

**Supporting identity development in talented youth athletes: Insights from existential
and cultural psychological approaches**

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to present existential and cultural psychology approaches to understanding athlete identity, and offer strategies for the development of well-rounded, reflexive and self-aware youth sports performers. Recently, the sport psychology discourse on athletic identity has diversified with a range of alternative approaches and methodologies now being employed by academics and applied practitioners. These alternative approaches advocate that identity interests can be simultaneously personal, social and cultural. Consequently, we recommend that Sport Psychology Consultant's (SPC's) should operate at both an organisational and individual level with the aim of facilitating elite youth athletes to (a) identify meaningful personal goals and values, (b) take responsibility and ownership for their development, (c) reflect on their limitations and possibilities, and (d) embrace not diminish alternative narratives.

Keywords: Identity, Cultural Sport Psychology, Existentialism, Sport Psychology Consultancy, Youth Development

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Since the early 1980's, the study of athletic identity in sport has received considerable interest (see Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Visek et al., 2009). Athletic identity can be defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role, and looks to others for acknowledgement of that role” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993, p.237). For Brewer et al. (1993), athletic identity is both a cognitive structure that organises self-related information, as well as a social role that is influenced by interactions with coaches, family members, friends, and other important people in the athlete's life. A substantial body of research has built on Brewer et al.'s conceptualisation of athletic identity as well as their '*Athletic Identity Measurement Scale*' (AIMS) to assess athletic identity quantitatively. The higher an athlete scores on the AIMS scale, the stronger their level of athletic identity, and the more they view themselves as an athlete in their chosen sporting context. Sports psychology researchers have further used the AIMS scale to explore the relationship between athletic identity, sports performance and psychological well-being both during an athlete's career and upon sporting retirement (Lamont-Mills & Christensen, 2006). The likely psychological and performance benefits (e.g. enhanced motivation) of a strong athletic identity, and potential negative consequences (e.g. burnout) of an exclusive athletic identity are presented in the following section.

Athletic Identity and Sports Performance/Psychological Wellbeing

It has been argued that a strong athletic identity poses a number of potential psychosocial benefits for athletic performance, including increased motivation, positive sporting experiences, and a higher level of social interaction (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Beachy, Brewer & Van Raalte, 2018). Lamont-Mills and Christensen (2006) explored

the relationship between athletic identity and performance, with the findings indicating that individuals who competed at an elite level scored higher on the AIMS scale when compared with non-elite and recreational counterparts.

Despite these benefits, scholars have also increasingly pointed out the potential dangers of athletic identity especially for youth sport participants who are developmentally at the stage of exploring who they are and aspire to become, (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavallee & Warriner, 2008). With the ever-increasing demands of elite sport systems for youth athletes that require them to dedicate their time to training, competition and other sport-related content (e.g., physiotherapy, psychological preparation, recovery, nutrition, etc.) the development of other equally important roles within oneself is often restricted (Klasen, 2016) and results in athletes who are one dimensional (Beachy, Brewer & Van Raalte, 2018). Sport psychology researchers have identified a number of potential negative consequences of over-identification/foreclosure, such as overtraining, anxiety, drug abuse, social issues, and an inability to cope with career transitions (Menke, 2014; Bimpa, 2014; Melendez, 2009; Lavallee et al., 1997; Martin et al., 2014). This may be attributed to the athlete viewing other aspects of their life as a threat to their athletic identity, and detrimental to their sporting performance (Knight & Harwood, 2017; Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2013). However, much of the research conducted to date has been descriptive, consequently causality cannot be inferred. It might be that good athletic performances and psychological wellbeing lead to a strong athletic identity.

Although Brewer et al.'s (1993) work has provided a foundational basis for developing understandings of athletic identity, scholars within 'the cultural turn' have powerfully argued for expanding the scholarship to perspectives that theorise and study the socio-cultural processes that constitute psychological functioning (Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). Following these developments, the sport psychology discourse on athletic identity has diversified with a range of approaches and qualitative methodologies now being

employed to study the construct (for a review, see Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016). One main trend has been to move towards perspectives that acknowledge the importance of the socio-historic context on shaping youth athletes' identities and recognise the diversity of meanings that can be brought to being an athlete. In this respect, two approaches – existential and cultural psychology – have been identified as particularly promising ways to expand our understandings of identity in sport (Devaney, Nesti, Ronkainen, Littlewood, & Richardson, 2018; McGannon & Smith, 2015). Although scholarship produced between these strands of thought contain some tensions in meta-theoretical assumptions (e.g., questions about language, realism vs relativism and the role of embodiment), particular perspectives within each tradition make them compatible and complementary. For example, both approaches are based on a meaning-centred approach to psychology and emphasise that our situated being-in-the-world (see Heidegger, 1927) is shaped by a horizon of understandings (i.e., the culture) that precedes us and enables/limits our possibilities of who we can be(come). Also, both approaches recognise the role of cultural narratives and storytelling on shaping our identities. While considerations of cultural diversity and difference have not been historically at the core of existential psychology, more recent works such as *Existential psychology East-West* (Hoffman, Yang, Kaklauskas & Chan, 2019) have sought to fill this void and explore the culture-specific answers to existential givens.

The purpose of this paper is to present existential and cultural psychological approaches as potential frameworks to extend understandings of identity in sport. Firstly, we introduce key concepts of existential and cultural psychology and distil findings from this research in youth sport. Following this, we will explore how sporting sub-culture impact youth athlete identity, and identify the importance of critical moments in facilitating or restricting identity development. Finally, and stemming from the authors' experiences as sport psychology researchers and applied practitioners, we use existential and cultural perspectives to offer

strategies for the development of well-rounded, reflexive, and self-aware youth sports performers.

Existential Psychology

Existential psychology is grounded in philosophy, and emerged from Europe in the 19th century as a critique of alternative approaches that have overlooked concrete human existence (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017; Nesti, 2004, 2007). Similarly to Cultural Sport Psychology (CSP), existentialism emphasises the importance of diversity, individuality, dilemmas, subjective truths, and the inseparability of the person and their context (Cooper, 2016; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). In sport, existential psychologists place concepts such as courage, free will, authenticity, spirituality and meaning, and anxiety at the centre of their research and applied practice (Ronkainen and Nesti, 2017; Nesti, 2004). More specifically, existential SPC's engage in dialogue with athletes to help them clarify and make meaning from challenging situations and identify authentic choices.

From an existential standpoint, identity can be viewed as the process of interpreting and making meaning of our tacit, lived experience of being-in-the-world with the symbols (e.g., narratives) that are at our disposal (Richert, 2002). Kierkegaard (1989) argued that the self is not a fixed entity, rather it lies in the changing and complex relationships that humans have with their 'being' (see Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Sport psychology researchers drawing on existential thought (e.g., Watson, 2011; Nesti, 2004; Ronkainen & Nesti, 2018) have identified that athletes and stakeholders (e.g., coaches, support staff) might hold sport as their central life project around which they build their identity. However, if alternative sources of meaning are absent- or the types of meaning that constitute the athletic identity are unsustainable-, this might be detrimental when athletes face critical moments (e.g. migration, de-selection, injury, retirement) (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Busanich, McGannon & Schine, 2014). The elite

sporting cultures are often based on success myths that centralise certain types of meanings that are centred on constant progress and winning. These myths have an impact on youth athletes, who might often project to an athletic future in a linear fashion that proves to be unrealistic (Mortensen, Henriksen & Stelter, 2013). Additional existential limits (e.g. the power that other people have over us) that restrict our freedom might also stall an athletic career. Finally, as athletes later in life encounter the existential threats of ageing and/or reaching their perceived limit of physical performance, it is vital for well-being and continued sport participation that they are able to find also other sources of meaning in sport and in life than these success myths (Ronkainen, Ryba, & Nesti, 2013).

Cultural Sport Psychology

Cultural Psychology is an inter-disciplinary approach that aims to explore how “cultural meanings, practices, and institutions influence and reflect individual human psychologies” (Snibbe, 2003, p.4). It is still relative that Cultural Sport Psychology has entered, and been accepted in sport psychology (Blodgett, Schinke & McGannon, 2015). However, the intersection of sport psychology and culture is not a new one. In the 1990’s, sport psychologists such as Duda & Allinson (1990) and Danish, Petitpas and Hale (1993) identified the importance of developing culturally informed sport psychology support methods. For example, the need to account for the impact of ethnicity and race on goal perspectives, perceived locus of control, and how athletes make sense of success and failure experiences when designing interventions. A central focus of CSP is on attaining a more contextualised understanding of marginalised voices and/or identities (see McGannon et al., 2015). More specifically, language, narrative and discourse are used to explore how identities are constructed and displayed within sporting environments (Douglas & Carless, 2009; McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Papatomas & Lavallee, 2014). CSP advocates that our identity is simultaneously personal, cultural and social (Champ et al., 2018).

In contrast to how the self and identity are conceptualised as observable entities in positivist approaches (e.g. Brewer et al., 1993), CSP researchers subscribe to approaches that come *after* positivism (see Ryba & Schinke, 2009), and advocate that identity interests can be located in personal, social, cultural and political struggles (Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009). Scholars drawing on CSP have focused on illuminating the complexities, fluidity, and cultural shaping of identity (Champ et al., 2018, 2019; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2008). CSP has also been utilised as an approach to understand the identity related experiences of elite youth sports performers, often with a focus on how power operates in sport organisations resulting in privilege and marginalisation of certain identities. For example, Schinke et al. (2006) explored the identity struggles and adaptations of youth and senior elite Aboriginal Canadian athletes. Findings indicated these athletes had to engage in two types of adaptation during their transition to mainstream elite sport; self-adaptation and environmental adaptation. More recently, Champ et al. (2018) used CSP as a framework to explore the organisational cultural impact of professional football on the identity and psychological well-being of elite youth players. It became evident that the hegemonic football cultural narratives were powerful in shaping youth players' construction of identities that were storied around a single-minded dedication to becoming a professional footballer. In the long-term, this was detrimental for their psychological wellbeing and identity development in that players were given limited opportunities to express their true feelings and engage in exploration/development opportunities outside of the professional football context. Consequently, Sport Psychology Consultants (SPC's) should be mindful of the dominant sub-cultural features of the organisational culture in which they exist prior to designing and/or delivering an intervention.

The impact of the environment on youth athlete identity

In recent years, sport psychology researchers have identified that the organisational culture of professional sport might have a powerful influence on the identity

formation/development of youth athletes (see Champ et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2014). More specifically, elite athletes are often encouraged to specialise early (DiFiori et al., 2018), sacrifice alternative opportunities (Mitchell et al., 2014; Champ et al., 2018), and fully commit themselves to pursuing sporting excellence at a key developmental stage (i.e., prior to and during adolescence) (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). As a result of this, youth athletes are being encouraged to align themselves with the dominant cultural narratives in professional sport (e.g. masculinity, toughness, leadership, gender roles), and construct their identities solely within their chosen sporting context (Champ et al., 2018; Douglas & Carless, 2013; Blodgett, Ge & Schinke, 2017).

This encouragement is particularly concerning when we consider that very few individuals who enter talent development settings at youth level will go on to have successful and sustained professional sporting careers. For example, Anderson and Miller (2011) stated that only 10% of academy players who receive a youth scholarship aged 16 will be successful in attaining a professional contract at the age of 18 (see Champ et al., 2018). Irrespective of long-term success, if an athlete is unable to align their personal experiences and behaviours with the dominant cultural narratives within their chosen sport they are likely to experience isolation, anxiety and ultimately withdrawal from the sport (either voluntarily or through de-selection). Carless and Douglas (2013) supported this, and used a narrative approach to explore the identity development of two elite male athletes. One of the athletes consciously adjusted their behaviour to ensure that their personal story remained synchronised with the culturally dominant narrative. This performer's development of a monologic discourse negatively affected mental health, and was associated with trauma, distress and identity difficulties during critical moments (Douglas & Carless, 2009). However, the other participant maintained diverse narrative threads, and did not conform his 'self' to identify with the desirable identity positions in sport. This was beneficial for his perceived self-value and other psychosocial qualities during

turbulent periods of his sporting career. In summary, organisational cultural research in sport emphasises the importance of creating exploration opportunities for youth athletes particularly during intense developmental periods (e.g. adolescence). In order to do this and in line with an CSP approach, SPC's might work at an individual and organisational level to create optimal talent development environments (e.g. challenge and support in equal measure, focus on long-term psychological development as well as than short-term success, encourage individuality, and provide opportunities for self-expression and reflection).

Critical Moments and their Implications for Identity

Scholarship has increasingly emphasised that youth athletes' development, including their identity development, is not a linear process but one that evolves through discontinuities and turning points (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank, & Richardson, 2012; Stambulova, Ryba, & Henriksen, 2020; Ronkainen, Aggerholm, Ryba, & Allen-Collinson, 2020). For example, Stambulova (2017) suggested that as many as 80 % of youth athletes experience the junior-to-senior transition as a crisis. Not being one of the best anymore in the senior sport context can challenge athletes' sense of self-worth, especially if it has been closely tied to athletic achievements. Ever-increasing training and competition load, trying to connect with older teammates, sometimes monotonous routines, and proving their ability in a world where recognition is earned through achievement can be taxing to young athletes and also conflict with their ideas about what an athlete's life is like. Although 'dropout' is the commonly used term for those youth athletes who discontinue their athletic careers at this point, it should be kept in mind that young people can also be agentic in disengaging from the elite athlete pathway and orient themselves to identities and life projects that they find more authentic.

Scholars drawing on existential thought have emphasised that 'critical moments' or 'discontinuous experiences' are highly subjective in that what is experienced as disruptive for

one athlete might not be so for another athlete (Ronkainen & Nesti, 2017). Rather, what becomes an existentially significant moment depends on the meanings that constitute youth athletes' identities and the way they are attuned to the sporting life-world. As an example, a young athlete whose athletic identity has gained meaning through relational narratives of sport (Douglas, 2009) could experience a quarrel with a teammate as highly disruptive, whereas another young athlete whose athletic identity gains meaning through performance narratives of sport might hardly notice that such an event happened. Conversely, for the 'relational' athlete, a bad performance in an important competition might be disappointing but not highly disruptive, whereas the 'performance' athlete could experience it a major crisis.

From an existential view, it is proposed that identity develops mainly through such subjectively felt 'critical moments' because these are the situations when our sense of who we are and what we care about collides with the situation we find ourselves in. These moments could be equally about 'positive' (e.g., unexpected victory) or 'negative' (e.g., collision with the coach) experiences; what is common to them is the perceived challenge to identity. It could be argued that such moments are more frequently experienced by youth athletes than their more mature counterparts, because they are in the process of developing their sense of who they are, and are also in the stage of their athletic careers where insecurity is the norm and possibility of de-selection or otherwise 'not making it' is high (Adams, 2015). As young performers are developing their athletic careers, various events and experiences can put their sense of self and future in sport in question. Although many critical moments are 'unwanted', the existential thought emphasises that they hold the potential to become valuable learning experiences where athletes can broaden their self-understanding and ways of 'becoming' (Ronkainen et al., 2020). The role of a sport psychologist or a coach is to recognise when such moments happen in the youth athlete's life and accompany the young person in exploring their significance and overcoming the potential crisis.

Strategies for Identity Exploration

The following section will bring together existential and cultural psychological approaches to offer concrete strategies for youth athlete identity development.

Goals and aspirations

SPC's should work with athletes to help them to (a) identify individual goals and personal values and a meaningful future perspective and (b) clarify personal sources of meaning. Therefore, SPC's should make an effort to encourage athletes to attain an appropriate balance when comparing themselves to other stakeholders' (e.g. coaches, support staff, significant others) expectations, standards and aspirations particularly leading up to and during critical moments such as contractual decisions. In doing so, SPC's should remain mindful that not all elite performers align their identity with the dominant cultural norms of professional sport, when working with these individuals SPC's ought to embrace not reduce differences. Once clear, meaningful, and individual goals have been set the SPC might work alongside coaches and/or support staff to design training sessions/schedules that offer opportunities for the attainment of these goals. Finally, it would be beneficial for SPC's to encourage athletes to take a step back and view both their sporting and non-sporting achievements and aspirations in a more balanced perspective. This is particularly important for youth performers (prior to and during adolescence), as it is during this developmental stage when athletes are starting to construct their self-story. SPC's can help young athletes in developing a horizon of an 'open' future that involves many possibilities for becoming, rather than 'a closed' one centred only on one narrow goal.

Opportunities for ownership

Elite level coaches and managers have identified 'independence' and the ability to take 'personal responsibility' as desirable character traits of top sports performers (Strachan, Cote

& Deakin, 2011). However, it is argued that sports organisations often do not currently employ adequate strategies to support these aspects of personal development at youth level (Denison et al., 2017; Champ et al., 2018). For example, athletes exist within a strict hierarchical structure, and are often required to conform to the instructions/directions of those in positions of power. Arguably, youth athletes are positioned at the bottom-rung of the sporting pyramid (underneath coaches, support staff and senior performers). SPCs should work with athletes and other stakeholders to introduce concepts such as ‘choice’ and ‘free will’. This could be achieved through the creation of opportunities for athletes to make training and competition-related decisions, the introduction of open and honest feedback sessions where coaches actively seek athletes’ input, and the creation of more supportive and secure socio-cultural sporting contexts.

Reflection

Existential psychologists advocate the importance of reflection in supporting individuals to better understand and take ownership of their limitations and possibilities (Ronkainen and Nesti, 2017). SPC’s should ensure that all youth performers are provided with opportunities for individual and team reflection. Individual reflection might be introduced through one-to-one counselling sessions during which the SPC encourages an athlete to direct their attentions inward (i.e., to an insight or introspection into his or her own thoughts, attitudes, behaviour, well-being, emotions, appearance, and competence). Team-based reflection will prompt athletes to discuss and share their emotional responses to various sporting experiences, and provide opportunities for teammates to highlight and better understand each other’s diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. It is through both individual and team reflection that athletes will have the freedom to make sense of the meaning that they attach to their sporting role. For SPC’s to be effective, they should also be sensitive to different frameworks of creating meaning (e.g.

phenomenological, experiential, evaluative), and ensure that any interventions are congruent with the athletes beliefs.

Altering the Performance Narrative

SPC's should raise awareness that it is both entirely possible and acceptable for athletes to resist the elite performance cultural narrative. More specifically, athletes can have empowering experiences in sport by developing and drawing upon alternative discourses such as dialogical and/or discovery narratives to make sense of their athletic identities (see Douglas & Carless, 2010). SPC's might engage in unstructured, client-led counselling sessions during which sense making and the existential anxiety (relating to human possibilities and freedom) that might accompany this is embraced. Furthermore, SPC's should facilitate discovery and/or exploration experiences at youth level. For example, athletes might be encouraged to engage in CPD opportunities inside and outside of sport (e.g. coaching badges, educational qualifications, various forms of informal learning), participate in extra-curricular activities (e.g. different sports and activities), asked to engage with/organise meaningful charity events, and interact with diverse members of society. Finally, SPC's should educate a range of stakeholders in sport (e.g. coaches, parents, support staff) on how their own self-stories and subsequent behaviours might privilege or disadvantage the elite performance narrative, and encourage them to reflect on how their behaviours influence athletes.

Conclusion

Sport psychology researchers and practitioners are moving towards psychological approaches that acknowledge the importance of socio-cultural and historic contexts on youth athletes' identity formation and development. Existential and cultural psychology are two promising ways to extend our understanding of identity in sport, and advocate the view that identity development does not occur in a linear or smooth trajectory across time, rather identity evolves

through discontinuities, turning points and conflicts. Sport psychology consultants should work both at an organisational cultural level and directly with youth athletes to facilitate discovery and exploration experiences that expand their possibilities of being and becoming.

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