



## Review

## Narrative and discursive perspectives on athletic identity: Past, present, and future

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The dominant role-based conceptualisations of athletic identity have recently been challenged in favour of theoretical perspectives that view identity as a complex cultural construction. In the present study, we analysed empirical studies on athletic identity positioned in narrative and discursive approaches to gain an insight into the use and subsequent contribution of these approaches to knowledge production in this research topic.

**Design and method:** A total of 23 articles, of which 18 narrative studies and five discursive studies, were identified in a systematic literature search. We used the meta-study method to analyse these studies in terms of basic assumptions, methodologies, and findings.

**Results:** Early narrative studies focused on biographical disruption in career termination and/or severe injury, whereas more recent studies examined the impact of different identity narratives on athletes' well-being and career decisions. Discursive studies examined the multiple ways in which dominant understandings of gender, age, and the athletic body are (re)produced and normalised within sporting cultures and institutions and can act to constrain athletes to certain identities and practices. Both approaches highlighted that elite sport culture offers limited narrative resources or subject positions for athletes, and can endanger athletes' well-being if they are unable to comply with dominant ideals of being an athlete.

**Conclusions:** Narrative and discursive approaches have advanced understandings of the constitutive role of sporting culture in athletic identity formation. Future research should continue exploring athletic identity in various physical cultural contexts and seek to identify alternative narratives and discourses that may enable athletes to construct more adaptive identities.

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In the recent decade, there has been an increasing number of books and theoretical articles in sport psychology calling for rethinking athletic identity through cultural epistemology<sup>1</sup> (Fisher & Roper, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Ryba, Schinke & Tenenbaum, 2010; Schinke, Stambulova, Lidor, Papaioannou, & Ryba, 2015). These authors have argued that athletic identity cannot be understood in isolation from culture and language practices that promote certain understandings of self and the sport world while silencing and marginalising others. As Schinke et al. (2015) observed, “the cultural practices in most sports marginalise female, gay, ageing, racialized bodies that are socially constructed in opposition to white heterosexual masculine standards, taken as normative in defining and giving meaning to sport activities” (p. 4). The cultural scholarship has aimed to destabilise the common sense and taken-for-granted meanings in athletic identity as a singular sport role. It has also aimed to open up the field for more nuanced examinations of athletic identities of those who might not conform to the dominant norms, who could be, for example, positioned as minority athletes, disabled athletes, or female athletes (McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013).

Much (although not all) of cultural scholarship has been framed as cultural praxis (e.g., McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012; Schinke et al., 2015). Cultural praxis is an approach to sport psychology which emphasises blending theory with social practice in order to produce progressive social change. Issues of sociocultural difference, social justice, and the impact of scientific research practices on producing privilege or marginalisation of certain identities and experiences are at heart of cultural praxis scholarship (Ryba & Wright, 2005; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2015). In addition to raising awareness of participants' various cultural identities, cultural praxis scholars have called for researchers to reflexively explicate how their own identities, values, and positioning impact methodological choices and their interactions with research participants (McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Schinke et al., 2012). The recent special section on intersecting identities in Psychology of Sport and Exercise (Schinke & McGannon, 2015) further demonstrates that cultural conceptualisations of identity are gaining popularity in sport psychology.

Narrative inquiry and discourse analysis are two growing methodologies that align closely with central tenets of cultural praxis articulated through critical cultural studies (see Fisher & Roper, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005). Discourse studies is a general term for different traditions and strands of work on discourse (discussed in details later). Narrative and discursive approaches differ from traditional identity theories in conceptualising identity as a cultural construction, rather than an entity or a trait residing within the individual. Both approaches understand identities as fluid and multiple (rather than stable and

singular), and acknowledge that identities are performed in a social context and cannot be assessed in isolation from the cultural context (Carless & Douglas, 2013b; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013). However, narrative studies tend to focus more on coherence and continuity of identity narratives, whereas discursive approaches conceptualise identities as fragmented, fluid, and multiple. Moreover, both approaches suggest that identity construction takes place as interplay of individual agency and contextual narrative or discursive possibilities. Yet, narrative approaches often put more emphasis on individuals' agency in selectively crafting narratives from available repertoire, while recognising that some narratives can be silenced or denied and therefore not accessible to people. Discursive approaches, on the other hand, suggest that some subject positions are privileged and can be also ascribed to individuals, thus limiting their choices and behaviour (Cosh, LeCouteur, et al. 2013; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

In the present study we review and analyse accumulated empirical studies into athletic identity positioned in narrative and discursive perspectives. We use the meta-study method (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001) to analyse the studies in terms of basic assumptions, methodological choices, and interpretation of findings. The review serves as a resource for those conducting identity research, informs scholars about current trends in the field, and provides guidelines for future studies (Chatoupis & Vagenas, 2011; Culver, Gilbert, & Sparkes, 2012). The following research questions guided our inquiry:

1. How have narrative and discursive researchers conceptualised athletic identity?;
2. What were the key research topics and findings?;
3. In what ways do the reviewed studies extend our understandings of traditionally marginalised individuals and their experiences in sport?

## 1. Method

### 1.1. Identifying relevant articles

We conducted searches in three databases (ScienceDirect, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar) using keywords “narrative identity” + athlete + psychology, “athlet × identity” (in Google Scholar: athletic and athlete identity) + “psychology”, “athlet × subjectivity” (in Google Scholar: athletic and athlete subjectivity) + psychology, and “subject position” + athlete + psychology (to reduce search results, in Google Scholar: “sport psychology”). The search terms subjectivity and subject positions were used because discursive approaches often prefer these terms over the traditional concept of identity (McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon & Mauws, 2002). For ScienceDirect (165 search results) and SportDiscus (81 results), we read abstracts of all studies; for Google Scholar (4923 results), the initial screening was done based on title and source (4632 rejected). The first and the second author completed the database searches, and all three authors hand searched for additional articles from their own collections. We also

<sup>1</sup> Cultural epistemology is an umbrella term for epistemological positions that consider knowledge as culturally and historically situated, partial, and theory-laden. These positions include, but are not limited to, critical theory, cultural studies, social constructionism, and poststructuralism (Ryba & Schinke, 2009).

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