

Para Sport Athletic Identity from Competition to Retirement

A Brief Review and Future Research Directions

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KEYWORDS

- Identity • Athlete identity • Elite athletes • Paralympics • Sport participation
- Disability identity

KEY POINTS

- Athletes with disabilities describe their disability and sport participation in diverse ways, and different factors contribute to one's athletic identity development.
- Quantitative research on para sport athletic identity suggests that possessing a strong athletic identity can have both positive and negative effects, whereas qualitative research on para sport athletic identity reveals that sport participation serves as a catalyst for athletes with disabilities to develop positive identities and to challenge disablist attitudes.
- Although individuals with congenital and acquired disabilities both experience identity-related challenges, those with acquired permanent disabilities face an additional challenge of acknowledging a forever lost past self (or selves).
- Future researchers might consider examining athletes with acquired disabilities' perceptions of their past, present, and future selves through the lens of narrative identity and identifying the capabilities (eg, compassion, courage) of those who acknowledge loss but embrace current and future selves.

My identity is not disability sport. How do you practice disability sport? Do you injure yourself a bit more or what? (...) I can play basketball, swim, play table tennis – but how do you practice disability sport? It doesn't exist.^{1(p157)}

—Lennart

INTRODUCTION

Self-concept is a multidimensional structure that comprises individuals' thoughts and feelings about the self across various aspects of life.² These varying dimensions of

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self-concept allow people to present themselves differently depending on the situation. Athletic identity is one dimension of self-concept and refers to the degree to which an individual identifies with the athletic role.³ It is considered to serve a cognitive structure (schema) and a social role. From the cognitive structure perspective, athletic identity offers a framework for processing information, coping in various situations, and influencing behavior. From a social role perspective, athletic identity may be influenced by the degree to which significant others emphasize the athletic dimensions of the individual. Athletic identity has received ample attention by sport psychology researchers^{4–8} and has shown to be important for health and fitness outcomes, global self-esteem, social relationships, and commitment to sport and physical activity.⁹ Similarly, a para sport athletic identity is the degree to which an athlete with a disability (either congenital or acquired) identifies as an athlete.

The purpose of this article is to review what is currently known about para sport athletic identity and to offer avenues for future research directions by drawing from under-used theoretic orientations about identity. The current body of literature, with some exceptions, tends to divide itself into 2 categories: quantitative research examining potential antecedents, correlates, and outcomes of an athletic identity⁶ and qualitative research using interviews to learn how athletes feel about being an athlete and having a disability. Although both lines of research have broadened our understanding of para sport athletic identity, a gap in the qualitative research pertains to how participating in sport and developing a para sport athletic identity can help athletes with acquired disabilities adapt to a lost past self and embrace current and future selves. For instance, a lost past self, after acquiring a disability, would be an identity as an able-bodied person. A future self might be a vision and anticipatory thoughts (eg, satisfaction) and feelings (eg, pride) of being a Paralympian in 2 years.

Quantitative Research

Athletic Identity Measurement Scale

Traditionally, athletic identity among athletes with disabilities has been explored using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS³), which was developed to assess the athletic portion of a multidimensional self-concept. After examining athletic identity with a sample of nonathletic male and female college students, Brewer and colleagues¹⁰ initially thought the AIMS was unidimensional. However, later research with intercollegiate male soccer players led Brewer and colleagues³ to conclude that the construct of athletic identity is multidimensional, comprising 3 factors: social identity (the extent to which the athletes identify with their athletic role), exclusivity (the extent to which athletes solely identify as an athlete while minimizing other life roles), and negative affectivity (the extent to which athletes experience negative emotional responses due to injury, retirement, not being able to make a team, and so forth [Fig. 1](#)). Among able-bodied athletes, this 3-factor structure has generally found support.^{3,11} In contrast, there is conflicting evidence that the 3-factor structure is maintained when the AIMS is used among athletes with disabilities.^{6,7,12} Martin and colleagues⁷ tested the multidimensionality of the AIMS in a sample of adolescent swimmers with

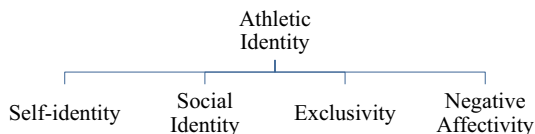


Fig. 1. Four-factor structure of the AIMS.

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