

Role identity and its implications in the athlete's personal development

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Abstract

Purpose. This study seeks to highlight the strong identification of athletes with the role they fulfill and the possible consequences that a limited self-identity can have upon entering a transition phase towards another career outside the sporting world and other social settings. *Methods.* For accomplishing the goals of this essay I have used the methods of observation and bibliographical study. *Conclusions.* Analysis reveals that coincidences, both positive and negative, associated with this strong sportive identity, do indeed exist. Sportive identity has been related to improvement of sportive performances rise of self-confidence improvement of the social relations and interactions and diminishment of anxiety. On the other hand, one-dimensional orientation towards achieving sportive excellence, which comes along with competing in the elite class, can have potential psychological and social dangers. The high level of identification with the role of an athlete can devalorify a quality education or even completely ignore it in some of the development stages, thus taking away from the athletes' important competences necessary in the development of the individual.

Keywords: *performance sports, role identity, glorified self, blocking of the identity market, social integration.*

Rezumat

Scopul. Acest studiu are ca scop reliefarea identificării puternice a sportivilor cu rolul pe care îl îndeplinesc, precum și posibilele consecințe pe care le poate avea o identitate de sine limitată atât atunci când intră în discuție tranziția spre o altă carieră în afara domeniului sportiv și alte setări sociale. *Metode.* Pentru îndeplinirea obiectivelor acestei lucrări am utilizat metoda observației și cea a studiului bibliografic. *Concluzii.* Analiza datelor relevă faptul că pot exista consecințe atât pozitive, cât și negative asociate cu această puternică identitate sportivă. Identitatea sportivă a fost legată de îmbunătățirea performanțelor sportive creșterea încrederii de sine, îmbunătățirea relațiilor și interacțiunilor sociale, precum și scăderea anxietății. Pe de altă parte, orientarea uni-dimensională spre atingerea excelenței sportive care însoțește participarea în sportul de elită, poate constitui potențiale pericole de natură psihologică și socială. Nivelul ridicat de identificarea cu rolul de sportiv poate face ca o educație de calitate să fie devalorizată sau ignorată în unele etape de dezvoltare, fapt care îi poate priva pe sportivi de importante competențe necesare în dezvoltarea individuală.

Cuvinte-cheie: *sport de performanță, identitate salientă, glorificarea sinelui, blocarea pieței de identitate, integrare socială.*

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Introduction

When we interact with those around us, diverse attributes, as name, gender, age, abilities or disabilities, clothing, style, personality traits and many others, present us and shows us who we are in relation to others and “shape our social identity” [1].

For the majority of performance athletes, their self identity is to a significant extent developed and confirmed through their participation at sportive activities. These athletes are so engaged in their competitive lifestyle that the opportunity of forming other career and educational identities is limited.

According to interactional theoreticians, individuals are active participants both in self construction as well as that of society. As concerns self construction, sociologists suggest that any new role fulfilled by and individual implies transformations of one's identity and of one's way of self perception; they describe this process as *identity construction* (G.H. Mead, 1962). Applied in a sportive context, Coakley [2] claims that athletes behave and are aware of their behaviour's impact on themselves as well as on others; they develop a vision of what they are and of the way in which they are linked to the rest of the social world. The interactional approach also emphasizes the central focus of the identity in which individuals are considered as been actively implicated in the process of identity construction and in the fulfilment of the roles demanded by their identities [3]. From this perspective, an individual chooses to try and develop, or to continually hold, the specifics of their role-given identity, for example, a gymnast of a rugby player [3]. Thus, individual identities are composed from a mixture of identities with varying degrees of importance and prominence. “Relevant identity, now a *salient* one, is necessary and sufficient to produce the identitary effect: differentiating and likeness, as well as inclusion and exclusion in and from a group” [1].

Sportive identity

In the field of sports, self identity can be defined as the extent to which the individual identifies with the athlete role [4].

McConnell and Edwards [5] define identity as “self perception, modeled by values, together with social and ideological practices”. Furthermore, the processes through which individuals build their identity influence perceptions and reflect in their way of implication in the social world they are part of. From this perspective, sportive identity is conceived as encapsulating the sportive part of a multidimensional self concept.

MacClancy [6] states that various sports are “vehicles of identity, that give people a sense of difference and a way through which they can classify themselves and classify others”. MacClancy also observes that sport “is not just a marker for someone who has already established a social identity, but also a means through which an individual might create a new social identity for himself.”

Moreover, according to Weiss [7], once the self perception of an athlete is strengthened by the growth of his prestige, together with social and public acknowledgement, one can develop an identity called “*glorified self*”. This term was developed by Adler & Adler [8] in their study regarding the changes occurring in the self perception of elite basketball players self from North American colleges, who have just gained access to a world of celebrity and fame. The authors note the fact that this confrontation with glory has been one of significant interest for the athletes involved, because it has created or extended various aspects of their self perception. It is also stressed that, naturally, self glorification is a greedy, catchy and toxic feeling, through which the self looks to increase its importance and escape from other dimensions

into which it might develop. Both Adler & Adler [8] and Brock & Kleiber [9] state that athletes can sacrifice the multidimensional character of their present, as well as the potential expansion of their future egos, or of different dimensions of a diminishing identity, both of which are detached or modified as a result of the high investment in the glorified self.

As the sportive identity becomes more interiorised, the athlete role is inclined to dominate the global self concept of the individual [2]. Furthermore, other individuals can define an athlete according to the field in which he excels. Thus, the self identity of an athlete is beginning to be consolidated from a social point of view and from the external side, by family, friends and the community.

According to Stevenson [3], as athletes receive more rewards and acknowledgement from the identity given to them by the role they fulfil, the efforts demanded by fulfilling the role will become increasingly greater and the stimulation to keep the identity will become more present. Moreover, Adler & Adler [1] note the fact that one of the first consequences of the birth of the "glorified self" is the loss of a future orientation and of long-time planning, as long as the future is defined for athletes as a direct follow-up to the present of the present. When dealing with young athletes, this aspect is of vital interest, because it creates a way of thinking that limits the necessity of imagining and planning a career outside the field of sports.

According to Stevenson [3], once they have chosen the involvement in sportive activity, the engagement, reputation and identity linked to it act out to "sink the athletes deeper and deeper into an engagement with this role identity and sportive career". Similar to this, Marcia [10] uses the term "*blocking of the identity market*". This is a term used to describe the closing of alternative career identities due to an

early engagement to a specific career identity, without previously allowing a sufficient exploration. In a sportive context, athletes rewarded for their efforts can choose not to seek success in the academic levels or other career opportunities [11]. According to Danish et al. [11] this blocking can be attributed to the requirements and expectancies of the athlete's background or may be a result of individual choices.

For many athletes, the blocking of the identity market is a common thing and is a result of an almost sacrificial devotion to their practiced sport. For the ones who aspire to practicing their sport on an international level, the incidence of the narrowing self perception is due to the great demands of a professional sport and the necessity to make from sport the unique focus of attention [12]. This aspect can be exacerbated due to false perception of the fact that they can extend their sportive career for a long time, something which is often considered to be unrealistic. Danish & al. [11] note that the blocking of the identity market is not malicious and can only become problematic when it limits exploring possibilities.

The level of identity invested in elite sport can imply that athletes, upon reaching retirement, are dealing with an identity crisis. Grove, Lavallée & Gordon [13], in their study on retirement from sport, have found a positive correlation between sportive identity and the degree of emotional and social adaptability necessary for the transition to an area outside the field of sports. When former athletes try to adapt to their new post-performance life, they are susceptible of encountering a feeling of misguidance from a social and cultural point of view; they lack a clear perspective on their new identity [14, 15].

The full concentration of all physical and psychological resources in order to achieve a high performance level can discourage athletes from

paying attention to issues linked to post-performance life and even to some aspects related to their personal development or to an alternative career [4,16]. A series of empirical studies has revealed that a strong sportive identity acts like a barrier in the way of the athletes' employment in taking measures of career planning and development, as well as in those which may offer assistance in planning their retirement [13, 17, 18]. Furthermore, the study conducted by Grove & al. [13] has revealed that athletes who poses a stronger sportive identity experiment real anxiety moods regarding career development, planning and decision making. For those athletes that have maintained a sense of equilibrium and have assimilated competences and life practises that may be used outside the field of sports, the identities of alternative roles should be easier to establish. This aspect is, in its turn, could create the premise of a successful integration into society [19].

For numerous athletes, even since childhood, the thing that is most appreciated by those from their own medium is their sportive identity; thus, this becomes the primary aspect for which they auto-appreciate themselves (Heyman, 1986). The extent to which the sportive identity of an individual represents an important part of his self concept will determine the probability of the thoughts and behaviours associated with this role be expressed in any given situation (Martin, Adams-Mushett & Smith, 1995). The sportive identity is a unique and important dimension of the self concept that offers a medium suitable for interpreting information and it also determines the type of behaviour in direct connection with the athlete role (Horton & Mack, 2000). Brewer et al. define the concept of sportive identity as "the extent to which an individual identifies himself with the athlete role" [4].

The identification of the athlete with his role can begin during childhood and can develop and intensify during the teenage years, up until maturity [12, 20]. This aspect is different from other professional careers, in which individuals gain their central identity after a long period of time [21]. Early experimentation of success, corroborated with the perception of a high level of competence leads to a definition of the self as an athlete [20]. Identities that are built first and foremost on obtaining some extraordinary performances are very fragile; the athlete gains a high level of self esteem upon winning a competition and a low level of self esteem when losing a competition (Thomas & Ermler, 1988). The athlete's own merit is concentrated on his ability of obtaining sportive performance (Lenning, 1982). Both coaches, as well as other people involved in the field of sports often discourage the activities that might distract the athletes' attention from these performances. Ogilvie & Taylor describe athletes that invest all their individual resources in the performance activity as being one-dimensional, just as their self concept does not extend beyond the limits of their practiced sport [22, 23].

This early identification with the athlete role can mean that young athletes can prematurely shape their identity and choose decisively a career before trying a vast selection of options in which they could exercise other possible talents and interests (Brown & Hartley, 1998). Andrews has noticed that "as young hockey players enter their teenage years, they invest much more from a psychological, physical and material point of view in their game.

Once the involvement and engagement in sports has risen, individuals develop a sportive identity that excludes other facets of their personality [24]. Due to the time and energy allocated to developing this identity, the athlete "ignores other components necessary of a mature, functional identity, that has a

solid base". The high requirements that are demanded by the athlete role may enter in conflict with other roles and important activities, which causes the appearance of problems, such as limited socialising with fellow human beings and gaps in social and career development has suggested that when an aspect of an individual's life weighs too much for a significant amount of time, other aspects will have to suffer.

Athletes from Eastern European countries have proven to be much more involved in the sportive activity, their sportive identity rising to a very high level. This aspect may have occurred due to the fact that sport is viewed as a way of increasing the social mobility in these cultures. Brewer and his peers have suggested that the variation of the models of identification with the athlete role according to the athlete's situation is to be expected. For example, the changes in sportive identity may occur as a function of the selection process. In the case of unselected athletes, they may limit their level of identification with the athlete role, to make the situation easier to bear [4].

Conclusions

There might be both positive and negative consequences associated with this strong sportive identity. Strong sportive identity has been associated with the improvement of sportive performances [4]), rise of self confidence, improvement of relationships and social interactions and the decrease of anxiety levels. It is also supposed that the sportive identity may have implications regarding the social life. For example, people with a strong sportive identity have much more chances of establishing connections with other athletes compared to those with a low level of identification.

While potential benefits in having a strong sportive identity do exist, studies have shown that there also

are possible negative effects. Often, sole focus on reaching sportive excellence that accompanies participation in the elite sport may constitute potential danger of a psychological and social nature. A high level of identification with the athlete role may lead to the ignorance of values gained through solid education in certain stages of development, aspect which may deprive athletes of important academic competences. In the same sense it is suggested that a strong sportive identity is associated with a delay in the development of athletes' careers, partially due to the perspective of both athletes and coaches that career planning may be perceived as a threat to sportive performances.

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