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Athletic identity and its relationship to sport participation levels

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Summary This study looked at the relationship between athletic identity and three levels of sport participation (elite, recreational, non-participation). Athletic identity was measured using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) with participants being compared on the total AIMS score and scores on its three factors (social identity, exclusivity, negative affectivity). Results indicated that the male non-participation group scored lower on all three factors and the total AIMS when compared to the two athlete groups. The male elite and recreational groups did not differ on exclusivity and negative affectivity but did differ on the total AIMS and social identity, with elite scoring higher than recreational. For female participants, the non-participation group again scored lower on all three factors and the total AIMS when compared to the two athlete groups. The female elite and recreational groups did not differ on negative affectivity but did differ on the total AIMS, social identity, and exclusivity, with elite scoring higher than recreational. Findings suggest that to assume sport is only important to elite athletes ignores the role that sport may play for less talented sport participants. Whilst not seeing themselves as athletes per se, it is suggested that participation in sport may still impact upon the self-perceptions of recreational sport participants. Therefore, threats to participation may result in similar negative consequences for both elite athletes and recreational sport participants.

Introduction

Athletic identity (AI) is the sport specific component of an individual's self-concept and is the extent to which an individual identifies with the athletic role.[1] As a social role, AI develops as a response to group affiliations and social interactions.[2,3] As a cognitive schema, AI is the means by which individuals interpret information and behave according to the conventions of the athlete role. Typically viewed as a multidimensional construct, AI encompasses social, cognitive, and affective elements.

Brewer et al.[1] argue that individuals who value the athletic element of the self-concept are more

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likely to engage in physical activity than those who do not. Thus, individuals with strong athletic identities are more likely to participate in sport than those with weak athletic identities. Danish[4] also contends that a strong sense of self as athlete is a necessary requirement for success at higher levels of sport. Research that has examined the relationship between AI and sport participation has produced equivocal findings. Some studies (e.g.,[3,5,6]) have found AI increases with level of sport participation, thus supporting Danish's proposition. However, a number of other studies have found no differences in AI between different sporting levels (e.g.,[7,8–12]). What appears to be a more consistent finding is an AI difference between individuals who participate in sport and those who do not. Sport participants, regardless of participation level, appear to identify more strongly with the athletic role than individuals who do not participate in sport in any form.

A possible reason for the above contradictory findings may be the lack of clear definitions concerning levels of sport participation that occur within some of past research. Indeed some studies have provided no definition concerning the level of participation.[1,5,8,9,11,12] When a definition has been provided it is commonly the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) Divisions I—II delineation. This in itself is problematic as the demarcation assumes that athletes who compete for Division I colleges and universities are more competitive and compete at higher levels than other divisions. However, it is the institution not the athlete that holds the NCAA status, thus attributes about an athlete are inferred from attributes about an institution. It is possible that some athletes who compete for Division II or III universities may be internationally or nationally ranked athletes and some athletes who compete for Division I universities may not necessarily be considered elite. Therefore, the use of institutional status as a definitional platform for classifying individual athletes on psycho-social attributes and the absence of participatory level definitions are problematic in terms of replication, validity, and reliability and serve to raise questions about past AI results.

In addition to the above, few studies have directly considered how AI differs across sport participation levels. Most AI research has focused on comparisons of elite and semi-elite participation levels and has not considered AI across a wider range of participatory situations. Given that the largest number of sport participants is to be found at lower levels of participation, there is an absence of research knowledge concerning how these individuals identify with the role of the athlete. Although AI is argued to be a salient aspect of the self-concept regardless of sport participation level,[13] there is limited empirical evidence to support this proposition.

This study aimed to explore the relationship between AI and sport participation in an Australian sporting context. There were two hypotheses associated with this aim. Firstly, it was hypothesised that the elite group would exhibit significantly greater levels of AI than both the recreational and non-participation groups. It was also hypothesised that the recreational group would exhibit significantly greater levels of AI than the non-participation group.

Materials and method

Participants

A convenience sample of 214 participants was used in this study. Of these 51 were considered to be in the elite participation category (23 men, 28 women), 118 in the recreational (57 men, 61 women), and 45 in the non-participation (11 men, 34 women). Elite was defined as having represented a sport at a national or international sanctioned competition during the past 6 months. Recreational was defined as currently playing sport in an organised competition at any grade and never having represented a sport at any grade at a regional or above level, including junior representation. Non-participation was defined as not having competed in organised or social sport for the last 5 years prior to the study commencing. If a non-participation individual had previously competed in social or competitive sport, this participation was only at the recreational level definition.

Nineteen different sports were represented in this study (e.g., rugby union, netball, touch football, orienteering) and included both individual (e.g., swimming) and team (e.g., cricket) sports. The mean age of participants was 33.52 years old (S.D. = 16.517) and the majority of participants self-identified as Australian ($n = 131$). Participation in this study was voluntary with incentives offered in the form of university course credit or a departmental raffle ticket.

Materials

AI was measured using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS).[1] It is a 10-item questionnaire where responses are made on a 7-point Likert scale that ranges from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Scores on the AIMS range from 10