. al., 2013; Robeson & King, 2014) have found football players and their parents unable to identify multiple symptoms of concussion; these symptoms include nausea or vomiting, neck pain, grogginess, personality change, and difficulty concentrating. Researchers (Delaney, et.al., 2002; Echlin et.al., 2010; Register-Mihalik, et.al., 2013; McCrea et.al., 2004) also found that if/when players do recognize symptoms up to 50% of athletes do not report concussion symptoms. Reasons varied for not reporting the concussion symptoms and included embarrassment and letting down teammates and coaches; however, the most common reason for not reporting symptoms was thinking the head injury was not serious enough to report. Indeed, education about the risk involved impacts how parents process and make sense of the decision to allow their child to play tackle football.

A mild traumatic brain injury (mTBI) or concussion is the most common head injury in athletes, particularly football players (Moser, 2007). An average of 300,000 patients are admitted to emergency departments each year with mild traumatic brain injuries according to the Centers for Disease Control. Contrastingly, researchers (Cournoyer & Tripp, 2014; Langlois, Rutland-Brown, & Wald, 2006; Powell & Barber-Foss, 1999) have reported up to 1.6 to 3.8 million concussions occur annually during sports and recreation with over 50% of concussions attributed to football participation. The discrepancy between suspected cases and those that actually invite hospital visits may indicate lack of knowledge related to concussion symptoms and severity (Cournoyer & Tripp, 2014). Consequently, the public, and parents specifically, are not armed with the correct information to make decisions to let their child(ren) participate in a risky sport such as tackle football.

Sensemaking Theory

Weick (1979) introduced sensemaking theory in an effort to frame how people make sense, the *why*, of life events. Scholars (Weick, 1979; Bird, 2007; Hermann, 2007; Miller & Horsley, 2009; Patterson et.al., 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011) have found sensemaking a stabilizing act through the process of taking in information, processing the information individually, and then having the option to discuss it with a partner or group of people. Sensemaking theory is fundamentally communicative (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004) and retrospective (Weick, 1979) and involves three stages: enactment, selection, and retention (Weick, 1979; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Hermann, 2007). Enactment occurs when people assign meaning to a message in an informational environment (Hermann, 2007). When framing a message in the environment, individuals begin the sense making process through enactment. Once individuals have assigned importance to a message, the selection of communication cycles, act-response-adjustment, begins. The more unclear a message is, the more communication cycles are required to reduce uncertainty. Once the communicative cycles succeed in reducing message equivocality, the process then becomes a rule and individuals retain the process for future use. Once the act has been stored for future use, people use that act as the framework for future sensemaking (restrospective act), starting the cycle over again.

Scholars (Weick, 1979; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) have argued sensemaking is inherently retrospective. Weick (1979) argued that a person cannot know and understand what they will say until they say it, "All understanding originates in reflection and looking backward" (p. 194). People use past experiences to shape how current situations are processed. Sensemaking as retrospective means that people are organizing past events only after the event has happened (Craig-Lees, 2001). Past experiences are used to

develop ideology, perceptual frameworks, and premises that guide decision making (Weick, 1995; Bryant & Sias, 2011). Retrospective reasoning is indivisible from the act of sensemaking. If a person is making sense of a situation, they are doing so retrospectively. Parents will be prompted to look back on a decision made in the past and will naturally make sense of that decision by reconciling the decision with the informational environment that existed at that time.

Scholars demonstrate the versatility of sensemaking as a theoretical framework by utilizing the process in crisis and non-crisis situations alike. Scholars (Weick, 1993; Miller & Horsley, 2009) have used sensemaking as the theoretical framework to make sense of crisis situations. Sensemaking in crisis situations is important in that it shows how people create and interpret crisis situations as well as how they recount the crisis situation (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). Weick (1993) analyzed the Mann Gulch disaster through the sensemaking lens to decipher communication breakdown resulting in catastrophic loss of life. Miller and Horsley (2009) analyzed crisis management in the coal industry through the lens of sensemaking in an effort to improve emergency management communication. Researchers (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Bird, 2007; Bryant & Sias, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Blazsin & Guldenmund, 2015; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) have also employed sensemaking in non-crisis situations in organizational settings to address a multitude of co-worker issues involving uncertainty. Bryant and Sias (2011) utilized sensemaking to analyze individual and subsequent co-created sense made by co-workers who experienced the same life event in workplace, sexual harassment, suggesting that sensemaking theory can be applied to a dyad who have gone through a life experience together. This exploratory study seeks to continue the broadening of sensemaking theory applicability beyond crisis situations to gain an understanding of parents sensemaking capability around an important decision.

Weick's (1995) concept of sensemaking is rooted in the creation of meaning as people interpret what they have created. Several properties are inherent to the sensemaking process. Sensemaking occurs at the onset of an equivocal, or uncertain, situation. Two sensemaking properties that challenge our ability to select and attend to the appropriate information are *equivocality* and *extracted cues.* Equivocality involves the many different ways in which information input can be interpreted (Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003). For example, when parents are exposed to the competing information about football safety, an equivocal situation is developed. Faced with the task of interpreting the contradictory information available, parents first must reconcile decisions made through sensemaking. The property of *extracted cues* orient an individual to specific cues that are consistent with past experiences (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). In sensemaking, extracted cues serve as a way for individuals to attend to their environment. Consequently, sensemaking allows people to situate themselves in a more stable emotional state (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006).

Individual identities develop through comparison to the people around us. (Patterson, Eubank, Rathbun, & Noble, 2010). Implicit in sensemaking, whether individual, dyadic, or group, are s*ocial* and *identity* properties. As a social construct, sensemaking influences individual's reality by the implied, actual, or imagined presence of others (Craig-Lees, 2001). For instance, as parents go through the process of digesting information, an individual assessment is made initially and then the individual turns to a spouse, family member, or friend to talk through the assessment, engaging the social property of sensemaking. Making sense of the decision to let a child play football would be no exception to this process. Additionally, identity construction, through comparison to peers, is a core element in sensemaking. (Craig-Lees, 2001, Dougherty & Smythe, 2004). Identity is conceived through each person-context

exchange and inseparable from every decision a person makes (Bosma & Kunnen, 2001). In this study, I focus on the sensemaking process parents go through once the decision has been made to allow their child to play tackle football. Next, I will discuss decision-making as a precursor to the sensemaking process.

Decision-Making

The decision about whether to enroll their child(ren) in sports can be a true dilemma for parents. No other sport genre has generated more attention about injury concerns in recent years than tackle football (Moser, 2007). Information parents receive concerning risky behavior is not immune from inconsistency. Jenkins (2006) studied parents' anxieties (with regard to their children and 'risky' behavior) after their child had been admitted to the emergency room as the result of an accident. Jenkins found parental decision-making plagued by uncertainty due to conflicting information about the health and wellbeing of their children. Researchers (Zarrett et.al., 2009) suggested positive impacts youth sports programs have on adolescent development; youth sports participation aides in developing initiative, responsibility, self-control, social cohesion and persistence. Conversely, Emery and Tyreman (2009) found participation in youth sports inherently involves risky behavior. With the capability to enroll their children in tackle football at five years of age, parents are left to decipher conflicting information when their children are still mentally and physically underdeveloped. When parents are exposed to the competing information about football safety, an equivocal situation is developed. Faced with the task of interpreting the contradictory information available, parents first must reconcile decisions made through sensemaking.

Due to the nature of American culture, the decision to allow a child to play football used to be an easy one to make. With increased media coverage rooted in contradictory information, parents are left to grapple with information from several sources and tasked with deciding which source to trust. When it comes time to make the decision to play tackle football parents either retain agency for themselves or may turn agency over to the child to decide. Scholars have researched familial agency in a variety of ways including child compliance (Kuhn, Phan, & Laird, 2014), at-risk families (Rodrigo, Correa, Maiques, Martin, & Rodriguez, 2006), and parents with mental illness (Nicholson, Hinden, Biebel, Henry, & Katz-Leavy, 2007). Kuhn, Phan, and Laird (2014) found child compliance higher in families' where parents retained agency over decisions. Child and early-adolescent input in decisions is undesirable because parental guidance is required to make competent and safe decisions. With recent research reported on the risks involved in tackle football, familial agency is worth exploring.

With the discussion of football associated risk on the rise, parents are often tasked with reconciling the risks involved in tackle football with the decision to allow their child to play. Tait, Voepel-Lewis, and Malviya (2004) reported the importance of accurate risk assessment for parents in order to make the best decisions on behalf of their child. Boyer (2006) explored the capability of children to assess risk and found that children who are still considered to be adolescent or younger are less likely to accurately assess risk. This finding is of particular interest to this study with a portion of families' relinquishing agency to their child.

Parental risk assessment coupled with the decision-making process has most often been studied from a medical standpoint regarding either sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy (Tanner, Carlson, Raymond, & Hopkins, 2008), genetic counseling (Thomassen, Sarangi, & Skolbekken, 2015), vaccine education (Valdez, Stewart, Tanjasari, Levy, & Garza, 2015), or

HIV prevention (Tarantino, Goodrum, Armistead, & Cook, 2014) providing a solid foundation for parental risk assessment and decision-making research. While risk involved with playing sports has been investigated by scholars (Nixon, 1993; & Emery & Tyreman, 2009) there is a paucity of research on parental risk assessment combined with decision-making with regard to playing sports.

Briley, Morris, and Simonson (2000) argue that decision-making is inherently rooted in individual culture especially when individuals are asked to explain choices. Panning (1986) spoke to a term called homophility, as it related to culture and group decision-making, defined as group members sharing similar attributes and opinions resulting in redundant information processing and biased decisions. When parents are immersed in a football culture, repeatedly in contact with football infused communication via media, peers, and social circles, it stands to reason that the decision-making process with regard to football participation will be similar to the people around them.

There is a paucity of research addressing parents' making sense of allowing their child(ren) to engage in risky behavior such as playing tackle football. A plethora of researchers (Register-Mihalik et.al., 2013; Cournoyer & Tripp, 2014; Mannings et.al., 2014; Hunt, et.al., 2016) have examined player and parent education regarding symptoms and treatment of concussion in youth sports; however, we still know little about the sensemaking aspect of parents' decisions to let children play tackle football. My hope is that this study can uncover the theories and concepts most appropriate for this research moving forward.

Research Question

Researchers have utilized sensemaking theory in many settings and combinations of individuals, dyads, and groups. However, a gap exists in the way scholars have used sensemaking theory to study parents in risky decision-making. The majority of sensemaking research takes place in organizational settings amongst coworkers, and scholars have not yet applied this theory to parents as a level of analysis. In this context, we know that parents make sense of decisions through similar processes but the interaction should differ due to intimacy of shared life experiences. We know that participants assess information individually, present the assessment to their partner for discussion, and then make a collective assessment of the information producing a shared version of information. In order to understand how parents make sense of known risky behavior in the form of tackle football and to expand sensemaking theory to additional research contexts, I aim to answer the research question as presented.

RQ: How do parents make sense of risk in the decision to allow their child(ren) to play tackle football?

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

I took an iterative methodological approach to this investigatory study which allowed participants agency when discussing decisions made about their child playing tackle football and also provided guidance for my analysis through the lens of sensemaking theory. My primary focus centered on parents of children who began playing between the ages of 10-14, which is the first opportunity for children to play tackle football through their schools. Through data analysis I documented the manifestation of sensemaking theory as themes emerged.

Research Context

Cresswell (2009) posits that qualitative research is appropriate for the investigation of emerging problems such as the question(s) presented in this study. Qualitative interviewing yields data of greater and richer detail allowing the researcher to study the explicit and subtle nuances of participant feedback (Babbie, 1998). Due to the nature of qualitative research, which privileges the participants' voices, researchers are encouraged to consider how the interview will improve the human situation (Cresswell, 2009). I gained insight into participant's motives for decisions by engaging them in the interviewing process (Babbie, 1998).

I interviewed parents who made the decision to allow their child to play tackle football. In order to be eligible for participation, parents had to be available to interview together (face to face or via conference telephone call), and have at least one child that currently played or has played tackle football in the past 3 years. I focus on the past three years because the *New York Times* first reported on this topic in October of 2014 (The Associated Press, 2014). The qualitative interviewing process allowed for natural discovery of ideas and values by allowing

participants to converse with the interviewer, and, in this case, each other, to create a shared sense of meaning (Tracy, 2013). Interviews also allowed for access to information from past events and created a space where interviewees could provide their opinion, motivation, and experience. The focus of the qualitative interview process is more on participants, to create an account, than on the interviewer. Through the interview, I sought to understand the sensemaking process parents go through when answering questions about this decision.

Recruitment and Participants

In order to protect the participants of this study, I filed a research plan with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review of study details (Cresswell, 2009). Additionally, an informed consent form, designed to make participants aware of the research process, was signed by participants before initiating the interviews.

Cresswell (2009) stated that purposeful sampling is the backbone of qualitative research because the researcher is permitted to hand pick participants in order to best understand the problem and research question. Therefore, I will recruit participants through purposeful and snowball sampling. The use of purposeful sampling allowed me freedom to choose participants who fit within the parameters of my research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Because I am interested in studying parents whose children are playing tackle football specifically, I targeted those families who already had a child playing. I spoke to personal acquaintances who fit the selection criteria to request that they take part in the study and also posted a call for participants on the social media website, Facebook, to recruit families. In addition, I employed snowball sampling to add to my field of participants. Snowball sampling employs participants to help recruit other

study members by speaking to family members, co-workers, friends, and other people, who fit the study parameters, about joining the study (Tracy, 2013).

Through these methods of recruitment I found 24 participants in the form of 12 married couples. Years of marriage ranged from four to 28 with a mean of 16.6 years. Ten of the twelve couples were the biological parents of the children in the household, one household consisted of the biological father and stepmother, and the last household had a blended family with three children that were living with their biological father, three children living with their biological mother, and one child belonged to both father and mother, for a total of seven children in that household. Participants included 12 males and 12 females. Participants ages ranged from 28 to 51 (M = 42.9) years of age for females, and 40 to 56 (M = 45.1) for males. Participation resulted in 22 interviewees who identified as white/Caucasian and two participants who identified as black/African American. Table 1 breaks out the demographic information about participants, including alias, age, gender, and years married.

Table 1

Parent Demographics

Alias	Gender	Age	Years Married	Ethnicity
Olivia	F	42	20	Caucasian
Liam	M	51	20	Caucasian
Ava	F	51	28	Caucasian
Noah	M	56	28	Caucasian
Emma	F	43	20	Caucasian
Logan	M	47	20	Caucasian
Sophia	F	42	20	Caucasian
Oliver	M	44	20	Caucasian

(table continues)

Alias	Gender	Age	Years Married	Ethnicity
Isabella	F	42	17	Caucasian
Mason	M	44	17	Caucasian
Mia	F	45	20	Caucasian
Aiden	M	41	20	Caucasian
Amelia	F	49	5	Caucasian
Ethan	M	40	5	African American
Harper	F	42	15	Caucasian
Elijah	M	44	15	Caucasian
Charlotte	F	40	14	Caucasian
Lucas	M	42	14	Caucasian
Mila	F	46	18.5	Caucasian
Alexander	M	45	18.5	African American
Aria	F	45	20	Caucasian
James	M	46	20	Caucasian
Ella	F	28	4	Caucasian
Jacob	M	43	4	Caucasian

For the purpose of this study, my unit of analysis as described by the term ‘parents’ refer to a collective set of two legal guardians. A unit of analysis is defined as the person (or people) being studied in research (Babbie, 1998). It is important to point out the collective unit in this study because the act of making sense of a dyadic decision is the structure of most significant decisions in families. I made the decision to interview co-parenting families while acknowledging that the not all households function in a co-parenting structure. I sought to analyze the interaction between two parents as they reconciled their decisions with their reality. The structure of a marriage or domestic partnership implies decisions for activities involving children that warrant a discussion, decision, and sensemaking following the decision (Allen, 2012). Depending on the gravity of the decision, this cycle can repeat numerous times.

Further, it is prudent that parents be interviewed together to keep the sanctity of joint sensemaking intact. Riina (2014) studied joint decision making and the impact of the importance of coparenting (making life's big decisions together) on a child's life. When marital partners are separate and remember a previous decision, often times, individualization occurs where a single partner remembers the decision differently than if the couple is together. The collective interview served as a checks and balances of the memory of decisions made.

In order to recruit participants, I invited parents from a suburban city in Northeast and Southeast Texas to be a part of my study. All of the participants' children played for the University Interscholastic League (UIL), which governs the local youth and high school football associations. I interviewed until data no longer produced unique results and I deduced that the study had reached theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Procedure

In order to provide anonymity, all participant and school names have been changed. Interviews were audio-recorded and followed a semi-structured, open-ended format. This approach allowed participants to speak freely about past decisions and make sense of those decisions in real time (Tracy, 2013). Parents chose the time and place of meeting in order to accommodate schedules and comfort levels. I designed interview questions (see Appendix A) using the research questions as the primary catalyst. Once the interviews were complete, I had responses transcribed with a professional transcription company.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the data collected through a constant comparative method which was similar

to a grounded theory approach. Rather than taking a grounded theory approach, I performed an iterative analysis, which combines both emergent data and an existing theoretical framework (Tracy, 2013). I analyzed emergent data through the lens of sensemaking theory. This approach was most appropriate because it allowed me to give preference to the meaning of the data as it emerged (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The data analysis method was a 3-step process which involved open coding, axial coding, and dimensionalization.

Once the interviews were transcribed, I began data analysis. First, I read through the entire transcription once to get a feel for interviews and begin making theoretical memos for the data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). During the second read-through I began the process of open coding of the transcriptions. Throughout the process of open coding I attempted to assign words that captured the essence of the data in an effort to include pertinent information as it emerged (Tracy, 2013). By using the open coding process, I refrained from restricting any data but rather coded data as seemed appropriate. The open coding process encompassed the categories that emerged from the interviews that pertained to my research questions and putting responses into categories that evolve in the transcripts (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The open coding process led to the creation of 92 categories.

Next, I performed axial coding which is a process of integrating categories/codes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Axial coding involved systematically grouping similar codes under a theme that synthesized the individual codes (Tracy, 2013). In the first stage of axial coding, five categories were discarded, two duplicate codes were combined, and one code was redistributed to similar codes. In the second stage of axial coding, I looked at the remaining codes independently to pinpoint a theoretical theme to categorize the code. While processing the individual codes I constantly considered the utility of developing a new theme or adding to an

existing theme. Axial coding allowed me to develop integrated sets of topics from the original set of codes (Banks, Louie, & Einerson, 2000). At the conclusion of this process I identified eighteen themes by linking commonalities and attempting to find common meaning in the 85 codes. Through the integration of codes, the themes I developed became the basis of theoretical constructs specific to this study.

Finally, I took the theoretical themes and found commonality between them in a process called dimensionalization (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Dimensionalization or "selective coding" allows researchers to identify core categories, extract the storyline, and polish and verify interpretations of the data (Banks, Louie, & Einerson, 2000). Through this process three overarching constructs emerged; risk assessment, aspects of decision-making, and agency which guided the direction of my study.

Verification

The process of data verification is designed to establish credibility in the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Verification is the process of substantiating the coding process in an effort to validate results of data analysis. There are three different lenses for researchers to choose from when it comes time to verify data; the researcher, the participant, and an outside source. I utilized researcher verification and participant verification for this study.

Utilizing the participant lens, I will incorporate member checking to verify data. I invited two sets of parents, Olivia and Liam, and Ava and Noah, to take part in the verification process. In this process, I presented my themes to the participants to verify that themes made sense and the overall account was true to their experience (Creswell & Miller, 2000). After discussion with Olivia and Liam, and Ava and Noah, both couples verified that data sounded true

to their experiences with the interviews. Finally, I scrutinized data and reported outliers in the result section to verify authenticity of data analysis. By doing this, I ensured that data was considered independently and analyzed under a critical lens.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

In this chapter I present a comprehensive review of data as it emerged through my interviews answering the research question of how parents make sense of the risk involved in allowing their child to play tackle football. Parental risk assessment emerged in three different themes through data analysis. The first theme, *downplaying risk*, which was overwhelmingly adopted by football families, appeared when parents used language that minimized severity of risks facing their children in tackle football. The second theme, *acknowledging risk*, was most apparent in language from hesitant- and child-focused families and was often paired with language offering one of three rationalizations; "he's so big", trust in technology, and benefits. The final theme, *zero risk assessment*, presented in all three typologies. This finding was surprising but also speaks to the amount of cultural and social influence families feel when making decisions involving their children.

The first theme, *decision-agency* described the power given to a person to make decisions. Decision-agency presented in two groupings: parental and child agency. Parental agency describes those cases in which the parents retained power to make this decision for their child. These cases were further categorized into two sub-themes I labelled "football family" and "hesitant family." Child agency depicted those situations in which parents transferred power to make this decision to their child. Thus, I categorized families into three types based largely on decision agency: football family-parental agency, hesitant family-parental agency, and child focused family-child agency. Table 2 summarizes information on the typology that emerged with description, agency, risk, and narrative.

Table 2

Typology of Parents

Family type	Description	Agency	Risk	Narrative
Football family	Strong affiliation to football	Parent	Downplayed	Football
Hesitant family	Cost/benefit analysis	Parent	Acknowledged and rationalized	Conflicted
Child-focused family	Biggest risk was child missing out on opportunity	Child	Acknowledged and rationalized	Child-focused

The second theme, *parental risk assessment*, was defined as the way parents analyzed and vocalized the risks involved in tackle football participation. Three sub-themes emerged under parental risk assessment: downplaying risk, acknowledging risk while incorporating rationalizations, and no risk assessment. Downplaying risk was characterized when parents suggested other sports were just as dangerous or implied children should not be shielded from risks. Acknowledging risk emerged when parents stated they understood the risk inherently involved in football but then justified their decision to allow their child to play through one of three rationalizations: their child's attributes, trust in technology, and focusing on benefits of playing football. The "he's so big" sub-theme was defined as parents believing their child's athletic prowess, experience, or conditioning decreased the risk of their child becoming injured in football. The sub-theme, "trust in technology," emerged through parents' beliefs that either (or both) the rules or updated equipment in football is making the sport safer for their child to play. The last sub-theme, "benefits of playing football," referred to parents recognizing the social benefits (e.g. camaraderie and team-work) and character building benefits (e.g. discipline and toughness) that occur from playing football, which offset any risks associated with the sport.

A final theme was *decision-making factors*, or those influences that infiltrated parents' decisions to allow their child to play middle-school football. Four sub-themes, cultural influence, family identity, social influences, and information sources, were identified as factors that influenced parents' decision-making processes. "Cultural influence" referred to the influence of family's home communities on the decision-making of parents and children. "Family identity" referred to a families' group-concept as it was constructed and negotiated through relational influences (Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016). "Social influences" included forms of subtle and direct, peer and family members' persuasion attempts on decisions to play football. The last sub-theme, "information sources," described occasions where parents had sought and/or received useful information they incorporated into their decision-making processes. Next, I will discuss the typology that emerged through analysis of agency in the family.

Decision-Agency: A Parental Typology

Bakewell (2010) defined agency as "the capacity for social actors to reflect on their position, devise strategies and take action to achieve their desires" (p. 1694). More simply put, agency refers to the power one possesses (or not) to make a decision that impacts their well-being. Through data analysis, I noted distinctive patterns in how families constructed familial agency and the decision to allow a child to play tackle football; three typologies emerged. For example, some families, whom I labeled, *football family-parental agency* (football family), was composed of five sets of parents who overwhelmingly believed that football was what their child should be doing. In fact, it seemed these parents were averse to their child *not* playing football. Thus, these parents made the decision for their child to play football without consulting, or with

minimal consulting of, their children. The second type, *hesitant family-parental agency* (hesitant family), consisted of three sets of parents who were less convinced that their child should be playing football but did not see any harm in participation at this point in their lives. For these families, the decision to play football was still held by the parents. The final group, *child focused family-child agency* (child focused family), was made up of four sets of parents who did not see themselves as "football people" and left the decision to play solely up to the child. Next, I will describe each type in more detail.

Football Family-Parental Agency (Football Family)

The *football family* included five sets of parents who were identified by statements of believing that their child should be playing football or by stating that it was never a question as to whether or not their child would play. Amelia and Ethan exemplified this type of parent; they spoke about the decision to have their children play football and reflected on the fact that the children simply did not have a choice in this deliberation. It was interesting to note the disagreement in remembering this decision that went on between Amelia and Ethan. Amelia also oscillated between saying their sons were made to play and saying they wanted to play. Amelia and Ethan's statement reflected both parental agency and a football family mentality:

> Amelia: …they don't know anything else. They just know football. They know every sport, but we didn't give them a choice. We made them do it. It helps build character, it helps them grow up and believe in their selves. We made them play. But they wanted to play.
>
> Ethan: I wouldn't say, yeah. I wouldn't say we made them play. Growing up ... because I've been a coach for so long and so the boys, they have been around football, basketball, they've been around it.
>
> Amelia: Yeah, they were they were excited to play.

Ethan: I don't know if in their little heads they thought it was expected, I don't know. I wouldn't say that we made them because we never have made them, it just always kinda right there.

Amelia: We did make one of them, because he didn't want to play. But, he wanted to play but he told us he didn't want to play. But he really did want to play. He's the one who ended up getting a scholarship going off to play. He was just a really good, good athlete. We didn't let him give up. So, it' just that it's been a part of life since they were little.

Ethan: Yeah. (Amelia & Ethan, interview)

The discourse which occurred between Amelia and Ethan is indicative of the football family mentality because it exemplified a situation in which their son did not want to play football and they made him participate. Amelia's father was a football coach, a fact I argue contributed to her overall outlook on football participation. Football had always been a part of her life and therefore, she believed her children should also participate in football.

Alex and Mila were parents of twin boys who were recognized as great athletes by their middle school coaches at summer camp. The parents acknowledged their boys did not want to play but they made them sign up for football. They said:

Alex: They really didn't want to play this year.

Mila: They said they weren't going to play.

Alex: Yeah, they didn't want to play because they want to concentrate on basketball… I made them play football this year… so I kind of forced them to it this year. (Alex & Mila, interview)

Other football families spoke about football being the right place for their son because they believed he would definitely continue to play through high school and beyond if he could. Olivia and Liam spoke of their middle school age son who wanted to play for the high school football team and they had no hesitation that he would. They stated:

Olivia: He will play in high school.

> Liam: Again, he's a 13 year old boy in a 5'11 body that's really not grown into it yet so he's kind of a little bit awkward, he hasn't got all his strength yet. But I see him potentially as a football player when he grows and matures and gets stronger.
>
> Olivia: Mark's desire is to play football for Trojans varsity team. (Olivia & Liam, interview)

Hesitant Family-Parental Agency (Hesitant Family)

The *hesitant family* type included three sets of parents who demonstrated lack of enthusiasm about the decision to allow their child to play football but saw no harm in his playing in middle school. All of these parents asserted they assumed agency of their child's participation in football. Ava and Noah spoke of their sons' involvement by discussing when they first enrolled him in football. Noah was his coach but then spoke to how they hoped he wouldn't like football or play football long-term because the risks would increase along with their son's age due to his opponents being stronger and faster. They said:

> Noah: Well, Axl, when he was about ... I don't know, 10 maybe, I coached him in flag football, so that was his introduction to football and I knew he loved it, 'cause the kid loves every sport.
>
> Ava: I was hoping that he wouldn't like football, but he does…
>
> Noah: Well, that's part of the reason I really don't want Axl... to play too long, 'cause the older they get, the harder the hits, the more hits you take to the head and of course, it's very concerning, 'cause it ... It's not always the culmination or the sum of all those little hits. Often, it's the sum of those three real bad, big hits. That sort of thing. It's very concerning. (Ava & Noah, interview).

Oliver and Sophia also reflected on their concern with their son going past a few more years of playing football saying:

> Oliver: We're not old enough maybe that it would've taken effect, but I do think a lot of the stuff we're seeing about the NFL guys is, I mean, they did it for 14 to 15 years straight at an extremely high level, extremely high level and-
>
> Sophia: And they kept playing through it.

> Oliver: ... we've known so many people who played high school football or it's just the volume seems like, at a certain point maybe, I would probably even worry more if he went on past high school more so than I do now, because it's got kind of a shelf life and then stops. (Oliver & Sophia, interview)

When asked if their son, who is currently playing middle school football, would play high school football, Elijah spoke about how that decision was up in the air right now, "That is an iffy, right now… There's been a lot of discussion about it. I think safety standpoint is somewhat there." (Elijah, interview).

Elijah's uncertainty about his son's future participation in football exemplifies the hesitant family type. These families believed it acceptable for their son to play football at present but were not convinced that he should play football in the long run which set these families apart from the football family type.

Child Focused Family-Child Agency (Child Focused Family)

While parents from all typologies had an element of listening to their child when it came to decision-making, four sets of parents emerged as weighing the child's opinion more heavily than their own. This group of parents included those who actively encouraged their children against football participation and those who said they let their child retain agency over their sports participation. Still, they all had one thing in common: they allowed their child to make the decision about football participation.

Parents spoke of not being involved in the decision to allow their child to play middle school football because they "did not care either way." Since they did not care, it made sense they gave over decision-making authority to their child. Isabella spoke about leaving the decision entirely up to their son. She said:

> I think his friends. I think it was just ... We didn't have anything to do with it. We didn't care either way. We were supportive, but whatever he was gonna do is okay with us. I think it was mostly his friends, and I think he thought it was cool, and he played (video game) Madden (football), and he loves fantasy football, and ...It was just him, and he said he wanted to try it in seventh, and it was interesting because half the team disappeared in eighth. (Isabella, interview)

Mason and Mia spoke specifically about the decision to play originating with their son. Because they did not know anything about the game of football, they did not classify themselves as football parents. They spoke about the decision to play and their ignorance of the game, saying:

> Mia: When he signed up for sixth grade, and he told me he wanted to do football. And so, it was kind of like well, if he wants to, we'll let him. Definitely had some concerns, but that's just it was just one of those things where he really wanted to try it out
>
> Mason: Yeah, well I told you I was a swimmer, I never was into football. I never even really watched it, so it's all new to me. I'm not a football dad.
>
> Mia: Yeah, we're the parents that are kind of the fish out of water up there in the stands. We're just like, um, okay. What just happened? (Mason & Mia, interview)

Even though they were not "football people," when asked if their son would be playing high school football in the following year, Mia responded, "He thinks he is, and he wants to. We'll have that conversation with him. I don't want him to" (Mia, interview). The "child agency" parents presented an option of discussion with their child revealing that they were child focused and willing to turn over their agency in the decision.

Finally, some parents were unique in that they actively campaigned against their children playing football but ultimately left the decision up to them. For example, Emma and Logan had the best knowledge of the dangers of football of the participant families. Emma recounted Logan seeing a sports news show profiling youth football as the most dangerous sport in America and recounting:

> …the title of it was 'The Most Dangerous Sport in America,' and he watched it. It wasn't football, it was peewee football. Peewee. He literally yanked Griffin out and said, 'None of y'all will ever play again. Y'all can play when your brains are more developed and more mature and that won't happen again until Junior High.' No one else got to dabble, nothing in it. It really flipped him out because it said little bitty hits leave these little bitty bruises on the brain but they don't show up forever. They could have lasting effects so he was like, 'Don't even ask me,' and the kids constantly, 'Can we play football?' He was like, 'No.' They just quit asking. So, in seventh grade Griffin was like, 'Can I play football now?' and Logan was like, 'Sure.' It's the first time and it's with coaches that know what they're doing and not just a dad that wants you to get out there and play for him. (Emma, interview)

Even with the aggressive dialogue about not letting their children play, Emma and Logan turned the decision over to their then 8th grade son. Emma said:

> But he did it and then Logan told him, 'In ninth grade, don't even ask me. You're not playing. I'm putting my foot down, I forbid you.' I will never forget it because you were at your desk and he came in your office and was like, 'Dad this is my life and this is what I want to do.' I walked into Logan's office and I said, 'We're going to have to pray a lot more and you're going to have to let him do it. He's going to have to make his own mistakes and his own decisions. If not, he will hate you for never letting him try.' Logan was like, 'Okay. If you end up in a wheelchair, you realize you're going to look at me and mom's face every day when we change your diapers.' And he was like, 'I understand.' He was like, 'Do you really understand? You could have spinal damage.' Griffin was like, 'Yes sir.' And he was like, 'Okay.' (Emma, interview)

All parents, whether football focused or child focused seemed to utilize a constant balance between risks and rewards when remembering their decisions. Football families who downplayed risks the most also spoke the most about benefits involved with game participation. Hesitant family parents spoke mostly to their concerns about their child playing but that they did not want to keep them from doing so. Ava spoke to this thought process saying, "'Cause I wasn't a huge fan, but I wasn't gonna deny him the opportunity, but at first, I would have much preferred him not" (Ava, interview). Sophia shared the sentiment saying, "I mean, I hesitate, but yes. I mean, if that's what he wants to do, I'm ... He can get hurt doing any sport, but …I just don't want him to get hurt. I don't want him to get hurt" (Sophia, interview).

Parental Risk Assessment

The second theme, parental risk assessment, addresses how parents qualified risk and then reconciled themselves to the decision to allow their child to take part in a risky activity, tackle football. I analyzed data for indications of risk assessment and found participants fell on a risk spectrum which ranged from downplaying risk, acknowledging risk, or no risk assessment. Downplaying risk included minimizing vocabulary indicating that football was not risky or that other sports are just as risky or riskier. Acknowledging risk examples coupled recognition of risk with rationalizations that appeared to minimize risk. Three primary rationalizations were "he's so big", trusting in technology, and rewards outweighing the risks.

Downplaying Risk

Downplaying risk occurred when parents employed minimizing vocabulary to negate risks involved in their child's participation in football. Parents negated the risk by suggesting it's not just football, parental control over risk, safe position on the field, and believing that football is safe for their child at this age. The football families were the largest contributors to the downplaying risk dialogue pointing to a connection between those families that believe football is the right place for their child to be and minimizing the risk that is involved in the activity.

It's Not Just Football

Several participants compared football with other sports, generally indicating that other sports are riskier, possibly to minimize the risk involved in football. Alex, from one of the football families, started by saying that football is dangerous and then quickly rationalized by saying that any sport can be dangerous, reflecting:

> My idea was that concussion with the football ... football's a contact sport. Every play that you snap that ball, you're trying to tackle and punish someone that has the ball. In any other sport, if you have a concussion, you can get elbowed in the head with basketball. You can fall on the floor and hit your head with volleyball. You can get hit with a baseball. So concussion is all the way through any sport. But football, every play, you're at risk of getting a head injury. Cause that's what you're doing. You're colliding ... it's like the Goliaths, the gladiators, and they're out there going head-to-head with each other. And that's what the game is about. Hockey has concussions. Everything has concussions. (Alex, interview)

This strategy is indicative to the sensemaking function of extracting cues. Parents recognize these other sports can involve injuries but do not realize the level of incidence is likely much lower. Hootman, Dick, and Agel (2007) reported that football had the highest injury rate among 15 sports researched.

Parental Control Over Risk

Families also downplayed risk by citing Dad's participation in coaching their child in football helped to negate the risk. Fathers were the largest contributors to this type of dialogue. For instance, Jacob, from a football family, downplayed risks involved in football by his involvement in coaching his boys which gave him more control over injury risk. He explained:

> And I have coached both boys' teams, virtually every year, so I was intimately involved in what they were participating in, what they were taught, what position, what they were being told to do. So, I feel like I had a reasonable amount of control, with their participation. (Jacob, interview)

It is intriguing that parents believed they had control over risk of injury in football participation. This perception points to parents living under the illusion that their presence at football practices and games decreases likelihood of injury.

Safe Position on the Field

Another tactic parents deployed in an attempt to feel better about their decisions to allow

football participation was citing the position their child played was not as dangerous as others. Ella believed in educating her child for signs of concussions and then checking in with them to make sure they are not playing one of the more dangerous football positions. She said:

> I just think you know, you have to talk to your kids and go to practices and teach them about the signs of a concussion. And you just have to watch out for your kids, you gotta make sure like 'hey what position are you playing?' Some of those kids, they play positions that I wouldn't want my kid playing. So you just have to be an advocate for your kid, and you can't just drop 'em off at practice and leave. You gotta stay at pretty much any practice, you gotta stay there and watch 'em, and you know, make sure ... 'Cause the coaches, they don't always do the right thing. (Ella, interview)

Not Dangerous at Young Age

Finally, several parents, across typologies, downplayed risk by saying that their child was too young to be in a really dangerous position right now. The overall consensus among this group of parents was that because the children are as small as they are, anywhere from second to eighth graders, they did not have enough weight on them to injure anyone or sustain injury themselves. Elijah and Harper relayed their opinions on this saying:

> Elijah: …I guess I found out pretty quickly that the speed of the game isn't that fast at the younger levels. The physical contact and the hits aren't as extreme.
>
> Harper: Yeah, I think the same thing. Yeah, when Noah was in second grade, they weren't playing hard enough to really be concerned about it. (Elijah & Harper, interview)

These responses are interesting because they represent short-term rationalizations. Kids grow at different rates and while all players may be the same size at the beginning of the season, a discrepancy in size and weight can develop rather quickly especially during puberty years. Another family, contradicted Elijah and Harper by talking about the fact that kids of all different sizes are put on peewee football teams making the sport more dangerous for the younger (2^{nd} to 5^{th} grade) players. Aiden said:

> Especially at that age for boys. On one of the nephew's teams, there was an 11 year old who was like six foot, almost 200 pounds. There was another 11 year old that's barely four foot and 70 dripping wet. There's too much disparity until you get to the kind of junior high, high school. (Aiden, interview)

The variation in viewpoints adds to the uncertainty parents face with regard to allowing their child to play football. Their viewpoints may be affected by where their child measures up, physically, at a younger age. The families who did not believe kids could be injured at a younger age had kids who matured earlier than the families who were concerned about size disparities.

Acknowledged Risk

Parents assessed risk on a second level where I found a connection between *acknowledgement of risk* involved in football participation and justification for the decision to allow their child to play through three types of rationalization. Some parents minimized risk through "he's so big" dialogue citing athletic prowess, experience, or conditioning of their child. The second rationalization presented was trust in technology due to advancements in equipment technology and practice protocol used by schools and coaches. The third rationalization was parents felt the benefit to their child was greater than the risk involved.

"He's so big."

Parents' acknowledgements of risk surfaced through conceding that football is an inherently risky activity followed by a minimization of that risk through rationalization for participation. Of the three types of parents identified, the child-centered parents, those who provided their child with the agency to make the decision to play, were overwhelmingly present in this sub-theme of risk assessment. Mia emerged in the child-centered typology and definitely

had concerns about her son playing but justified it through a good coaching program, her son's size, and a social outlet for her son. She explained:

> …so I had heard really good things about the coach and the program, and that it was definitely more geared towards learning the sport rather than they're going to throw them out there and just let them go at it or whatever. And so, it was kind of like well, if he wants to, we'll let him. Definitely had some concerns, but that's just it was just one of those things where he really wanted to try it out and I felt it was a safe enough environment at the time. And the program was good, and he was so big, I figured that ... If anything, I thought he'll get like a sprained ankle or something like that. But I wasn't really worried as much about him getting completely leveled on the field or anything. (Mia, interview)

Additionally, a father mitigated risk associated with football by saying that the players don't tackle when they first started playing, Liam reflected:

> It was interesting because the kid's big, or thinks he's big and strong, and then you put the pads on him and they just don't want to tackle him. They do everything but want to hit each other so it's kind of strange that your kid wants to do this but then all of the sudden it's really not what you expect. It's really, virtually no tackling when they are a very young age. (Liam, interview)

Specific rationalizations attributed to the child's skills or physicality were present in several families' dialogue. Mila talked about her boys' desire to play, coupled with their coaches admiring their size and ability, in reconciling the decision to play football. She said, "They said they wanted to play, they went to a camp this summer and the coach loved their size and their ability and so we just let them play" (Mila, interview).

Additionally, parents spoke to their child's conditioning as a mitigating factor to risk. Amelia, who was placed in the football family type, felt that her son had a much lower risk of injury because he is in such good shape year-round. She said:

> Probably another reason why our kids have done well with ... and the kids that we ... our group of kids that my youngest son hangs around and what we're involved with a lot, is they're conditioning, their strength and conditioning that they do, year around... keeps them fit. Keeps them in shape and fit. And that really and truly has a lot to do with keeping healthy, too when you play. (Amelia, interview)

Parents allayed risk associated with football participation by positing that their child's physical presence on the field or athletic ability kept them safe from risk. This rationale is emotionally rooted with no scientific support. While having a larger stature or more athletic ability should work in a child's favor, in a sport where players are required to collide, injuries are an inevitable (Omalu, 2015).

Trust in Technology

The second rationalization brought up for families acknowledging risk was that equipment and the rules of the game (football) are becoming safer. Parents from all three typologies were present in the codes depicting safer equipment in football and several took it upon themselves to purchase the safest equipment on the market. Sophia stated that her husband took their son out to buy the best equipment they could find before starting his middle school season. She said:

> No. No. And that's one reason why the last two years, Oliver has taken him and we have bought his helmet. The middle school's helmets… are good, but Oliver wanted to make sure we had the proper fit, the right ... We were gonna spend the extra money-... to get ... and that's what I told him, 'I don't care what you spend on a helmet. Get him a helmet that's gonna protect him.' (Sophia, interview)

James mirrors this sentiment stating:

> I said to my wife, 'Hey, there's two helmets. There's this one for this and then there's this one for more.' And she's like, 'No. We're buying the nicer helmet.' And so that was fine and that was the choice that we made.

Mila, a participant with two sons who play football, spoke to the updated safety protocols for both equipment and the rules of the game but then acknowledged that she cringes anytime one of the boys is hit on the field. Mila described her perspective as follows:

> And I think of the rules they have stiffened to protect the players. Like our boys' helmets have air cushions in them, and they fit it custom to their head. They try it on, and if it's

> loose, they air it up some more to make it tighter for a more custom fit. They have, in addition to shoulder pads ... I remember my brother having some cheap shoulder pads when we were kids. Now they have back plates and rib protectors, and types of padding in their pants and stuff. What'd you say? They have visors. My son that's a wide receiver has a visor that covers the front of his face mask on his helmet. So they do try to improve the equipment. If you think back to when they used to wear leather helmets, it has gotten a lot better. But it's still scary when one of them gets tackled and takes their time getting up. As a mom, I'm holding my breath and trying not to jump the fence to run down there. (Mila, interview)

Another rationalization parents utilized pointed to strategies of coaching and rules of the game changing to increase safety for players. Elijah spoke to his younger sons' football practices and how the coaches were teaching the boys proper ways to tackle making the move less risky. He said:

> …the coaches are teaching them a tackling ... new tackling drill of not using their head. They're teaching them the head and front and then the wrap up and turn, it's got certain words for it, but it's a technique to avoid the helmet and the collision. It's more of wrapping up and taking to the ground as far as tripping them up, so to speak. They both have taught that, both fourth and fifth grade. I don't know if TYA is pushing for that or if the coaches just are getting more involved in it with all of the safety things out there with concussions. (Elijah, interview)

Isabella, who was not interested in letting her boys play tackle football until they approached her, said that new techniques are making the tackling element safer for players. She said, "The overall, constant hitting, I feel, is better, different than what it used to be. I hope I'm not being naïve, but that's my impression is they're teaching safer ways to tackle, if that makes sense."

Another element identified was that parents believed rules for the game have helped decrease risks to their players. Alex spoke of his son's position being well protected due to new rules of the game saying, "Being a quarterback… you always have to kind of protect your quarterback. They have a lot of good stuff in place to protect quarterbacks now, that you won't get your head knocked off" (Alex, interview).

Ethan also expressed a feeling of better protection for players, citing the state's scholastic athletic governing body when speaking to safety increasing in the game. He also suggested the game is becoming safer than it was when he played, saying:

> The UIL, they give us different ... they give us lots of stuff, actually. Basically, before we can step on the field each year, we have to study, we have to read, watch videos and ... because every year it seems like it's something new and they give us different scenarios and different things that may of happened the previous year. Different things like that and just basically keeping us cautious. I do High School and Little League and I know one of our big rules in the High School is that we cut down on the time that we are allowed to make full contact. That's one of the big concussion deals that we do. We only get to hit for 90 minutes a week, which really, to me ... hearing everything and reading stuff year after year, seeing and watching the news and learning different things about concussions, I am a coach that does the least amount of hitting that you can do. And the reason I do it is because of all the stuff that's been tested and... you know. It's just something that ... when I was in school this stuff wasn't thought about but... now, I mean, I like the precautions we take. (Ethan, interview)

While great strides have been made in the equipment and safety regulations of football as a sport, the most risky elements still remain. As long as players are still consistently colliding, head first, with other players, the risk of sustaining head trauma remains. Auerbach (2018) reported on a recommendation to save football players' brains saying that the offensive and defensive lines need to be eliminated from the sport. Linemen line up across from one another and then launch at each other head first creating the perfect scenario for head injury. Parents will continue to rationalize their child's participation with advancement in technology but at least some experts assert there are still improvements to be made in both equipment and rules.

Benefits Outweigh Risks

The final rationalization technique utilized by parents was stating the benefits of playing tackle football outweighed the risks involved. While this rationalization was moderately employed by hesitant parents and child focused families, it was widely applied by football

families. I found a consistent pattern between football families who downplayed risks in turn emphasized benefits of football participation. Of the 12 benefits of playing football that were identified by families, the football families were present in 100% of them. These benefits included coping with trauma, developing leadership ability, having fun, persistence, camaraderie, parental involvement, providing activity for child, self-confidence, team work, toughness, discipline, and mentoring troubled youth. The three most prevalent benefits among parents were persistence, camaraderie, and teamwork. The connection between downplaying risks and parents' abilities to see benefit in football participation was undeniable. While parents from all three typologies acknowledged social benefits for their child, parents who were included in the football family typology saw additional benefits. For example, Ethan pointed to persistence as a unique quality built by football participation. He said:

> You want to have fun doing it and I guess, me, I guess I've always been a competitor and try to teach kids, you know, life situations with football. Just not giving up, being tough, holding your ground, just different little everyday things that ... I try to tell them you got to practice, whatever job you going to get, you're gonna have to study it, practice it so you can become great at it. (Ethan, interview)

Jacob confirmed this sentiment:

> But there was always something. I can specifically remember days, when I played in high school, where I just thought I was done. I had nothing more left in the tank, and I remember coaches saying, 'Look, you don't know your limits yet.' And I believe you do find more limits, and more limits, than ... when it's fourth quarter, it's two minutes to go. You're tired, you're beaten down, and you suck it up, and you plow through. (Jacob, interview)

Several families also spoke to the camaraderie that is unique to football. Alex, a dad from a football family, even equated camaraderie in football to reduction of bullying some students are subjected to. He said:

> It's a good camaraderie between the players and just building team effort and staying together. It's really good…so many kids are lost because they don't have a camaraderie.

> They get picked on, and it's because they don't have the camaraderie between their peer-to-peer athletes. My thing is, with any sport, if your kid likes a sport.

Another benefit of football participation families identified was that of teamwork or team building. Sophia and Oliver, parents in the hesitant family group, spoke to team work as a benefit to their son and agreed on this benefit, speaking at the same time about the team work:

> Oliver: I mean, we talked about-
>
> Sophia: Team sport.
>
> Oliver: ... team sport, being part of a team, understanding that it's more about ...
>
> Sophia: Helping ... It's not just about you getting the ball and you scoring.
>
> Oliver: It's about the overall team-
>
> Sophia: It's helping somebody else doing it, too.
>
> Oliver: ... being part of a group. You doing your piece to make sure the overall thing is successful and when needed, be a leader- (Oliver & Sophia, interview)

Elijah, a dad from a hesitant family, spoke in detail about several benefits to his sons' participation in football but that participation comes with a qualifier in that if there is a serious injury a discussion will be had before returning to the game. He said:

> Until then, I'm willing to take the good of the teamwork, the camaraderie, the physical toughness. 'What doesn't kill you makes you stronger' mentality. Bruises, your first bruise is a lot worse than your second, and it's good to be tough and to be on a team and to help them understand that life's just not easy. I'm okay with all that benefit as long as it doesn't have a huge injury yet. Until that happens, if they do get a concussion, then we'll have to have a serious sit down on whether or not I'm going to allow them to play again. (Elijah, interview)

The perspective elicited from Elijah's quote is unique in that he vocalizes very strong feelings about the benefits of football but is from the hesitant family typology. This points to the underlying tension parents might be subjected to when it comes to the decision to allow their child to play football.

Zero Risk Assessment

The last point on the risk spectrum was that of zero risk assessment. It is interesting to note that families from the football and the child centered typologies are present in this code. This finding confirms that those parents in the hesitant family typology always acknowledged risks which is interesting because it shows that football families and child centered families can have similar mindsets of moving forward without assessing risk involved in this activity. Charlotte, a mom from the football family typology, spoke of the decision without assessment as 'not instilling fear in their children,' saying:

> Yeah, I try not to put fear in them... 'Cause I've seen, it somewhat concerns me that like, in the school, they really do ... Like they go over all the concussion stuff- And they do have a protocol in middle school, they have to have one. They have to have one. And if they even think a child's got a concussion, they have to sit 'em out for a week. And they have to see a doctor, they have to be cleared by a doctor, you know. So I don't know, it wasn't really even a thought, it was just like okay. Is that something you want to do? And you know, I try not to put fear into the kids, you know what I mean? So I was okay with it. It wasn't a discussion for us, we just kind of said 'okay'. (Charlotte, interview)

Conversely, parents who emerged in the child centered typology, Mason and Isabella, also spoke of little to no conversation about the decision to start playing football. They said:

> Mason: I don't think there was a decision. It was just ... no discussion at all. Sign him up.
>
> Isabella: Just sign him up, let him try it. (Mason & Isabella, interview)

Parental risk assessment emerged in three different themes through data analysis. The first theme, *downplaying risk*, which was overwhelmingly adopted by football families, appeared when parents used language that minimized severity of risks facing their children in tackle football. The second theme, *acknowledging risk*, was most apparent in language from hesitant- and child-focused families and was often paired with language offering one of three rationalizations; "he's so big", trust in technology, and benefits. The final theme, *zero risk*

assessment, presented in all three typologies. This finding was surprising but also speaks to the amount of cultural and social influence families feel when making decisions involving their children.

Both football-first and child-centered parents alluded to little to no discussion prior to the decision to allow their child to play tackle football. Zero risk assessment appeared in families across all typologies and may be connected to cultural influences. For example, one family, who emigrated to the United States from England in the early 2000s, spoke about not knowing about tackle football until moving to Texas. When their son asked them if he could play, they immediately said "yes." This response, similar to answers from other sets of parents, suggest cultural and social influence both play a huge role in the lack of risk assessment, a topic I address in the next section.

Decision-Making Factors

Once people have made a decision that assessed risk, that decision becomes available for scrutiny when a person is asked to reflect on it. Scholars (Weick, 1979; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) have argued sensemaking is inherently retrospective. In this study, I asked parents to reflect on how the decision was made to have their child participate in tackle football. The dialogue that emerged in the third theme, *decision-making factors*, addressed the decision-making element of the research question. When asked to reflect on their decisions, families' decisions appeared to be influenced by at least four factors: cultural influence, social influence, information sources, and family identity. The anthropological sense of *culture* is most appropriate for this study because it is defined as the individual behavior which is formed and is complementary to a specific group behavior (Njoku,

2017). Cultural influence emerged in participants' responses as they discussed the influence of the communities in which they lived. *Social influence* is defined as an individual changing or accommodating his/her beliefs or attitudes to maintain or establish a relationship with others (Cho, 2011). Social influence surfaced in two ways: the way parents recalled their children being influenced to play football and social influence on parents. *Information sources*, which refers to where individuals receive information (Ishikawa, Kato, & Kiuchi, 2016), involved three sources: athletic coaches, 'no news is good news', and perceived expert sources (such as doctors or schools). Finally, Wagner, Kunkel, and Compton (2016) conceptualized *identity* as a person's self-concept, "built upon communicative functions, enactment, relationship development, and community integration" (p. 254). Family identities seemed to emerge as parents discussed their decisions to allow their children to play football.

Cultural Influences

Culture is defined as the individual behavior which is formed and is complementary to a specific group behavior (Njoku, 2017). Tse, Lee, Vertinksy, and Wehrung (1988) argued that culture impacts decision-making processes. Decision-making processes change depending on an individual's geographic location and the culture that is most prominent in that area. The results of this study align with this finding; data analysis revealed participants were influenced by their geographic location in the heart of "football country." Cultural influence in football communities, like those study participants hailed from, runs high and emerged in two ways: dialogue that alluded to "professionalization" of youth football leagues and schools, and pressure from the community.

"Professionalization." Some parents spoke of the intensity of football being too much while others reveled in the atmosphere and togetherness unique to Texas football culture. "Professionalization" surfaced through several families' recollection of initial, dramatic football experiences. Isabella, from a child focused family, spoke of the intensity of a peewee football game being played right next to her son's baseball game. She said:

> I know it's intense around here. Ross has some friends that are doing tackle, but that's not really ... We're not really interested in that yet for him… So it's kind of concerning. It just seems like a lot of pressure, too… little guys, four and five, in full pads, and the coaches were screaming bloody murder at them, and like, 'Whew! This seems like a lot. I don't know if I can handle this.' It just seems like a lot, all the plays to learn and stuff. (Isabella, interview)

Aiden and Mia, parents from another child focused family, aligned with Isabella and went further to say that parents were also too intense. They said:

> Aiden: It was like 70 percent, the coaches would just ream on the players, and it's like, they're seven, or they're ten. I mean, come on. They're going to make mistakes. This isn't NFL football here… They're supposed to be learning here, so the coaches' attitude, we didn't know if he would get on one with a reasonable coach or from what we saw most of them were very aggressive type and we just didn't like that.
>
> Mia: And the parents were too.
>
> Aiden: We didn't like that entire aspect, especially at that age. I felt the need to make that comment. (Aiden & Mia, interview)

Liam and Olivia also spoke to the cultural influence in their community, explaining the setup of the stadium as a "professional setup" and that the football games are a "big social event." They said:

> Olivia: I think community…is huge. It's a big social event if it's a Trojan game.
>
> Liam: The revenue that's generated from this I'm sure his huge but again it's your kids. There's a group of kids that attend these games, the parents attend it. To be quite honest the first time I went to a game, it was like a professional set up. Probably better than any third division soccer club site I'd ever seen. Very impressive.

> Olivia: It's a social event too I think. It's a Friday night to go watch the Trojan game, it's very much of a social event for the kids. The kids just go play and want to be there because all their friends are there and the parents are there just hanging out and watching the game. If you want season tickets then you have to camp out overnight to get them. It's a community event. (Olivia & Liam, interview)

Parents also spoke to the football culture by referencing the atmosphere at high school football games on Friday nights. Ava, a Mom from one of the hesitant families, spoke about the excitement that is generated at football games that is unlike any other sport saying:

> It is fun. And what's fun about football is ... and I wish soccer was as exciting. I wish it was as popular, but there's just so much more in the stands and everybody's excited and everybody's cheering them on and everybody is ... In the other sports don't have as much of that following, I guess, because it's such a popular sport. It's kind of fun to watch and it's fun to go to the games and there's electricity in the air and there's cheerleaders and it's the atmosphere. (Ava, interview)

One mom, Emma, from a child focused family, agreed with Ava's assessment of the atmosphere with Friday night football games and went a step further to say that they love football but they just do not want to watch their own children playing football. This speaks to a strong football culture, when parents are invested in the game when their children are not playing. Emma's family has season tickets to the games which is what she talks about here, saying:

> We love them. Oh my gosh. We love them. We've been buying season tickets for those because we love to watch everybody else's kids play. We just don't really prefer to watch our's play. Some of the hits we see these kids taking right now... we both gasp. These kids are young. (Emma, interview)

Professionalization in football communities had an impact on parents' perception of football participation. Some parents felt the intensity too much for youth players while others found the atmosphere intoxicating. The next aspect of cultural influence is the sway of community members.

Community influence. Parents articulated their feelings about football and seemed to make a connection to pressure from the community as a factor for enrolling their son in football. Liam and Olivia, parents from one of the football families found the idea behind football to be completely counterintuitive to what parents teach children. They spoke to how kids, especially when they first start playing football, do not want to hit each other the way football requires saying:

> Liam: It's, to me, the football is against everything you teach your kid. All of the sudden you put some pads on him and you've got all these football players and coaches that say 'hit this kid as hard as you can' so it's difficult for your kid to all of the sudden think 'okay I can run and hurt that kid with pads on.' So they'll twist and they'll grab, they'll do everything but actually hit properly so it's interesting.
>
> Olivia: It was interesting because in second grade, when he went, we thought he would be quite aggressive and he was afraid to tackle. He was afraid to go in and tackle because he didn't want to go in and get hurt even with the pads on. He was frightened to tackle and get hurt and I think he had interest because every other kid in the grade, all of the boys, played football and want to play football and the dads know about it so everybody's coaching. (Liam & Olivia, interview)

Parents spoke to the indoctrination of young children in their community saying that the high school football players would come to the elementary school and read to their kindergartener and ask him if he was "coming to the football game?" Olivia said:

> I think another piece was so in elementary… the varsity football players would come every Friday before a game and be reading pals and they would also be telling the kids, 'you coming to the game tonight? You going to come and watch me play?' And just revving them up to just make sure they were into it. So even if you didn't really like football and didn't want to follow it then on Friday here comes your reading pal… (Olivia, interview)

Whether influenced by the "professionalization" of the youth programs or by members of their communities, parents grappled with the spectacle that is youth football in Texas. The pressure on children and parents to be a part of the most popular sport in the state is high and it showed in conversations with the participants of this study.

Social Influence from Parents and Peers

Data analysis showed a portion of parents remembered social influence of peers and family members as a factor affecting their decisions to enroll their children in tackle football. Cho (2011) defined social influence as when a person changes their behavior to match or accommodate the expectations of the environment around them. For example, when a child comes home from school and tells their parents that they would like to play tackle football with the other kids in the class or when a parent enrolls their child in tackle football because their best friends' husband is the coach. These real-life examples occurred in the majority of interviews conducted for this study. Child-focused families were prevalent in dialogue concerned with social influence from parents and peers. Often times the social influence involved peers or families from the child's school that invited the families to participate in football. This sub-theme also emerged as a reason for the child to stay in football even though the parents were unhappy about football participation.

All three types of parents suggested their child was influenced to play football by their peers. Mila, a mom from a football family, spoke about the fact that her boys initially did not want to play tackle football. The boys were then influenced by their friends who told them "they had to." Mila spoke about her husband signing the boys up stating, "My husband was coaching their private school where they went last year, so all of their friends were like, 'Y'all got to play. Y'all got to,' so they played" (Mila, interview). Lucas, from a football family, spoke about the decision as being made solely by their son at school because his son's friends were playing. He said, "The second day of the seventh grade year… he was playing football. And I think it's because all his friends were playing football" (Lucas, interview).

Harper and Elijah, from one of the hesitant families, said their boys played because of friends and also because they were invited by one of Elijah's coworkers, which speaks to the social influence of friends of the parents. They said:

> Harper: I think they got invited by friends. They wanted to play with their friends. Just having fun playing with friends, really.
>
> Elijah: Yeah, John was invited ...John was ... Now that I'm thinking about it, he was ... When he was seven, he was invited by one of my co-workers who had a flag football team, and said, 'Hey, how old is John?' I told him. 'Why doesn't he join our team?' Noah was the same way. When he was four or five he joined that same team that ... Friends of ours were on that team and asked if he wanted to play. (Harper & Elijah, interview)

A couple of child-focused families spoke about their unhappiness with their child's participation in football but spoke about how their children still wanted to play. Emma remembered her first-hand encounter with the dangers involved in football participation and that she still allowed her son to play football. Emma recalls that conversation here saying:

> He played his freshman year, did pretty good and of course he made A again. They have a freshman A and B. We're like, 'Could you quit feeding it coaches and push him back down?' Then next year they put him on junior varsity[*]. Actually, his freshman year, they moved him out of freshman class and put him in varsity class his spring semester of his freshman year. He came home and I was terrified. He looked like he had been in a car wreck and I was like, 'What is wrong with you? What happened?' I didn't know what happened to him and he was like, 'Mom, they're putting all of us freshman against all the varsity.' They were their "(tackling)dummies" for the varsity team. His chin had about a two-inch cut. Both shoulders from the elbow up were black and blue, completely bruised. I said, 'How are you getting that if you're wearing pads?' He said, 'Because I play defense. They just put us against them.' He was black and blue. One time I think his cheek was cut or forehead, and I was in tears. I was like, 'I don't want you doing that. You're taking hits on your head every time.' He was like, 'Mom, I'm fine. It looks a lot worse than it is.' I was literally in tears. It was terrible. (Emma, interview)

This quote exemplified the overall perspective of Emma and her husband who were the only participants to actively campaign against their children participating in football. However,

[*] Junior varsity- In larger high schools, there is more than one football team; freshman is the lowest, junior varsity is the intermediate, and varsity is the highest team players play on

their son's coach and his peers influenced their sons' willingness to stay on the football team when his parents were lobbying against his involvement pointing to the affect these forms of influence had on the decision to play tackle football.

Information Sources

Through analysis of data, three sub-themes of information sources emerged. Information sources are simply the person or resources used by parents to obtain information to make the decision to allow their child to play football. The three sub-themes were coach knows best, no news is good news, and expert sources (e.g. doctors, the school). While parents from all typologies referred to information sources for their decision-making, child focused and hesitant families cited outside sources as influencers of their decisions more than football families.

Coach knows best. Of the three sub-themes, families mentioned coaches as swaying their decisions most often. In Texas middle schools there are generally six to eight coaches on staff for athletics. All of the coaches function, primarily, as football coaches and then are assigned another sport for the remainder of the year. Therefore, any child who signs up for middle school athletics is exposed to the football coaching staff on a daily basis. Parents' mentioned "coach knows best" influence in several ways including the coach outright recruiting their sons, trusting the coach to not put their child in a dangerous situation, believing the coach will separate players by size and skill, and finally, hearing that the coaches and program are reputable. One of the football families talked about a phone call from their middle school coach recruiting their sons. Alex said he was not planning on having their boys play middle school football because they were already involved in two sports and the boys did not want to play football. However, he received a call from the coach recruiting the boys, so he signed them up. He said:

> I made them play football this year because their coach gave me a call. That he really needed the boys to play and he would really like them to play…They kind of acted like babies and said they didn't want to play. One ended up being the quarterback and the other one is the receiver. They're starters and they're in 8th grade. I knew they were good, but they really excelled big time into the sport this year. (Alex, interview)

Elijah recounts his trust in coaches to put players on teams with equivalent size and speed at the middle school level. It is interesting that he talks about the coaches separating players, which he believes provides for a safer environment. However, he later contradicts that idea when he recognizes the coaches can't control who the team plays against in games. Elijah said:

> I think it really helps in the middle school level that they have the A-team and the B-team and the C-team because they ... I think those coaches do a pretty good job of understanding who the A-team players are the ones that have the experience and the size. They go more off speed and size as the A-team players. A lot of parents have an issue with, 'Well, my kid is better', and whatnot, but I think those coaches do a pretty good job of putting the big kids, the more mature kids, as Harper would put it, about as being more physical, hitting puberty, getting the testosterone levels already and then the B-team is maybe a step below that and then the C-team is just the beginners getting through that. I don't think the C-team has very many physical hits at all. Those are kids just learning the game and maybe not the athleticism that some of the other kids have.
>
> I think they do a good job of separating. They usually try to line up the top kids with each other and the bottom kids with each other on hitting drills and things, but if you're in a game, you're in a game, and so you can't really control that. That's why I think it's easier, or safer, I should say. (Elijah, interview)

Aria and James, from a child-focused family, remember part of their decision to let their son play, relying heavily on the coaches' reputation and credentials. They spoke specifically about trusting the coach to not put their child in a dangerous situation on the football field. Aria and James collectively remember the decision; they said:

> Aria: I would say the discussion was more or less, the writing was on the wall to me that he would maybe want to play in middle school. Because he was enjoying football and the flag and seven on seven, and this coach Rob Henley... We like him a lot. And we like how he coaches the boys and how he handles himself and their team. His son had also never played tackle, as well as most of the boys on the team and their goal as explained to us, was that they wanted to teach them the proper way to tackle and be tackled and teach them, because they have a football background, as well as the other coaches that they recruited to do this who were football players at various levels and careers.

> James: Or former coaches.
> Aria: Or former coaches, to teach them the right tackling mechanics and all that. And we asked Glenn and he was interested in trying and so we thought this would be a good place to learn.
>
> James: …And our philosophy was just as Aria said, it's better to try it with people you trust and it's better to try it with people that you understand… (Aria & James, interview)

The credibility that parents gave the source of their information was directly related to their ability to rationalize the decision to allow their son to play football. In this quote Aria and James stressed the trust they had for their son's coach exemplifying the importance of perceived reliability in an information source.

No news is good news. Parents, surprisingly, did not rely on media resources for information when making the decision to allow their child to play football. Rather, parents most often cited the lack of information about youth football coverage as a justification for the decision to allow their child to play football. While there is a litany of medical research about college and professional football, the absence of information regarding the youngest football players provides a loophole for parents to ignore current findings. When Mia was asked if she had heard anything about youth football in the media, she responded that what she had learned about football she had learned from her older nephews. She said:

> No, not a whole lot. Just from what we've witnessed with my nephews. Of course, you see a lot more [in the media] with the older ones, and I'm thinking it's probably because they're the ones that are suffering consequences from previous play and stuff like that. I've read little bits like through the NFL pieces and different things like that. They're looking at helmet technology and things like that. In my mind, 'I'm kind of like, that's still not going to work, but whatever.' It's a violent sport, it just is. (Mia, interview)

Mia acknowledges the information that she has received regarding football is mostly of a negative nature as it pertains to long-time football players. Mia also suggested that football is always going to be an unsafe sport to play while still allowing her son to play. As a part of the

child-focused group of parents, this quote exemplifies the tension parents are a part of when handing over agency to their child to make the decision to play football.

Additionally, when making sense of the decision made, parents showed signs of extracting cues (Weick, 1995) from information sources stating they were educated on the risk of football through media sources. For example, one individual received information and then sought his/her partner to make sense of the information collectively. James and Aria had one such interaction when discussing what sort of media coverage was available to them as a resource. They said:

> James: I listen to a lot of sports talk radio because I have an hour drive to work. There's a lot of talk about it on the media, so ESPN as radio is probably the best example I have. With all of the research and the studies out that said there's a direct correlation to the number of concussions you have and your propensity against CTE… do you let your kids play football? And so there's all kinds of discussions on sports talk radio about all of that. Not to mention you hear stories, and this is probably what I was talking about the media, but you hear stories about, you know NFL. The NFLPA, the players' association and the lifetime medical, which they don't all get. And yet you hear all this a stuff about the challenges with the medical care and that this is really a big push for these players who play, you know the average time in the NFL is three years and you don't get lifetime medical and yet, the CTE condition-
>
> Aria: That's not youth.
>
> James: No, but I'm drawing a connection. No, but what happens though is, that all gets into a story and then what gets bubbled up is then you start getting callers, so with what you know about CTE, with what you know about the studies and the connections with head injuries and football and then they say, would you allow your kids to play football? Then they do polls and people say, 'No I wouldn't.' Or, 'Yes I would.' Or everything else, and so then you get ... I would say there's a lot of active discussion around all of that. And whether you as a parent will even allow your kid to play. There's some people who say, 'Nope. I'm not going to let him play.' Or, 'I'm not going to let him play until they're this old.' Or, I don't know what the right answer is, I'm just to me, I guess we talked a little bit about this not with football or anything, but with parenting in general. If you constantly tell your kids no, I think with anything, they're going to question why you always say no. And they're liable to try something or do something that, maybe make a bad choice or a poor choice versus I think what you try to do is you lay it out there. And we didn't say to Glenn by any means, 'Hey, there's a good chance you could get a concussion.' Or anything else.

> But what we did say is… 'Hey, you're going to get coached the right way. You can do all this. You can learn, etc. And then you can make the right choice for you.' And I would tell you, it wasn't an emphatic, absolute, 'Yeah, I want to do it.' It was a, 'Yeah, well I don't know. Let me think about it.' And then the choice was made, but I think as a parent you just go support your kid and you make sure that they're doing things as correctly and safe. I mean, I would get in the car and be like, 'Glenn, you can't put your head down like that.' You know, when you do stuff you have to, and he's clueless and doesn't really know.
>
> But that's my whole point though is, is that honestly you ... Part of it too is you try to put your kids in a good place, with good people who are also going to try to make sure that your kid doesn't get into that situation. But there's nothing that, no way to predict the future. You just try to give your kids the best opportunities they can and encourage them, but obviously you want to make the right decision and try to keep them as safe as you can. (James & Aria, interview)

This exchange between James and Aria points to what parents are faced with when inundated with information. Often times messages are competing and parents are left to decipher what is the right decision for their family. James spoke specifically about hearing news about NFL players and the latest findings on CTE and if parents of youth are allowing their child to play. Even with hearing the news on CTE and statistics of football injury, parents may extract the information they are most familiar with and that is aligned with their ideologies. This information becomes their guiding framework. Ultimately, James said they would not say "no" just to have their child avoid risk. He felt that would be as detrimental to their children as letting them try and getting hurt. This child-focused family felt they just needed to teach their son the appropriate way to play football and chose to attune to the information that most lined up with their current opinion.

Expert sources. The final information source parents relied on was 'expert sources' in the form of medical doctors or the child's school. Ava, a mom from a hesitant family, said that she was hoping their son would not like football. However, because the doctor said he could play, they made the decision to let him play. She said:

> I was hoping that Axl wouldn't like football, but he does. He was originally told when he was born that he wouldn't be able to play football, because he has a heart condition. But the doctors have agreed to allow him to play now and every year, it's kind of a year-by-year thing, but as long as he continues to maybe just be the kicker, they think that they'll be able to approve him to continue to play. (Ava, interview)

Another mom, Harper, spoke about their school's role as an information source to the family with regard to football participation stating:

> You mean did they talk to us about concussions or about the injuries? Yeah. During the parent meeting they definitely talked about it. They did all of the fitting for shoulder pads and helmets and mouth guards. I think they did a really good job of teaching the boys about their equipment, what they needed to do to be responsible for their equipment, why it was important for it to fit certain ways. I felt like John learned more during that little seventh grade bit that he even learned before because we took that or his coaches did. I do think, yeah, they definitely ... Obviously you have to sign all sorts of stuff too, about the risks of it, but they ... We've been really happy with the way that the Thomas Middle School has (educated us). (Harper, interview)

Family Identity

Scholars (Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, 2016) define identity as an individual's self-concept that is interactive, socially influenced, and created by community. When parents made the decision to allow their child to play football, their family identity often played a role in the sensemaking process. While family identity emerged as a decision-making factor in all typologies it was most present in the football families. Whether family identity was created through community or influenced by parents' past experiences, it played a major role in participants' narratives of their decisions to allow their child to play football. More specifically, there were instances in data collection in which parents identified as "football people" and that connection to football manifested itself into the overwhelming desire for their child to play football. Conversely, if the parents did not strongly identify with football, the pendulum swung the other way in the decision to allow their child to play; the parents either left the decision

entirely up to their son or they begrudgingly made the decision to allow their child to play based on community impressions on their family identity.

Identifying as a "football family" influenced several sets of parents to allow, or encourage, their child to play football. This was most apparent when the mother of the family came from a football background. Several mothers also spoke about their strong ties to the game, through their father's role as a football coach, and their involvement in football as young children. Amelia, a mom from a football family, talked about the fact that she was named after a football players and her dad's involvement in football playing a huge role in her football identity:

> I was named after a football player. My daddy played football. I was at a football game when I was 10 days old, watching my dad play. He played college football. My Dad was a coach my whole life. Then I married a coach… I mean, I can actually say that ... little league football, we've probably done it since ... my son who's fixing to be 22, he was ... how old was Bill when you guys ... seven? Eight? (Amelia, interview)

A father from another family, Elijah, spoke of his reticence about their boys playing football and that his wife's football ties were stronger leading them to sign their boys up. He said:

> I think I've been a lot more tentative in allowing the football than she has because of probably her background with her dad and being the football coach, and wanting the toughness mentality. I've certainly backed off and let that happen. As long as I don't see, like I said, an injury, so to speak, I think the discussions might have to get a lot more serious. (Elijah, interview)

Another family spoke about sports being their "entire life" demonstrating a strong connection between family identity and sports, specifically football. Amelia initiated our interview by introducing herself and stating that "sports is my life." An interesting facet to sports as part of her family identity is that she said that she did not participate in many sports but still considers sports to be an integral part of her life. This position speaks to a lifetime of sports

identity through family members which would impact her decision about sports participation for her children. Amelia said:

> …sports has been pretty much my life my entire life. I didn't play much sports. I was more of dancer so ... I guess you could say that is a sport as well. I danced from the time I was, well, I guess I was four, three or four, and I danced all the way through high school and I even taught dance in high school. But I did play volleyball my seventh and eighth grade year, and that's about the amount of sports I had. I didn't do it anymore. But I was raised around it. My Dad was a coach, he played football. He coached ... my Dad retired from coaching, so I was around all sports my whole life and still am. (Amelia, interview)

The factors presented here appeared to play a significant role in the decision-making processes related to parents' decisions to allow their children to play tackle football. Cultural influence, social influence, information sources, and family identity, whether already ingrained in participants or obtained through community, impacted their decision-making process. *Cultural influence* runs high in football communities and was most prevalent in football families and child focused families. *Social influence* was most talked about from the parents in the hesitant family and child focused families speaking to peers influencing the decision made by these families. *Information sources* in the form of coach knows best, no news is good news, and expert sources (schools or doctors), was utilized by all typologies with families trusting coaches, above other sources, which impacted their decision to allow their son to play football. Finally, *family identity*, played a major role in football families' decision-making but also emerged as an antithesis in child focused families who had little experience with football showing that lack of football identity also impacts decision-making.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

I employed this investigative study to analyze how parents made sense of risk involved in the decision to allow their child to play tackle football. Through 12 qualitative interviews, of 24 participants, incorporating open ended questions, I collected data in an effort to produce a better picture of sensemaking as discussed by Weick (1993, 1995) in co-parenting relationships. In the process of making sense of the decision, parents vocalized on factors that influenced their choice. Three themes emerged as the catalyst for parent decision-making: decision-agency, risk assessment, and decision-making factors. In this section I will discuss the theoretical implications of my findings, how the findings can be applied practically, and limitations and directions for future research.

Theoretical Implications

Typology of Families

A key finding to this study is the typology of families that emerged: football family-parent agency, hesitant family-parent agency, and child-focused family-child agency. Each type of family exhibited narratives and culture that were unique offering three separate angles of which the assessment of risk and decision about football participation was made. In this section I will describe the attributes of the different family types through narratives, agency, risk assessment, and family identity.

Football Family-Parent Agency

The football family was characterized by an extremely strong affiliation to football and

sports in general. The affiliation was observable through the narratives of the couples I interviewed with statements such as "I've been involved with football for over 30 years" or "football shaped me to be the person I am today." Kellas (2005) spoke of storytelling as a major contributor to creating family narratives and identity. In football families parents and children were engaged in football stories on a consistent basis creating a family narrative that was intertwined with football. As a result of a strong affiliation with football, football families overwhelmingly downplayed risks involved with football participation citing "other sports are just as dangerous if not more" and "the kids are too small to hurt each other at this age."

In football families, the parents retained agency for the decision about football participation. "Agency is about having choices and the competencies to act on them" (O'Hair, Villagran, Wittenberg, Brown, Ferguson, Hall, & Doty, 2003, p. 198). This family dynamic was such that the children were often not consulted about the decision to play but rather parents enrolled them because of the expectation of the child to carry on the family narrative. Finally, the family identity of this group had a strong affiliation to football and sports in general. The family identity for football families was expressed with statements such as "we are just a sports family, that's the way it is" and "I've been around football all my life. My daddy played football. My granddaddy played football." The families that fell into this type contributed to the football culture in their communities by supplying pro-football narratives and full support of the football lifestyle. Due to the pro-football conviction football families exhibit these families would be the most difficult to influence with risk communication. Risk communication would need to involve a way for children to still play football in order for these families to consider the information.

Hesitant Family-Parent Agency

Hesitant families demonstrated concern over participation in football. The narrative theme in these families involved uncertainty about football as the right choice for their children long-term. These families did a lot of cost/benefit analysis and spoke about the shelf life of football participation. In contrast to football families, narratives from hesitant family parents were wrought with conflicting emotions about child participation with statements such as "I was hoping he wouldn't like it, but he does" and "I'm just concerned about him getting hurt, but I couldn't tell him no." As a result, the assessment of risks showed acknowledgement of risks involved but where rationalized away in an attempt to minimize concern. Parents spoke openly about risks involved with statements such as "I'm worried about him getting hurt" but followed the concern with "we buy him the best equipment available to keep him safe."

Despite the fact that these parents were hesitant to enroll their child in football they retained the agency to do so, deciding ultimately that their child could play football "at present." I used the term "bounded consent" to describe how hesitant parents agreed to football participation. In other words, the decision was made with definite parameters set on participation such as their child could "only play a certain position" or "not play when they are older." The family identity in hesitant families took on a fluid state in that they outwardly (e.g. to their child and the community) supported their child's involvement while still not endorsing the long-term participation behind closed doors (e.g. to each other). The family identity produced here was unctuous in nature. These families seemed okay with football publicly but privately knew that their child was only participating for a set amount of time. This type of family would be more open to acknowledging football safety and risk communication but would need ample justification for withdrawing their child.

Child-Focused Family-Child Agency

In child-focused families the narrative was all about the child and what he wanted to do. The parents in this type discussed football enrollment in terms of "he came to us and wanted to do it (play football) and we didn't care" and "whatever he wants to do, we'll let him try." Due to the nature of the narrative with this group it became apparent that parents had turned agency over to the child when making the decision to play football. The parents in a child-focused family went so far as to try and discourage their child from participating but ultimately "left the decision up to him."

The child-focused parents addressed risks involved in football participation but saw the biggest risk as not letting their child play if he wanted to play with statements such as "there is risk in everything but you can't put that fear into them." No matter the concerns of the parents, the real risk was of holding their child back from living this experience. The child-focused families were impacted by community culture in that the parents were approached or their child was approached to play football. Football participation was not a family idea but rather suggested by an outside source. The family identity exhibited was child-centered and focused on acquiescing to the child's desires regardless of parental concern. Child-focused parents would be very open to football safety and risk communications. The challenge for these families would be to convince the child of risks involved (since the child has agency) and/or convincing the parent to retain agency over the decision for child participation.

Familial Sensemaking

Scholars have used sensemaking theory to analyze both crisis (Weick, 1993; Miller & Horsley, 2009) and non-crisis situations (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Dougherty & Drumheller,

2006; Bird, 2007; Bryant & Sias, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Blazsin & Guldenmund, 2015; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) in an effort to understand how individuals reconcile past events to a lived reality. Researchers (Craig-Lees, 2001, Dougherty & Smythe, 2004) cite individual identity as an important pre-occupation in the process of sensemaking. Identity is the first, and arguably the most important, on the list of seven properties in Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory. Weick (1995) wrote in great detail about the impact peers and family have on the process of personal identity construction. Identity construction cannot occur individually but requires interaction with other people who serve as a referent of comparison. In my study, I found families had strong familial identities that impacted the decision to allow their child to play football. I argue that familial identities are utilized in the sensemaking process in the same manner as individual identities, contributing to enactment, selection, and retention. Therefore, familial identities are a significant contributor to the sensemaking of analyzing the risk in the decision to allow a child to play tackle football.

While examining additional theoretical dimensions within sensemaking theory, I found several points of connection. First, this study upholds Weick's (1995) argument that identity impacts sensemaking. Much like Weick's (1995) individual identity construction, familial identity is constructed via shared experiences and collective understanding between individuals in the unit (Epp & Price, 2008). Researchers have analyzed how familial identity is created as it pertains to grandparents and grandchildren (Soliz & Harwood, 2006; Soliz, 2007; Fowler, 2015), adoptive children (Suter, 2008), in-law relationships (Rittenour & Soliz, 2009) and gay and lesbian parents (Breshears, 2010). In this study, I did not analyze the creation rather I witnessed familial identity as it already existed to varying degrees. I argue that an established familial identity, like those presented in this study, affected the decisions made within the familial unit.

Familial identity is both defined and built through communication (Soliz & Harwood, 2006; Suter, 2008) and is heavily reliant on individuals superseding personal identity to that of the familial unit (Soliz & Harwood, 2006). One indicator of familial identity is the use of 'we statements' in story telling or remembering (Kellas, 2005) similar to statements many of the families made during interviews. A result of this study points to familial identity as a factor in the decision-making process with regard to children playing football. Football families exhibited a strong identity linked to football and sports in general. Hesitant families' identities were more unctuous as a result of their hesitancy resulting in bounded consent to football participation. Child-focused families had child centered identities which led them to football through their children's desires. Scholars should add familial identity to the sensemaking process when examining family units.

Second, parents seemed to engage in the sensemaking process when faced with an equivocal situation. Equivocality is another concept Weick (1995) offers as reason for sensemaking. During the interview process, parents were asked to assess the risk involved in football participation creating a situation involving competing messages. Football families showed no signs of equivocality when remembering the decision to enroll their children in football saying "we just signed them up" and "they didn't have a choice, they were going to play." What I found through interviews is that hesitant parents and child-focused parents engaged in the reasoning process by vocalizing on the uncertainty and then rationalizing the uncertainty through information that justified the family position on football participation. When faced with the equivocality of health risk, DeSantis (2002) found the participants in his study of cigar smoking, claimed that virtually everything in the world is dangerous. Hesitant parents and

child-focused parents explained their decisions as “we had concerns but he wanted to play” and “I felt like he was big enough to play at that age.”

A state of equivocality requires people to find justification in their decisions which often times leads to searching for reasoning. This process is known as extracting cues (Weick, 1995). All interviewees conceded to receiving conflicting messages (equivocality) with regard to the safety of tackle football for youth players. However, hesitant families and child-focused families cited information sources more often than parents in football families. DeSantis (2002) found that participants rationalized their cigar smoking by acknowledging information they felt was useful and debunking information/research that countered their stance in a rationalization he termed “flawed-research argument.” Due to their staunch approach to football participation, football families rarely cited utilizing information sources as affecting their decisions. Hesitant families and child-focused families engaged in extracting cues by utilizing information sources (e.g. coach knows best, no news is good news, school administrators, and doctors) to support football participation. Hesitant families and child-focused families received information from outside sources and chose the pieces of information that attended to the family identity and disregarded information that did not align, deeming the information as less credible. Despite findings that seemed to point to the risks involved in playing the sport, these families would choose the feedback that most closely aligned with family identity.

The last Weick (1995) theoretical supposition supported was the social impact involved in decision-making. Community culture played a large role in the decision-making process of families. While football families helped create and encourage the football community culture, hesitant and child-focused families spoke to the outside influence of friends, coaches, and/or children’s friends as an influence in the decision to enroll their child in football. Richardson and

Maninger (2016) spoke to the importance of community culture as a resource for identification with an in-group and the sense of belonging people felt as a way to feel connected to community. The presence of a strong community culture and the impact that had on families cannot go unnoticed. The term homophility (Panning, 1986) is appropriate to describe what happens in these communities. Homophility occurs when group members, such as a football community culture, share opinions as a result of redundant information processing and biased decisions. The community dynamic becomes synonymous with the activity that is constantly talked about and circulated through community dialogue, in this case, football. Parents from all types vocalized the importance of their child belonging to a team or social community as justification for football participation as if football was the only team sport available. Additionally, parents spoke to the intensity of the community culture and the impact it had on their family or, more specifically, their football player.

The concepts supported through Weick's (1995) theoretical framework presented a picture of how parents arrived at the decision to allow their child to play tackle football. While these concepts link to existing sensemaking theory, I also found an element which could expand the scope of sensemaking theory. Through analysis of the interviews parental attitudinal patterns emerged. As a result, I developed a typology of parents justified through family identity exhibited. Analysis of familial identity and the impact it has on sensemaking theory is worth further investigation.

Theory of Planned Behavior and Familial Identity

In addition to sensemaking as a framework for understanding parental decision-making over risky behavior, I suggest TPB could also impact scholarship focused on risk assessment by

parents on behalf of their children. When parents in this study were faced with decisions about risky behavior, familial identity impacted the reasoning behind decisions made. Epp and Price (2008) reported that familial identity is bounded to decision-making. Data analysis revealed that familial identity as it functioned in football families seemingly consumed critical thinking through downplaying risk. In the child-focused family, familial identity presented more democratically also impacting risk assessment in decision-making. A useful theoretical framework for analyzing familial identity and the impact on decision-making is Ajzen's (2011) theory of planned behavior (TPB).

Omalu (2015) stated that the safest place for a football player is not on the field. If current research points to the increased risk of youth football participation, understanding how parents assess risk and rationalize participation is worthy of investigation. I contend the reasons parents continue to minimize current information about risk involved in football are framed by the elements of TPB. TPB has been widely used by researchers to understand the components that influence conscious decision making (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010). TPB includes three determinants that contribute to behavioral intention: attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control. When parents were asked to reflect on the decision-making process in this study, all three of the components of TPB were present validifying the use here as an explanation for familial identity.

Attitudes

Attitudes are formed by the belief, positive or negative, a person holds toward the object of the attitude (Ajzen, 1991). Additionally, attitude toward performing the behavior is taken into account when deploying TPB. When families are faced with making a decision about risky

behavior, not only do attitudes toward the behavior factor in but so to do families attitude toward *risky* behavior. Slovic (1987) reported that risk communication will not resonate with the public unless it is structured in such a way that connects to attitudes and beliefs. Experts should listen to the lay person's opinion of risks involved and construct communication with the public's attitudes in mind. Therefore, the pre-conceived attitudes of football parents are valuable in the quest to craft affective risk communication.

Unlike other studies (Greene, Hale, & Rubin, 1987; Bamburg, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2003; Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010; Linder, Harper, Jung, & Woodson-Smith, 2017), I did not find a single set of attitudes of which I could characterize the group but instead found three types of attitudes resulting in a multidimensional approach to data analysis. Similar to a study on parent assistance in prevention of childhood obesity (Andrews, Silk, & Eneli, 2010), the current study found that parental attitude toward the behavior in question will impact the outcome. While most research (Greene, Hale, & Rubin, 1987; Bamburg, Ajzen, & Schmidt, 2003; Linder, Harper, Jung, & Woodson-Smith, 2017) utilizing TPB examines attitudes of the individual who will perform the action, this study looked at third party attitudes about a behavior (tackle football) to be performed by another individual (their child).

In this study, I found football families to have overwhelmingly positive attitudes toward football through statements that cast football in an almost majestic light while concurrently downplaying risks. Amelia remembered her excitement about the start of football season and expressed that she never felt concerned about injury but only felt excitement at the prospect of her son playing. Parents in the football family type did not express negative beliefs about football solidifying their identity as a football family. Hesitant family parents possessed both positive and negative attitudes toward football consistent with their family identity of parents

who recognized risk but utilized rationalizations to justify their child's football participation. Noah recalled the conversation he and his wife had about their son's participation and how they were not that excited about letting him play but they were not going to tell him no. Finally, child-focused families attitudes toward football varied depending on the families past experiences with the game. It stands to reason that their family identity was then centered around their child, incorporating a democratic atmosphere in order to make decisions. It seemed as if parents risk assessment was overturned by the child's desire to play football. For example, Emma spoke very passionately about actively trying to dissuade their son from playing tackle football but in the end left the decision up to the child because they had explained all of the risks and it was his life.

Subjective Norms

Ajzen (1991) introduced subjective norms as normative beliefs held by individuals in relation to approval or disapproval of referent individuals or groups. Subjective norms also consider a person's motivation to complete the suggested behavior. Green et al. (1997) found subjective norms to be a direct predictor of behavioral intention. Similar to the study by Andrews et al. (2010), parents in this study reported influence of salient groups (e.g. child's friends, adult friends, coaches) who would approve of their child playing football. Subjective norms are not created individually but rather occur through the process of interacting with other individuals or groups (Richardson, Wang, & Hall, 2012). From analysis of data collected, I argue that subjective norms can apply at the community level as well encompassing a larger radius than individual referents. For all three familial types that emerged, social influence and community culture emerged as elements considered in decision-making, pointing to participation

in tackle football as a normative behavior for the communities in which participants resided. However, a distinction in family types can be argued, in that football families create social influence and community culture where as hesitant families and child-focused families are subject to the social influence and community culture created.

Throughout the interviews, families spoke of the culture of football in their community but those families whose identities were firmly rooted in football, football families, spoke about their 'buy-in' to the culture as a "way of life" or "this is how it is." With the hesitant families and child-focused families, parents were questioning the culture as "too intense" or "crazy." Why then, do parents in hesitant families and child-focused families allow their child to participate in tackle football? And once they have started playing, why do parents continue to allow participation in the face of new concerns? Parents in these types were consistently citing the social influence of their child's friends, coaches, or family friends as the reason they enrolled their son in tackle football demonstrating the weight social influence and community culture, as the normative behavior, had on parental risk assessment and decision-making. Additionally, Bamburg, Ajzen, and Schmidt (2003) reported that once an activity becomes routine, the prospective analysis of that behavior becomes obsolete. For example, once most people decide to take a job, they will not wake up every morning and assess the advantages and disadvantages of going to work but rather begin the morning by preparing to proceed to work with little conscious thought.

Perceived Behavioral Control

An individual's "ability to engage or control a certain behavior" (Brann & Sutton, 2009, p. 200) is known as perceived behavioral control. As the third element of TPB perceived

behavioral control determines intention and action (Ajzen, 1991). Perceived behavioral control incorporates the idea that a person has control over the outcome of a behavior due to past experiences and opportunities. This variable is important to this study from two angles: parent feelings of no control and parent feelings of control over the outcome (Andrews et al., 2010). The families that retained agency over the decision for their child to play, football and hesitant families, spoke about football participation through the lens of "control over participation" while child-focused families, who turned decision-agency over to their child, expressed "lack of control" over football participation. In this study perceived behavioral control was characterized by statements such as "you can get hurt in any sport" or "he won't get hurt because he's really big." Statements such as these were made across the board from participants though football families definitely justified play through control statements more often.

The more invested families seemed to be the greater amount of control they believed they had over the outcomes of football participation. Therefore, if family identity lent toward football the perceived control expressed was higher than those families whose identities were not as invested in the game. Though perceived behavioral control was exemplified in all family dialogue there was clear tension between lack of control (over outcomes) and football participation in hesitant and child-focused families. It is important to note that tension between control and lack of control was present in the hesitant family type. These parents felt as if they had control over the decision for their child to play but did not have control over the outcomes of football participation. Families in these two types expressed lack of control through statements such as "it's the one thing he wants to do, we don't want to tell him 'no'" and "it is his only social outlet, we can't pull him out."

The theoretical implications of this study emerged through Weick's (1995) sensemaking theory as well as Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior. The typology of parents that emerged through this study contribute an avenue of multidimensional analysis to both theories. While sensemaking traditionally examines an individual's sensemaking process, this study offers a look into a co-parenting sensemaking process. TPB has historically examined a groups attitudes, normative behavior, and perceived behavioral control from a unilateral perspective, this study offers a multidimensional perspective with which to apply the theory.

Practical Implications

The process of consuming information and making a decision based on risk and safety information provided is indicative of the ethical framework significant choice (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013). Significant choice is defined as public access to information with regard to safety hazards or risks involved in an activity to allow informed decision-making about whether or not to engage in the activity. In an effort to inform parents of the risk involved in tackle football participation, the UIL, high schools, and middle schools should offer a panel of experts (e.g. pediatrician, neurologists, psychologists) to present parents the most accurate, up-to-date, comprehensive data available so parents have the opportunity to engage in the process of significant choice.

An overarching rationalization from this study was trust in technology either through amendments to rules of the game or from technological advances in equipment. Parents' should be made aware that experts (Omalu, 2015; Auerbach, 2018) do not believe these changes are enough. Auerbach (2018) reported that the way to make the game safer is to not allow any

lineman to crouch on the line taking the players' head out of the direct line of contact. Until players are all "standing up" to start a play on the field, the riskiness of the game remains.

The results of this study can contribute to risk communication designed for different types of parents. In order to reach families possessing different familial identities', communication should be tailored to accommodate attitudes and norms of the family. Other research (Kennedy, Glasser, Covello, & Gust, 2008; Miller-Day & Kam, 2010; Cupp, Atwood, Byrnes, Miller, Fongkaew, Chamratrithirong, Rhucharoenpornpanich, Rosati, & Chookhare, 2013) reported the importance of risk communication being tailored to parents using verbiage and dialogue which appeal to parental norms. Additionally, risk communication should be available to the football player similar to risk warnings for a smoker. Every football helmet should have a warning label indicating the risks involved in putting the helmet on and engaging in the sport of tackle football.

Parents should also be made aware that flag football is a reasonable alternative for their child to develop skills and rules of the game. Some options to raise awareness would be community campaigns lobbying for all youth tackle programs to be converted to flag football as well as middle schools converting their football programs to flag football. There is an online campaign going on presented by concussionfoundation.org that provides information and statistics on why children should wait until the age of 14 to engage in tackle football.

With concerns of risk involved with football participation on the rise, the effectiveness of risk communication is of utmost importance. Similar to the cigar study by DeSantis (2002), this study exemplified a dangerous trend of rationalization of risks against prevention efforts presented to them. It is imperative that researchers continue to explore how to most effectively communicate to different types of parents such as the types presented in this study. If presented

effectively, risk communication has the potential to arm parents with factual information that will allow them to carefully consider risks involved in football participation.

Some high school programs in this study sent football players to the elementary schools to read to kindergarten students creating an "indoctrination" into the community football culture. I agree that high school students reading to the youngest students in the community is beneficial to both participants involved creating a sense of belonging and affiliation to the community. As an alternative to only football players reading to kindergartners, I propose that high schools also send members of their academic decathlon, national honor society, or choir (to name a few) to read to kindergartners in an effort to provide symmetry of exposure to the academic "elite" and athletic "elite."

Limitations

There are a few limitations for this study. One limitation involved the study participant marital status. Because I was studying the sensemaking process of co-parenting units, I missed out on a subset of parents who are not part of a unit but are single parent families or families with divorced parents who still make decisions together on behalf of their children. As a result, perspectives of those parents were not represented here. In future research, to add to perspectives of all types of parents, researches could include single parent families, divorced parent families, and families with LGBTQ parents. Another limitation was sample size which was held to twelve sets of parents. This led to a rather homogeneous sample population due to intentional sampling. Most of the families in the area that I had access to hailed from the same socioeconomic background, which was relatively affluent. Future research should include greater diversity to include families dependent of football scholarships as the means for their

child to attend college. Finally, the population involved in this study primarily came from the same geographic location revealing a sampling of attitudes and beliefs of people in north or southeast Texas only. Future research should address communities that are not as football intensive to see how much influence the community has over this decision.

Directions for Future Research

The results of this study revealed some areas for future research. First, a larger sample size of participants would be beneficial. As mentioned earlier, I ended up with 12 sets of parents, primarily white, from the same socioeconomic background. Expanding the number of participants would allow for a more diverse sampling in which to study. Second, a quantitative study with TPB as the guiding framework and incorporating different types of families would expand the scope of parent attitudes, normative behaviors, and perceived behavioral control. Finally, it would add an extra element of analysis if families who did not allow football participation (e.g. saying 'no' from the outset or changing their mind and withdrawing their child) were involved in a study similar to this one. Scholars should analyze the impact of information sources, social influence, community culture, and identity on families who make the opposite decision on behalf of their child.

Conclusion

Sensemaking theory is a useful framework for individuals to process decisions and create a lived reality. In existing research (Weick, 1993; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Bird, 2007; Miller & Horsley, 2009; Bryant & Sias, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Blazsin & Guldenmund, 2015; Weber,

Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) scholars address sensemaking among individuals in an organizational setting. While sensemaking has been used in crisis (Weick, 1993; Seeger, Sellnow, & Ulmer, 2003; Miller & Horsley, 2009) and non-crisis (Dougherty & Smythe, 2004; Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Bird, 2007; Bryant & Sias, 2011; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011; Blazsin & Guldenmund, 2015; Weber, Thomas, & Stephens, 2015) situations, little is known about parental sensemaking about decisions made on behalf of a child. In this exploratory study I analyzed how parents assessed risk involved in the decision to allow their child to play tackle football.

While most risk studies (Dickson & Giglierano, 1986; Knäuper, Stich, Yugo, Tate, 2008; Rogers & Gould, 2015) examine the individual as the decision maker, this study examined how parents make decisions about risk on behalf of their children. As a result of analyzing co-parent decision-making I was better able to observe dyadic sensemaking and the familial identity that emerged. I found familial identity to play a major role in the way families from the three types, football family, hesitant family, and child-focused family, made sense of their risk assessment and decision-making process. Football families overwhelmingly downplayed risk involved with the sport retaining parent agency over the decision to play. Hesitant families acknowledged the risk involved but utilized a form of rationalization for participation while still retaining parental agency. The child-focused families turn agency over to the children while still showing great concern for the risk involved in the sport but letting their son's desire to play override any risks they expressed.

The parents in this study all had children who were participating in tackle football lending the dialogue to justification of the decision to let their child play. Parents felt as if they had some control over the outcome of football participation aligning with the concepts of theory

of planned behavior. Familial identity seemed to be precursor to both risk assessment and decision-making when it came to parents making decisions on behalf of their child. With the multitude of information emerging on a daily basis about risk involved with youth football participation, scholarship about how to most effectively reach parents is warranted. A broadcast on The Ticket, a Dallas based sports radio talk show, from March 8, 2018 reported that the prospect of football participation is starting to divide families creating strains in parent to parent and parent to child relationships. In closing, I quote Omalu (2015) saying "Allowing your child to play football is similar to allowing them to smoke a cigarette a day."

APPENDIX

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introduction: Thank you both for agreeing to speak with me. This discussion should last 45-60 minutes. As we discussed on the Informed Consent form, your participation in this project is completely voluntary, you do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer, and you can stop the interview at any time if you decide you do not want to participate. Are you okay with me audio recording the interview?

I want to assure you that your names will not be used in my study.

Background

First, can you tell me a little about your family, your children, and what types of activities they are involved in?

What types of sports did you play when you were in school?

Can you tell me about your son/daughter's football experience so far?

Decision-making:

At what age did your child start playing football?

Tackle football?

Can you walk me through the decision-making process to allow him/her to play football for the first time?

Did you do any research related to risk or health concerns in football for this decision, for example, talking to your family doctor or internet research?

How would you characterize the conversations the two of you had about this decision?

How many of your son's/daughter's friends play football and what role did that play in your decision?

How do you think your decision-making process will change, if at all, as your son/daughter desires to play football in high school?

Questions about risk and benefits

What were the benefits you felt your son/daughter could gain by playing football?

Do you think football carries any risks and how did you weigh those in your decision?

Has your son/daughter been injured in football or any other sports he/she plays?

Questions about CTE

Have you heard any of the news about CTE (chronic traumatic encephalopathy)?

How did you hear about it?

Do you find the information credible?

Raise any concerns/discussions?

Some doctors suggest children should not play football until they are 18; how do you respond to those sorts of claims?

Media

Do you think the media fairly portrays the pros and cons of youth football?
What would you like to see the media focus more or less on?

These are all the questions I have; is there anything regarding the interview you would like to mention before we conclude?

Finally, can you answer these demographic questions:

What are your ages? Parent 1_____ Parent 2_____

How long have you been married? _____

How many children do you have? _____

Boys/girls? _____

What are the ages of your children? _____

Thank you for your time!

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