Maintaining and managing athletic identity among elite athletes

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MANTENIMIENTO Y GESTIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD ATLÉTICA ENTRE ATLETAS DE ÉLITE

KEYWORDS: Elite athlete, athletic identity, identity maintenance, contingent self-worth.

ABSTRACT: Researchers have studied athletic identity (AI) and explored the impact that having a strong AI can have on an athlete. Additionally, researchers have explored the maintenance of AI, but only among very specific athletic populations. Little is known about how different athletes manage their AI at various stages in their career (i.e., still competing versus retired). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how both retired and non-retired elite athletes from a range of sports maintain and perpetuate their AI. Five male and eight female elite athletes were individually interviewed on two separate occasions. Participants were asked questions regarding their AI, their successes and failures in sport, and how their feelings of self-worth were related to their athletic achievements. An inductive data analysis process was used, and relevant themes were identified. It was also found that there are things athletes do, or that occur in their environment that maintain and perpetuate their AI. The current findings expand this body of literature by exploring the various strategies elite athletes use to support their AI

As stated by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993), AI reflects the cognitive, affective, behavioural, and social elements of recognizing the self strongly or entirely with one's athletic role. Horton and Mack (2000) found that athletes who possessed a stronger AI were more committed to their sport and had better athletic performances. However, athletes with a stronger AI were more likely to neglect of other parts of their lives to fulfill their athletic role, which can impede the development of a more multi-dimensional self-concept (Horton and Mack, 2000). Additionally, athletes with a stronger AI may be at greater risk of emotional and psychological distress upon retirement from sport (Webb, Nasco, Riley, and Headrick, 1998).

Researchers have studied the construction and maintenance of AI. However, these studies have focused on specific athletic populations such as members of a professional women's football team (Knapp, 2014) or Olympic and Paralympic equestrian athletes (De Haan, Sotiriadou, and Henry, 2016). One study by Stephan and Brewer (2007) examined the factors that contributed to individuals' identification with their athletic role among a varied group of retired Olympic athletes, who identified that both social and personal factors contributed to identification as an athlete. Despite this study, there is little research examining the formation, maintenance, and management of AI among a variety of athletes at various stages of their career. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how retired and non-retired elite athletes from a range of sports maintain and perpetuate their AI. This study was approached from a constructivist paradigm and assumed a transactional and subjectivist epistemology, and a relativist ontology (Guba and Lincoln, 1994).

Method

Participants

Thirteen Canadian athletes (five males, eight females; M age male = 21, M age female = 25) participated in qualitative semi-structured interviews. All athletes were currently or had

previously competed for Canada at the international level (2 at the Olympics; 11 at national competitions), because it was believed that high level athletes would have a strong AI. Athletes competed in swimming (n=1), athletics (n=5), volleyball (n=2), field hockey (n=3), rugby (n=1), and figure skating (n=1).

Procedure

Upon providing informed consent, each athlete participated in two interviews. The first interview was used as an opportunity to get to know the participants and to learn about their personal sport experiences, and the second interview was used as a member-checking interview, which allowed the participants to engage in the research process and add to the interpretation of the data (Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter, 2016). Interviews lasted between 11 and 74 minutes (M = 35 minutes).

Data analysis

Data were analyzed used an inductive content analysis following procedures outlined by Thomas (2006): transcripts were cleaned and formatted; the first author read the transcripts closely until the data became familiar; specific segments of text were noted and categories were created; overlap of text that had been coded into separate categories was reduced; and categories were revised to include subthemes and similar themes were merged.

Results

All participants identified as athletes and some also identified themselves as students; however, these identities appeared to be fluid and shifted throughout the year. Some participants identified challenges associated with having a strong AI. Participants' athletic identities appeared to be maintained through personal actions and behaviours, and by the influence of environmental factors (see Table 1 for a list of themes and supporting quotes).

Athletes' Personal Actions and Behaviours

Compartmentalization. Compartmentalization was an important day-to-day strategy that athletes used to keep their sporting life separate from the rest of their life. By separating sport and other aspects of their life, athletes felt they could avoid letting external stressors influence their sport performance and were therefore able to continue performing at a high level, which further fostered and perpetuated their AI. The use of compartmentalization demonstrated that sport was the primary domain of focus within the participants' lives; athletes attempted

to relegate the other areas of their life to the periphery so that those areas did not interfere with their sport.

Justified commitment: "I've got my whole life to do that stuff." Athletes also attempted to justify their commitment to their sport, which helped maintain a strong AI. Participants explained that to compete at a high level they had to neglect social relationships; however, by framing this neglect as a choice, they appeared less upset about their decisions to prioritize sport over other areas of their lives. This strategy helped to maintain AI because it served as a rationale for prioritizing sport over other activities.

Setting sport-related goals. Participants who reported strong AIs also reported setting very specific sport-related goals. Setting sport-related goals appeared to be adaptive for the participants because it gave them something to work towards and provided a reason to continue training and identifying as an athlete; however, this could be maladaptive because it promotes the formation and maintenance of a singular AI, which could have negative consequences for athletes.

Internal attribution of success and external attribution of failure. Athletes also maintained their AI by making internal attributions about the causes of their successes, while making external attributions about the causes of their failures. By attributing successes internally, athletes maintained that they were in control of their athletic careers and that they were successful because they were talented and worked hard. On the other hand, athletes attributed their unsuccessful experiences to uncontrollable factors, such as to injuries, and these explanations in turn impacted their feelings surrounding those events. By attributing poor sport performances to external factors, athletes could view those events in a more positive light and did not need to accept any level of personal blame, which may serve to maintain an intact sense of self.

Environmental Factors

Attention from others. Athletes noted that they received recognition, praise, and encouragement based on their participation and success in sport, which appeared to maintain participants' AIs. Participants noted that because others saw them as elite athletes, it reinforced their identity as an athlete.

Daily routines and rituals. Athletes explained that they required ample amounts of sleep, got up early for practice, and turned down social invitations, which appeared to support their identity as an athlete. Engaging in these daily tasks and rituals demonstrated to others and to the athlete themselves that they

were highly committed to their sport. Additionally, engaging in these acts functioned to maintain the participant's legitimacy as an athlete.

Discussion

The main findings indicated that elite athletes' personal actions and behaviours helped to maintain their AI, and that environmental factors also fostered the maintenance of a strong AI. The findings are consistent with those of Stephan and Brewer (2007), and builds upon previous research by interviewing non-retired athletes about their AI.

It appeared that the athletes' personal actions and behaviours contributed to the maintenance of their AI. These may be adaptive strategies to help athletes cope with the difficulties of maintaining rigorous training schedules and high levels of achievement in their sport. These findings also connect to literature on goal disengagement and goal readjustment, which may assist athletes in overcoming difficulties in their sport (McEwen, 2015). Goal readjustment and compartmentalization may help to alleviate distress associated with challenges in meeting their goals in different areas of their lives. However, athletes found it difficult to keep the different areas of their life separate, which is consistent with the notion that identity is fluid and dynamic (Reynolds and Pope, 1991). If athletes engage solely with their sport goals, they may lack the ability to flexibly engage with goals in other areas of their lives,

leading to potentially negative outcomes including an over-commitment to their athletic role.

Participants also engaged in daily rituals, such as waking up early for practice, to demonstrate their commitment to their athletic role. This is consistent with research that has found rituals help to maintain and foster identity. Researchers suggest this is due to the level of commitment that is displayed when engaging in rituals (Watson-Jones and Legare, 2016). For example, in a study of 219 athletes, it was found that sport superstition and the enactment of superstitious rituals, was positively correlated with AI (Brevers, Dan, Noel, and Nils, 2011). Additionally, Drenen, Peters, Leigh, and Hollenback (2009) found that the ritual of tailgating at large sporting events acted as a way to promote collective and individual identities of those who engaged in the tailgating ritual.

Strengths of this study include the sampling of retired and current male and female athletes who participated in a variety of sports, and the use of member checking to ensure trustworthiness of the results (Birt et al., 2016; Shenton, 2004). However, participants were all national level athletes meaning the findings may not be generalizable to other groups of athletes. Moreover, the cross-sectional nature of the interviews could be seen as a limitation. It would be valuable to follow athletes over a prolonged period of time to examine how the maintenance of AI changes at different points in athletes' lives.

Theme			Quote
Conceptualization of Identity	Identifying as athlete		P13 - I've always viewed myself as an athlete… like, I'm always gonna be an athlete.
	Identifying as student		P2 - I don't like, 100% identify myself as an athlete… definitely as a student… I feel like my athletic identity isn't everything to me.
	Seasonal changes in identity		P1 - First semester is pretty much just training so you're not really like a competitive athlete… so I guess I'd say I'm more of a student first semester and then more of an athlete second semester.
Challenges Associated with Strong Athletic Identity	Temporary nature of sport		P12 - I always knew in the back of my mind even when athletics was my main focus that this wasn't forever and I've had a cutoff… at some point I needed to be more focused on work or school.
	Goal disengagement		P2 - I actually wanna go into dentistry… so that's something that I think is a lot more important in terms of like rather than like, saying 'oh well I'm a world class athlete.'
	Contingent self-worth		P13 - I really struggled with that as an athlete that if I like, had a bad game I would really internalize that and like my self-worth would go down… I felt really bad as a person.
Maintenance of Athletic Identity	Personal actions and behaviours	Compartmentalization	P2 - I'm pretty good at um, compartmentalization… I keep things very separate so like, I could do really shitty on a test or something and it wouldn't really affect my running.
		Justified commitment: "I've got my whole life to do that stuff"	P4 - You kind of have to have priorities… for me I the way I look at it is you only have so long to do track and field. Like I'm only gonna run this sport… until the Olympics so I'm gonna do everything I possibly can to do well athletically... so social life kind of takes a little back burner…but I'm ok with that… I've got my whole life to do that stuff.
		Setting sport-related goals	P4 - I really wanna make the Olympics that's like, that's it. That's the end goal. That's pretty much the only goal.
		Internal attribution of success and external attribution of failure	P2 - I won CIS… and ended up winning [event] in California… all these things together is like, 'I am capable of doing great things,' you know what I mean? It's just like, if I work hard and apply myself then sky's the limit so… if you work for something you can achieve it. P2 - I first experienced this injury in… my second year of university and that was tough because I didn't really have a lot of guidance afterwards… so I had a really, really tough time coming back from that.
	Environmental Factors	Attention from others	P13 - It was coming from people all around me, I think that like, reinforced that who I was… I realized that people looked at me and it was field hockey… I was so embedded in it and that's how others saw me.
		Daily routines and rituals	P8 - I made this choice to run and my social life has basically been curtailed so I fall asleep at 7:30 some nights 'cause I'm so tired so there is no drinks… because you can't have a ton of alcohol and be a great athlete.

Table 1. Themes and supporting quotes.

MANTENIMIENTO Y GESTIÓN DE LA IDENTIDAD ATLÉTICA ENTRE ATLETAS DE ÉLITE

PALABRAS CLAVE: Atleta de élite, identidad atlética, mantenimiento de la identidad, autovaloración contingente.

RESUMEN: Los investigadores han estudiado la identidad atlética (AI) y han explorado el impacto que puede generar tener una AI fuerte en un atleta. Además, los investigadores han explorado el mantenimiento de la AI, pero sólo entre las poblaciones atléticas muy específicas. Poco se sabe acerca de cómo los diferentes atletas manejan su AI en varias etapas de su carrera (es decir, siguen compitiendo contra jubilados). Por lo tanto, el propósito de este estudio fue explorar cómo los atletas de elite jubilados y no retirados de una variedad de deportes mantienen y perpetúan su AI. Cinco atletas de élite masculinos y ocho femeninos fueron entrevistados individualmente en dos ocasiones. Se les preguntó a los participantes acerca de su AI, sus éxitos y fracasos en el deporte, y cómo sus sentimientos de autoestima estaban relacionados con sus logros atléticos. Se utilizó un proceso inductivo de análisis de datos y se identificaron temas relevantes. También se encontró que hay cosas que los atletas hacen, o que ocurren en su entorno que mantienen y perpetúan su AI. Los hallazgos actuales amplían este cuerpo de literatura explorando las diversas estrategias que los atletas de élite usan para apoyar su AI.

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