The influence of peer groups in organized sport on female adolescents' identity development

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Engagement in the process of identity development has been identified as the most significant milestone of adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and peer groups serve as a key facilitator in this process (Kroger, 2007). Peer groups are particularly significant in the lives of female adolescents, as females derive a substantial part of their identity through these relationships (Josselson, 1987). Despite the significance of personal identity development in adolescence and the importance of peer groups in this process, this area has not been explored in the extant sport psychology literature.
Purpose: To investigate the potential influence of peer groups in organized sport on female adolescent identity development.
Methods: Data were collected through photo-elicitation and semistructured interviews of eight female athletes between the ages of 13 and 17 years. Participants in the study played a variety of sports and competed at various levels. Data were analysed using a thematic narrative approach.
Results: Participant stories suggest that interactions with peers in sport assist female adolescent athletes in developing their psychological (including emotional and intellectual), social, and physical selves.
Conclusion: Stories shared by the female athletes suggest that a relationship exists between peer influence and identity development in sport. Findings are interpreted through Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development and the nature of the relationships in which peer influence on identity development occurs are discussed. Recommendations for future research are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Personal identity is referred to as "a well-organized conception of the self, consisting of values and beliefs to which the individual is solidly committed" (Berk, 2010, p.314). A personal identity can be considered a collection of distinctive characteristics, such as intelligence or confidence, which makes each person unique in relation to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While some researchers have explored domain-specific identities (e.g., athletic, gender, ethnic, social identities), which are valued in their own right, this study focused on global self-identity, which can be considered the integration of these domain-specific identities to create a broader personal identity (Goossens, 2001). Although identity is thought to change throughout the lifespan, adolescence is widely accepted as a critical stage for identity development (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987; McCabe, Roberts, & Morris, 1991).

The process of personal identity development in adolescence involves various changes, including cognitive, emotional, social, and physical modifications of the self (McCabe et al., 1991). Adolescents who navigate identity challenges well tend to have higher self-esteem, achieve a higher level of moral reasoning, discover unique talents, create meaning in their life, and recognize future possibilities (Deaux & Burke, 2010; Kroger, 2007). Adolescents who do not resolve identity challenges or resolve them negatively, may experience academic challenges, organizational concerns (e.g., time management), negative feelings (e.g., hopelessness), and/or issues with substance abuse (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2005).

Adolescence is also marked by a significant shift in loyalty and closeness from family to peers (Josselson, 1987). Membership in a peer group fulfils the desire to feel connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), provides an environment for sharing personal experiences and receiving encouragement and feedback about oneself (McCabe et al., 1991), and serves as a "reference for testing new identity related skills" (Kroger, 2007, p.54). Membership in a peer

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group is conceptualized across three levels of social complexity, including, interactions (i.e., behaviours of two people engaged in conversation for a period of time), relationships (i.e., a sequence of interactions engaged in by two or more people who are familiar with one another), and groups (i.e., multiple individuals who interact and tend to influence one another; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

Despite the significance of personal identity development in adolescence and the role of peer groups in this process, this area has not been explored in the extant sport literature. However, peer groups have been recognized as an influential social agent in the sport and physical activity experiences of youth. Peer groups have been studied in relation to peer acceptance (e.g., status and popularity), and friendship (e.g., dyadic relationships; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), and have been associated with various sport-related outcomes, including, intrinsic motivation, increased commitment and potential talent development, and perceived physical competence, as well as, conflict resolution skills, companionship, and teamwork (e.g., Bruner, Eys, & Turnnidge, 2013; Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, 2012; Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo, 2008; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Further, scholars have also explored links between group norms, team cohesion, and performance (e.g., Bruner, Carreau, Wilson, & Penney, 2014; Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998), as well as, social identities of youth athletes, which have been associated with an increased likelihood of prosocial behaviour (Bruner, Boardley, & Côté, 2014; Nezlek & Smith, 2005). In spite of recommendations to study the relationship between personal and social identities of youth athletes (Bruner, Dunlop, & Beauchamp, 2014), and the potential role of peers in sport on the development of global self-identities (Smith, 2003), research on personal identity is lacking.

Considering the importance of personal identity development in adolescence, the significance of peers in this development for females, and the paucity of research surrounding this developmental process in sport, this study sought to investigate the influence of peers in sport on the personal identity development of female adolescents.

Consistent with this research purpose, narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study. Narrative inquiry has emerged in the social sciences as a qualitative methodology that centers on the personal and cultural realities constructed by individuals through the telling of stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). This approach directs attention to *what* each story depicts, such as, the plot, context, or characters, and/or *how* these stories are told (Chase, 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.131). This methodology is relevant for identity development research as the construction of the self and formation of identity through personal stories is considered a core aspect of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narrative stories are also often created through relational networks, which suggest that one individual does not typically construct narratives by him/herself (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Instead, narratives are perceived to be shaped by those involved in the experiences described in the stories (Bach, 2007). This relational significance supports the use of narrative to explore the influence of peers on identity development in female adolescents.

2. Methods

2.1. Paradigmatic approach

This study was conducted from a social constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes meaning-making on a personal level (Daly, 2007). From this standpoint, knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant, and is viewed as subjective, conditional, and located within a particular context (Daly, 2007). This paradigmatic approach aligns well with narrative inquiry, which emphasizes the individuality of research participants, acknowledges each story is co-constructed and subject to change, and recognizes the context in which each story is shared (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). These criteria are consistent with a social constructivist ontology, which considers realities as multiple and informed by the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013). A social constructivist paradigm is relevant for the study of identity development as identities tend to be modified and developed across time relative to individual context and personal perspective (Hewitt, 1997).

2.2. Theoretical perspective

Erikson's (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development was chosen as the guiding framework as it incorporates the development of physical, emotional, social and cognitive facets of the self throughout stages of the lifespan, from infancy to late adulthood. For each stage, a set of developmental tasks/skills are considered important for one's mastery of the environment and navigating through the challenges of the stage. The major challenge confronted by adolescents is identity development, which can be supported or facilitated through five developmental tasks, including, physical maturation, emotional development, peer group membership, formal operations, and initiation of romantic/sexual relationships (Erikson, 1968). In addition to outlining the developmental tasks of adolescence, Erikson's (1968) theory addresses the focal aspects of identity formation, including, expected behaviours and dynamic relationships (Newman & Newman, 1995).

Some researchers have criticized Erikson's theory for being out-of-date and established on universal positivist inferences (Gergen, 1994; Kvale, 1992; Martin & Sugarman, 2000), however, Hoare (2013) refutes these claims by indicating that Erikson has recognized that each individual has unique group and personal identities that are influenced by various social aspects, opportunities (or lack thereof), and diverse cultural practices. From this perspective, Erikson's theory incorporates the importance of interaction between the person and his/her environmental influences across time (Kurtines, 1998). This theory broadly influenced the conceptualization of the study, development of the interview guide, and interpretations of the stories.

2.3. Participants

The personal identity development stories of eight female athletes between the ages of 13 and 17 years ($M = 14.8$) were included in this study. Athletes were recruited until data saturation was reached (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For this study, data saturation was considered to be the point at which broad themes with diverse examples were emerging from participant interviews. Female athletes were chosen as the focus for this study because they tend to derive a substantial part of their identity through the relationships they have with their peers (Josselson, 1987). Further, athletes were included based on their active engagement in competitive organized sport, outside of the school environment. This sport participation inclusion criterion was chosen because extracurricular competitive sport requires a more substantial commitment to training, competing, and travelling together as a team, thus providing an appropriate environment in which to study peer relations. The participants represented both individual and team sports, including, rock climbing, gymnastics, lacrosse, martial arts, equestrian, rowing, soccer, and hockey, and the level of competition within their sports ranged from recreational to international level. All participants competed in their sport for a minimum of one year.