

Athletic identity foreclosure

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Athletic identity foreclosure refers to commitment to the athlete role in the absence of exploration of occupational or ideological alternatives. This article traces the theoretical underpinnings of the construct, examines the role of sport participation in identity development, and provides an overview of the course, correlates, and consequences of athletic identity foreclosure. Implications for future research are discussed.

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The primary developmental task of late adolescence is to establish a sense of personal identity [1]. According to developmental theorists [2,3], optimal development is likely to occur when individuals explore a variety of activities and interact with people from different backgrounds. This exploratory behavior provides individuals with the experiences and information necessary to make informed decisions about their personal values, interests, and skills, and enables them to develop coping strategies and confidence in their abilities to be successful in adult life. Many athletes, however, put so much of their time and energy into sport participation that they do not engage in exploratory behavior, thereby hindering the process of establishing a sense of self-identity [4]. Athletes who do not engage in exploratory behavior, but make firm commitments to sport as their primary source of identity, have been described as being in a state of identity foreclosure [5,6]. The purpose of this article is to examine the concept of athletic identity foreclosure as a means of conceptualizing the role of sport participation in identity development. Before discussing identity foreclosure in the specific context of sport, however, general information on the construct is presented.

Identity foreclosure

The term identity foreclosure was first used in 1959 by Erikson [1] in a diagram of his stages of human development. The term foreclosure was placed in polarity to work identification in the latency stage of development, but Erikson did not describe or define the term foreclosure in any of his writings. A decade later, Marcia [7] reintroduced the term as part of the ego-identity development process of adolescents. He described foreclosure as occurring when individuals make premature commitments to occupational or ideological roles that are socially and parentally acceptable in order to avoid identity crises. This role commitment might provide a sense of psychological safety and security, but is done at the expense of personal freedoms and opportunities for psychosocial growth. According to Marcia, optimal ego-identity development requires individuals to experience crisis in the form of being forced to choose among meaningful occupational and ideological alternatives. Individuals' ego-identity status is determined by whether they have explored occupational and ideological alternatives and whether they have made a commitment to an occupational or ideological role. Individuals in identity foreclosure would be identified as having not engaged in exploratory behavior, but expressing commitment to a life role.

Establishing a unique personal identity requires individuals to separate from early parental identifications in order to engage in a process of individuation [8]. The success of this process is dependent on the knowledge gained through exploratory behavior. Varied life experiences and interactions with people from diverse backgrounds provide individuals with new information and options about their personal situations and facilitates a positive separation from a primary focus on parental identifications [2]. By definition [7], a lack of exploratory behavior can result in identity foreclosure. Individuals who fail to explore new life options are prone to adopt parental identifications and exhibit elevated levels of authoritarian thinking, lower autonomy and self-directedness, and an external locus of control [9].

Henry and Renaud [10] argued that the extent to which people experience identity foreclosure can be influenced by both psychological and situational factors. With respect to psychological influences, some individuals may make unwavering commitments to careers and ideological options approved by parents and/or society to avoid identity crises. These individuals use their idealized sense of self as the main aspect of their intrapsychic defensive systems. In terms of situational influences, being enmeshed in a given social system may prompt

individuals not to engage in exploratory behavior because of the time commitments, peer approval, and intrinsic and extrinsic rewards associated with involvement in the social system [10].

Role of sport participation in identity development

In keeping with the definition of identity foreclosure developed by Marcia [7], the occupational or ideological role to which individuals commit prematurely in athletic identity foreclosure is that of 'athlete' and the exploratory behavior being avoided pertaining to roles other than that of athlete. Building on the work of Henry and Renaud [10], Petitpas and France [11] argued that the psychological and social dynamics of sport participation may be particularly conducive to the development of identity foreclosure in athletes. For example, athletes who believe that their primary means of gaining parental or societal approval is through athletic accomplishments, may avoid situations or people that they view as a threat to their athletic identity. In contrast, when athletes get enmeshed in the sport system, they may not engage in exploratory behavior because of the time commitment required for sport participation, the approval they receive from peers for participating in sport, and the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards accrued from athletic accomplishments. These individuals may not have a pressing need to engage in exploratory behavior because their needs for relatedness and competency are being met through sport participation [11]. In addition, the sport system is often structured in a manner that promotes compliance with team norms rather than independent thinking [12].

Course, correlates, and consequences of athletic identity foreclosure

Scholarly inquiry on athletic identity foreclosure has been hampered by the lack of an adequate measure of the construct and the use of research designs that are limited in the kinds of inference that can be made from the results. In the absence of a psychometrically sound means of assessing athletic identity foreclosure, researchers have relied on measures tapping athletic identity (which refers to the degree to which individuals identify with the athlete role) and identity foreclosure. Measures of the former construct (such as the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale [AIMS; 13,14]) overlap with the commitment aspect of athletic identity foreclosure, but contain no items that address exploratory behavior. In contrast, measures of the latter construct (such as the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status) [15], have no sport-related item content and, in some cases, confound commitment with exploration. With respect to research design, retrospective, cross-sectional, and qualitative designs have predominated in studies of issues related to athletic identity foreclosure [16•], thereby making it difficult to determine the consequences and developmental trajectories of athletic identity foreclosure. Nevertheless,

investigators have compiled a body of work of direct relevance to the course, correlates, and potential consequences of athletic identity foreclosure.

Course

Data from retrospective studies have shown that competitive female gymnasts report increases in athletic identity from age 10 to age 15 that remains steady to the college years, whereas female nonathletes and gymnasts who stopped competing report decreases in athletic identity from age 10 or age 15, respectively, into the college years [17]. Similarly, results of a cross-sectional study indicated that although the levels of athletic identity and identity foreclosure of athletes who were in their first two years of college did not differ from those of athletes who were in their last two years of college, the levels of both constructs were significantly lower for nonathletes who were in their last two years of college than for those who were in their first two years of college [18]. Inverse associations between age and athletic identity were also found in samples of college students who varied in their degree of sport involvement [19] and intercollegiate student-athletes [20]. Results of longitudinal studies have demonstrated that athletes tend to decrease their identification with the athlete role after experiencing events that threaten or diminish their ability to perform as athletes, such as a poor competitive season [21], deselection [22], and severe injury [13]. Such reductions in athletic identity may serve a self-protective function, and may even be initiated proactively in anticipation of experiencing a diminished role of sport involvement in one's life [23]. Thus, it appears that among sport participants, athletic identity (and possibly also athletic identity foreclosure) tends to increase from late childhood into adolescence and remain elevated until the prospects of reduced sport involvement are faced.

Correlates

Numerous correlates of athletic identity have been documented, with associations generally reflecting small-to-moderate effect sizes. For the purposes of the current discussion, 'correlates' refer to variables that either do not appear to be potential effects of athletic identity or may have reciprocal causation with athletic identity. For example, men tend to identify more strongly with the athlete role than women [13,24], but the gender differences seem to be less pronounced or nonexistent at higher levels of sport involvement [18]. Also pertaining to gender are the negative association that was found between athletic identity and femininity [25], and the positive associations between athletic identity and masculinity [25], conformity to masculine norms [26], and aspects of gender role conflict [27–30].

Significant correlations have been documented between athletic identity and a variety of other factors in the academic, social, cognitive/motivational, and emotional/

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