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**Title:** What can gender tell us about the pre-retirement experiences of elite distance runners in Finland?: A thematic narrative analysis

**Year:** 2016

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Ronkainen, N. J., Watkins, I., & Ryba, T. V. (2016). What can gender tell us about the pre-retirement experiences of elite distance runners in Finland?: A thematic narrative analysis. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 22(1), 37-45.  
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2015.06.003>

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## **What can Gender Tell us About the Pre-Retirement Experiences of Elite Distance Runners in Finland?: A Thematic Narrative Analysis**

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1 **What can Gender Tell us About the Pre-Retirement Experiences of Elite Distance Runners in**  
2 **Finland?: A Thematic Narrative Analysis**

3  
4 **Abstract**

5 *Objectives:* This study explores gendered experiences of the mastery stage in endurance runners'  
6 athletic careers in terms of (a) key themes in this period of life, (b) retirement decision-making and  
7 (c) changes in athletic and runner identities.

8 *Design and Method:* Ten male and nine female athletes aged between 25 and 62 participated in  
9 individual interviews. The data were analysed via thematic narrative analysis.

10 *Results and Conclusion:* Gendered meanings permeate career decision-making and retirement  
11 patterns of Finnish runners. Female athletes reported many difficulties, including health problems,  
12 loneliness, societal pressure and lack of social support during the final years of their careers. These  
13 aspects were important reasons for them to start considering retirement from sport. Male athletes  
14 reported less social pressure and suggested that friendship in sport was a major reason for  
15 postponing retirement. Male athletes expressed more interest for coaching others, wherein women  
16 perceived themselves as incompetent and/or lacked time and interest for it. Running remained  
17 important for the majority of athletes after retirement and they anticipated or had continued regular  
18 running post-retirement.

19

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22 Athletes tend to reach the mastery stage of their careers approximately at the age of 18-19,  
23 depending on the sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). The mastery stage involves high investment  
24 and high sport-specific training, making it rather challenging for elite athletes to maintain life  
25 balance (e.g., Cosh & Tully, 2014). Moreover, the social influence of parents decreases whereas the  
26 relationship with the coach becomes a key concern for athletes' motivation (Keegan, Spray,  
27 Harwood & Lavallee, 2014). Studies examining reasons for the transition from mastery to  
28 discontinuation and athletic retirement have identified such issues as loss of motivation or  
29 enjoyment, injury, age, deselection, family, studies/work, and finances (Lavallee, Grove, & Gordon,  
30 1997; Moesch, Mayer, & Elbe, 2012; Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013). The adaptation process  
31 to retirement is influenced by numerous factors including the strength and exclusivity of athletic  
32 identity, social support, sense of control over retirement decision, relationship with the coach and  
33 level of athletic achievement (see Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013, for a review). Yet, there is a gap in  
34 literature on women's athletic careers and few studies have focused on understanding the impact of  
35 gender on athletes' career development and retirement processes. As Stambulova and Ryba (2013,  
36 2014) asserted, athletic career models operate on the level of a 'universal' athlete, who is most likely  
37 a white, male athlete. In a recent review, Park and colleagues (2013) identified only four studies  
38 examining gender in athletic retirement, and only a study by Stambulova (2001) indicated gender  
39 differences in Russian athletes' perceived adaptation to retirement. In addition, Moesch and  
40 colleagues (2012) examined gender in retirement decision-making in Denmark, female athletes'  
41 desire to start a family being the only identified difference. In light of the feminist and emerging  
42 cultural sport psychology research into the gendered construction of experience, meaning and

43 identity in and through sport, there is an urgent need to develop a more contextualized and nuanced  
44 understanding of the ways gender meta-narratives shape the construction of athletes' careers.

45 This research study is situated within a cultural praxis conceptual framework (Ryba &  
46 Wright, 2005) and draws on narrative inquiry to contribute to the growing genre of cultural sport  
47 psychology (see McGannon & Smith, 2015). Cultural praxis, as a critical discourse, does not only  
48 concern culturally competent research but also social action (Ryba, 2009). Therefore, the aim of this  
49 research project was to provide a contextualized account of the gendered athletic career construction  
50 with the explicit goal to instigate changes in the culture of elite running in Finland, especially in  
51 relation to premature career terminations by female elite runners (Pihlakoski, 2014).

### 52 **Gender and Distance Running**

53 Before the 1980s, women were excluded from participation in distance running events of the  
54 Olympic Games because it was considered unhealthy for them to participate in such strenuous  
55 activity (Lovett, 1997). Albeit increased participation of girls and women in competitive sport, it  
56 remains to be a domain that is dominated by hegemonic masculine narratives (Sparkes & Smith,  
57 2002). Emerging narrative research into distance running, however, highlights that men and women  
58 develop different runner identity narratives influenced by cultural narratives surrounding gender,  
59 sport and the body (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2012, 2014). For example, Busanich and  
60 colleagues (2014) studied disordered eating in elite running and concluded that it is culturally  
61 constructed as a feminine problem and may therefore be silenced in men's narratives. In contrast,  
62 leanness, openness in discussing emotions, and engagement with maladaptive behaviors were  
63 constructed as part of the feminine athlete identity. Moreover, few studies on mother-athletes in  
64 running (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012) suggested  
65 that the cultural attitudes of incompatibility of motherhood and elite sport still prevail, and these

66 mothers often combat with feelings of guilt, caused by absence from their young child's life due to  
67 training.

68 In recreational running, Busanich and colleagues (2012) demonstrated that for men, running  
69 allowed to develop a masculine identity framed by discourses of performance and productivity,  
70 whereas women's narratives focused on achieving ideal feminine body through running. While  
71 some male runners constructed a performance narrative similar to elite sport, female runners framed  
72 their stories exclusively within health and well-being discourses. Similarly, Griffin (2010)  
73 contended that the mass culture of women's running is antithetical to competitive sport and instead  
74 draws from discourses of inclusiveness, empowerment, community and fun. However, these  
75 discourses work to exclude those women who are competitive and interested in athletic  
76 performance; Griffin (2010) suggested that the emphasis on fun and frivolity could be interpreted as  
77 a trivialization of sport for women, as the underlying message is that athleticism and femininity are  
78 potentially contradictory.

79 In Finnish society, the dominant cultural narrative builds upon a notion that gender equality  
80 has been already achieved (Korvajärvi, 2002). Despite Finland's consistently high ranks in cross-  
81 national comparisons on gender equality and the noteworthy advances in gender policies, Finnish  
82 elite sport remains to be a cultural field governed by men and catered largely for men. According to  
83 a report issued by Ministry of Education and Culture (2012), men hold the majority of leadership  
84 positions in the sport systems and coaching. Women account for only 24% of executive directors in  
85 the Finnish Sport Federation (SLU) and 25% of executive directors in National governing bodies. In  
86 2004, 94% of the registered coaches in Finnish Sports Federations were men (Ministry of Education  
87 and Culture, 2005). While this trend has been slowly changing toward more inclusive practices, at  
88 the elite level the number of female coaches is extremely low and women typically occupy assistant  
89 coaching positions, supporting male head coaches (European Commission, 2004). Such gender-

90 typing of tasks and abilities not only reinforces structural hierarchies in sport, but seems to be  
91 fuelling the processes through which persistent gender differences in achievement motivation,  
92 career aspiration, well-being, and overall sporting experiences are realized.

93         The history of Finnish distance running is largely a male narrative. After Finland established  
94 its independence in 1917, men's distance running and Olympic success became central blocks of  
95 national identity and pride. International competitions were closely followed by the public, and it  
96 has been argued that Finns' attitudes towards sport were extremely serious (Tervo, 2001). Most  
97 stories associated with the successful male runners of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were associated with work-  
98 like attitude to running, gruesome training methods, and "sisu", a Finnish word for mental  
99 toughness (Hannus, 1990). Journalists portrayed successful male athletes as national heroes  
100 exemplifying the Finnish character, whereas female athletes were either completely ignored or their  
101 presence was constructed as embodiment of modesty and respectability, and their athletic  
102 achievements were considered irrelevant (Tervo, 2001). Moreover, Finnish sport leaders resisted  
103 allowing women to compete in Olympic Games, because their performances were seen as inferior  
104 and therefore it was argued that including their results in the overall country rankings was  
105 inappropriate (Tervo, 2001).

106         Women's elite running emerged in Finland in the 1980s (Hannus, 2008) and is visible in  
107 contemporary sport media. Pirinen (1997) argued that the dominant media discourse constructs  
108 sport as gender-neutral domain, providing equal opportunities for participation and success. Yet, her  
109 analysis reveals that discriminating discourses continue to work around the female athlete's body  
110 and sexuality. Moreover, recent media reports have voiced a concern for female athletes' premature  
111 career terminations (Hannus, 2008; Hollo, 2011; Pihlakoski, 2014). A Finnish sport leader suggested  
112 that "the specific issues related to girls' development and lack of understanding of their values were  
113 central reasons to female athletes' retirements" (Pihlakoski, 2014). In the context of running, this

114 “loss of talents” has been associated with female runners’ health problems, lack of athletic  
115 development after success in junior years, and coaching problems (Hannus, 2008; Hollo, 2011).

116 To summarize, the gendered ways of career construction have been largely unexplored in the  
117 context of elite distance running. Few sport psychology studies that compared male and female  
118 runners’ narratives (Busanich et al., 2012, 2014) seem to be unanimous that cultural narratives and  
119 social practices surrounding sport and gender have a profound impact on athletes’ experiences. The  
120 current study builds on that work to analyze male and female, elite runners’ narratives in order to  
121 understand processes associated with athletic development, anticipation of athletic retirement, and  
122 decision-making around career termination. Our aim is to address three research objectives:

- 123 1. To examine gendered experiences of the mastery stage of an athletic career;
- 124 2. To gain an understanding of how cultural narratives of sport and gender shape athletes’  
125 personal experiences and their perceptions of future after high-performance sport;
- 126 3. To examine how athletic and runner identities are negotiated and (re)constructed as  
127 athletes leave the peak years of performance.

### 128 **Theoretical Approach**

129 Cultural praxis was initially introduced in sport psychology by Ryba and Wright (2005) as a  
130 call for critical engagement with cultural epistemological questions, conceptual rethinking of  
131 athletes' identities, and opening up the field for a broader variety of qualitative research traditions.  
132 Discussing methodological approaches in a cultural praxis project, [Ryba](#) and Schinke (2009)  
133 suggested that cultural praxis should be understood as “a discourse that encompasses a variety of  
134 ontological and epistemological underpinnings on a paradigmatic continuum that come *after*  
135 positivism” with a common goal of developing “a discourse that brings issues of sociocultural  
136 difference, enmeshed with power and ethics, to the fore of psychological analysis” (p. 267). The  
137 recent practical implication of the cultural praxis heuristic is the cultural praxis of athletes’ careers,



138 which merges the holistic lifespan perspective on athletic career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004;  
139 Wylleman et al., 2013) with a cultural mindset to stimulate the development of culturally situated  
140 career research and assistance (Stambulova & [Ryba](#), 2013, 2014). To date, cultural praxis has been  
141 mainly discussed on a theoretical level (McGannon & Smith, 2015); the few empirical studies have  
142 examined dual career ([Blodgett](#) & Schinke, 2015; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, &  
143 [Selänne](#), 2014; Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2014) and athletic identity  
144 negotiations in judo (Kavoura, Ryba, & Chroni, 2015). The present study contributes to the body of  
145 empirical research within cultural praxis.

146 Cultural praxis aims to blend theory, lived culture, and social action so that research would  
147 contribute to development of more equal and inclusive sport practices (Ryba & Wright, 2010). This  
148 emphasis requires a deeper consideration how the research resonates with participants' experiences  
149 and how the findings can inform applied practice (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2014).  
150 In the present research, we have actively sought for participants' suggestions how to raise awareness  
151 and instill practical changes in cultural practices of Finnish elite sport. Based on their comments, we  
152 are preparing two popular articles to be published Finnish sport media.

153 Narrative inquiry has been recently advocated within cultural sport psychology because it  
154 aligns well with the central tenets of cultural praxis. As McGannon and Smith (2015) argued, "the  
155 use of narrative as a medium in knowledge translation aligns with the transformative and social  
156 change agenda within cultural praxis, as well as the goal of grounding such change in people's  
157 experiences and identities" (p. 81). In recent years, narrative studies have become visible in sport  
158 psychology publications (e.g. Busanich et al., 2012, 2014; Carless & Douglas, 2013). Narrative  
159 inquiry encompasses diverse approaches but they share the focus on stories and their psychological  
160 function (Crossley, 2000; McGannon & Smith, 2015). The philosophical underpinning of the  
161 present study lies in critical constructivist perspective on narrative (Richert, 2010). This approach

162 subscribes to ontological realism (i.e., there is a world which is independent of our knowledge of it)  
163 combined with epistemological constructivism (i.e., our knowledge remains subjective and  
164 incomplete). The critical constructivist stance differs from social constructionism in two central  
165 assumptions: 1) construction of meaning is at least partly derived intraindividually from our  
166 embodied, lived experiences and not solely from social interactions and discourse; and 2) there is a  
167 core in the person's sense of self which makes the notions of agency and continuity in life narratives  
168 possible. This approach is inspired by phenomenology and allows for the possibility that we "can  
169 experience phenomena at a deeply corporeal, pre- (perhaps ultra-) linguistic level" (Allen-Collinson,  
170 2010, p. 6), avoiding the risk of reducing experiences to language practices. Addressing the second  
171 point, our analysis will not only focus on delineating the cultural narratives that are drawn upon in  
172 storytelling, but also on lived experience and authenticity in personal narratives.

173         In this study, narrative identity is understood as "a person's internalized and evolving life  
174 story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of  
175 unity and purpose" (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). In any identity narrative, multiple small  
176 storylines are woven into the fabric of the storytelling, which consists of reconstructed accounts of  
177 personal experiences, drawing upon cultural meta-narratives to create meaning and bring continuity  
178 to the lived experiences (Crossley, 2000). While strong cultural narratives surround gender and  
179 children learn them early on, gender cannot be conceptualized as a stable variable that differentiates  
180 the ways in which men and women narrate their lives (Fivush & Buckner, 2003). Rather, gender is  
181 "an emergent property of the specific developmental and situational context" (Fivush & Buckner,  
182 2003, p. 163). Yet, when differences do emerge, women tend to tell more evocative and relational  
183 narratives, whereas men's identity narratives are more focused on individual goals and aspirations  
184 (Fivush & Buckner, 2003; Gilligan, 1993). In elite sport, Douglas and Carless (2006) suggested that  
185 the dominant cultural narrative is that of "the performance narrative", a storyline focused on single-

186 minded dedication and pursuit of winning. As alternative narrative types, they identify discovery  
187 and relational narratives that gain meaning through life experiences gained in and through sport, or  
188 from the shared journey in sport with family or friends.

189 Narrative scholars have argued that when people anticipate an important life transition they  
190 have no experience of, they search for *exemplary life stories* of people who have already been there  
191 for advice and guidance (Spector-Mersel, 2006). These stories allow people to convey what are their  
192 future possibilities, promoting certain understandings and actions while marginalizing others. As  
193 such, stories of sport heroes and older athletes can provide younger athletes with narrative templates  
194 that guide them in career decisions and transitions. One aim of this study is to discern the types of  
195 exemplary narratives elite runners turn to as they enter the process of leaving elite sport.

## 196 Methodology

### 197 Participants

198 The participants of this study were 10 male and nine female Finnish runners, aged between 25 and  
199 62 years. All athletes had reached at minimum the national level and participated in Finnish  
200 championships. Two male participants had orienteering as their main sport but also competed  
201 regularly in running. Three males and two females had been professional athletes at some stage of  
202 their careers; others had combined studying or work with sport. Recognizing that distance runners  
203 typically reach their peak later and continue their careers longer than exemplified in athletic career  
204 models (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), the mastery stage in this study refers to the period of  
205 competing on top national or international level. Moreover, this research did not focus on stories  
206 associated with participants' sport practices at the time of the interview, but rather on the narratives  
207 derived from the peak years of their athletic careers.

### 208 Data Collection

209           This research project consists of two epistemologically compatible interview studies, which  
210 were combined to examine gendered meanings in elite athletes' career experiences. The 10 male  
211 athletes participated in first author's PhD research, which examined personal and spiritual meanings  
212 in sport participation as well as shifts of meaning associated with career transitions. Male athletes  
213 were interviewed by the first author with the life story interview method (Atkinson, 1998). As  
214 Atkinson explains, "A life story is the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has  
215 lived, told as completely and honestly as possible, what the person remembers of it and what he or  
216 she wants others to know of it" (2002, p. 125). Nine athletes were interviewed twice and one athlete  
217 was interviewed once and follow-up questions were sent through email. The nine female athletes  
218 were interviewed by the second author for her Master's research that focused on experiences of  
219 athletic retirement. Drawing on Kadlcik and Flemr (2008), a semi-structured interview guide was  
220 developed to explore the following themes: (1) initiation into sport, (2) achievement and satisfaction  
221 with the career, (3) mastery stage and pre-retirement conditions, (4) adaptation to retirement and (5)  
222 life after athletic retirement. Seven female athletes were interviewed face-to-face, and due to  
223 inability to arrange a meeting, one athlete was interviewed via Skype, and one via telephone. While  
224 facial expressions and body language are lost in telephone interviews, in our study the telephone  
225 interview provided one of the richest descriptions and emotions could be heard in the tone of the  
226 participant's voice. Therefore, we did not see this as a drawback in the data collection process.

227           It is important to emphasize that in data collection, both interviewers adopted a flexible  
228 approach where participants were encouraged to discuss personally relevant issues that were not  
229 restricted to pre-determined themes. As both women and men had narrated rich and nuanced stories  
230 of the final years in their elite careers, we considered the data to be suitable for a comparative  
231 analysis. Acknowledging that combining two different data collection methods may create

232 methodological tensions that need to be reconciled in order to claim credibility of the findings, we  
233 discuss the study’s analytical rigor and validity in the following sections.

#### 234 **Thematic Narrative Analysis**

235         In the reported study, a thematic narrative analysis was applied to both datasets due to its  
236 reported suitability for various types of data, from archival documents to interview segments and  
237 life stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2012; Riessman, 2007). According to Riessman (2007), “in thematic  
238 narrative analysis, emphasis is on “the told”—the events and cognitions to which language refers  
239 (the content of speech)” (p.58). A thematic approach focuses on the “whats” of the stories (rather  
240 than the structure), and seeks to identify common elements in order to theorize across cases  
241 (Riessman, 2007). The analysis involved reading the transcripts several times, inductive coding,  
242 developing themes and subthemes, and seeking to identify core narrative elements associated with  
243 each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The themes were interpreted through the lens of narrative  
244 theory and specific attention was given to continuity and coherence, as well as identifying  
245 exemplary narratives and narrative resources. We strove to be reflexive in our interaction with the  
246 data in order not to suppress the participants’ knowing “as opposed to applying foundational ‘set in  
247 stone’ rules that ensure trustworthiness and truth” (Schinke, McGannon, Battocchio, & Wells, 2013).

#### 248 **Reflexivity and Validity**

249         As critical constructivist researchers, we do not subscribe to a postpositivist assumption that  
250 rigorous following of a standard procedure constitutes validity in qualitative inquiry (Sparkes, 1998;  
251 Sparkes & Smith, 2009). We believe that “qualitative work is produced not from any ‘pure’ use of a  
252 method, but from the use of methods that are variously textured, toned, and hued” (Sandelowski,  
253 2000, p.337). In line with our epistemological situatedness, here we address reflexivity through  
254 which we make transparent the processes of ensuring the study’s quality.

255 According to Day (2012), reflexivity concerns three interrelated issues: (1) researchers'  
256 underlying assumptions about knowledge production (epistemology), (2) issues of power,  
257 researchers' identity and positionality, and (3) reflexive techniques to produce good-quality and  
258 rigorous qualitative research. Epistemological reflexivity refers to awareness of issues such as,  
259 how they go about *choreographing* a study, how they write *of* and *about* lived  
260 experience or phenomenon, how research papers *create* a particular version of reality  
261 through selective (in)visibility of what is included in or excluded from the paper, which  
262 is *contingent* on a methodological choice, etc. (Ryba & Schinke, 2009, p. 269)

263 Throughout the research process, we engaged in lengthy discussions on each authors'  
264 paradigmatic positioning. The first author had been guided by existentialism and narrative inquiry,  
265 whereas the second author, as a novice qualitative researcher, had not firmly established herself in  
266 any paradigmatic "camp". Nevertheless, having experienced personal difficulties as a Finnish elite  
267 runner, second author was acutely aware that it was impossible for her to conduct "objective" and  
268 detached research. Her research questions stemmed not only from gaps in the literature but also  
269 from her experiences of, and desire to bring change to, distance running practices in Finland. The  
270 first author is also Finnish and a non-elite runner, whereas the third author is a former track athlete  
271 (sprints and hurdles) and has lived in Finland for several years, but is not a Finn. Our different  
272 positioning in relation to the study topic allowed us to detect multiple layers of attitudes and  
273 assumptions associated with gender and running. Although the researcher triangulation allowed for  
274 developing reflexivity and additional insights into our data, we acknowledge that our interpretation  
275 of runners' experiences remains partial and incomplete, and therefore our findings cannot be  
276 essentialised as 'Finnish runners' experiences. As a research team, we shared the aspiration to  
277 understand the phenomenon from runners' subjective points of view and to give 'voice' to  
278 subjugated knowledge, especially in the case of female athletes.



303 The performance narrative (Douglas & Carless, 2006) could be identified as a vital element  
304 of all athletes' narratives from the mastery years. For those, whose sense of self most strongly relied  
305 on this narrative, result stagnation or decline threatened to disrupt their identity narratives. In such  
306 moments, people have two options: either to modify their behavior in order to restore narrative  
307 alignment, or to search for alternative narratives within which to understand their experiences  
308 (Carless & Douglas, 2013). For most female athletes, performance narrative was a non-negotiable  
309 ingredient of the elite athletic career.

310 I: What were the reasons for retirement?

311 Elina (32): I did not succeed any more. Sport was everything to me so obviously I was  
312 striving for success. And when I did not succeed I was not interested in running.

313 Previous studies on gender in the male dominated fields of sport and business have  
314 suggested that, in these contexts, women need to act tougher than men in order to be considered  
315 competent (Granito, 2002; Nicolson, Rowland, Lokman, & Fox 2012). In order to be validated as  
316 "serious athletes", the female runners had strongly internalized performance narratives offered in the  
317 sport culture. For these narratives to provide with meaning and coherence, athletic development is  
318 essential; therefore, female athletes could not imagine continuing the career beyond that.

319 Men and women drew from different exemplary narratives (Spector-Mersel, 2006) in  
320 justifying their career decisions in the face of result stagnation. Women drew from exemplary  
321 female athlete career where sport was a project of youth, illustrated by their observations that  
322 "everyone else retired". Cultural narratives of incompatibility of elite sport and family (Appleby &  
323 Fisher, 2009) and lack of alternatives provided additional interpretive resources for one of the  
324 runners, who considered her unplanned pregnancy as the normative end of her elite athletic career:

325 Sylvi (35): [Becoming pregnant] was a shock in terms of my athletic career. I thought  
326 that's it... At that time she [an elite Finnish mother athlete] was not running... [Later]



327 I read that she had a babysitter several hours a day so she could do her training, and  
328 her husband was also taking care of the baby. Then it could work, in theory. If you  
329 were in international level then you would have the money to do that. I never exceeded  
330 national level so that would have been a very challenging combination.

331 In contrast, majority of male athletes drew from a narrative suggesting that it was acceptable  
332 and worthwhile to continue the athletic career beyond the peak years and after having children.  
333 Alternative narratives that provided them with a new template for continuing the athletic career  
334 involved relational narratives surrounding male bonding (Curry, 1991), love for running and  
335 enjoyment of challenges. One of the men illustrated the power of exemplary narratives:

336 Heikki (36): In the future, I can see myself challenging the younger guys especially in  
337 the selection to club relays. This local athlete, 41 years old, is now a kind of role  
338 model for me. He is five years older than me, but running and competing just like I  
339 am... So I can see that I will be competing also after I retire from professional sport.

#### 340 **Transition into Vocational Development**

341 Graduation and transition to work is a central part of the Western exemplary life script and it  
342 typically occurs during the mastery stage of an elite athletic career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).  
343 Attesting to the prescriptive function of a life script, Fivush (2010) suggested that “it is not simply  
344 that one *typically* gets married and begins a career path in one’s 20s but that one *should* get married  
345 and begin a career path in one’s 20’s” (p.93). For two male and six female amateur runners, the  
346 transition in vocational development marked a turning point in the athletic career:

347 Ansa (36): My athletic career went hand in hand with my studies. I graduated and  
348 started to work and then I started thinking that maybe this is it. It is different to train if  
349 you work... and I felt I wanted to work. So, I was not willing to continue running.

350 Similar to previous narrative research in the Nordic context (Ryba et al., 2014; Ryba,  
351 Ronkainen, & Selänne 2015), we found that especially female athletes experienced pressure from  
352 their families to conform to the exemplary life script where graduation should lead to full-time work  
353 and then family. As the life script appears incompatible with the performance narrative of elite sport,  
354 which conveys the “all in” attitude as the only way to live the athlete life (Douglas & Carless,  
355 2006), most women felt they had to choose between the gendered life script and sport. However,  
356 rather than constructing a victim narrative, many women also expressed interest in work and  
357 studies. For men, on the other hand, compromising academic achievement and work due to  
358 commitment to sport was more often approved by parents. Several male athletes were willing to  
359 postpone their ‘second career’, as exemplified in other Finnish studies (Vuolle, 1978).

360 Timo (33): I didn’t retire because I could not get sponsor money or I felt a pressure to  
361 do something else, get a job. Nothing like that. I just lost interest in running.

### 362 **Injuries and Overtraining**

363 A third central theme was related to injury and overtraining. Researchers in sport medicine,  
364 athletic training, and sport psychology have suggested that female athletes may be more susceptible  
365 to injury than males due to physiological and psychological factors (e.g. Clement et al., 2012;  
366 Granito, 2002; Ivkovic Franić, Bojanić, Pećina, 2007). In our study, all athletes reported injuries, but  
367 only female athletes’ stories were dominated by them during the mastery years.

368 Hillevi (32): I had many injuries and the training suffered because of that... over three  
369 years. My motivation was decreasing because I could never fully do the training.

370 Most female runners were very conscientious in following coaches’ instructions, as observed in  
371 other studies as well (e.g., Kristiansen, Tomten, Hanstad, & Roberts, 2012; Tomlinson & Yorganci,  
372 1997). When one of the female runners challenged her coach, she had to face serious consequences:

373 Siiri (31): I became overtrained... I had a new coach and he was... we had trained  
374 really hard and when I could not recover from those trainings, it was like battling with  
375 him. Before the national championships, I refused to do the hard trainings because I  
376 knew I would not recover. He said he would not coach me anymore.

377 Previous studies have similarly demonstrated that if women challenge coaches' authority,  
378 especially when facing injuries, this may result in a conflict (Kristiansen et al., 2012). These  
379 experiences reflect the dominant gender order in sport where men are positioned as naturally more  
380 knowledgeable and competent (Kilty, 2006), and that female athletes are often expected to listen to  
381 their coaches rather than their bodies. In previous research, female athletes have linked their injuries  
382 and overtraining to coaches' tendency to plan training regimes based on male stamina (Kristiansen  
383 et al., 2012). This was not directly evident in the present study, but women's coaching relationships  
384 were characterised by dependency rather than collaboration (see also Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997),  
385 and women mentioned that the coach was most often designing the training plan alone rather than  
386 with the athlete. Previous research has indicated that a democratic coaching style is especially  
387 important for female athletes to sustain intrinsic motivation (Amorose & Horn, 2000); in our study,  
388 most women drew from performance narratives associated with extrinsic motivation.

389 Men's narratives of injuries were different from female athletes, as they drew from the  
390 dominant masculine narrative where injuries are constructed as an inevitable part of sport and one  
391 should not complain about them (Dowling Næss, 2001; Granito, 2002). Men's stories implied that  
392 they generally had less serious injuries, but also that injuries were naturalized as a part of the  
393 exemplary athlete narrative. Most men described collaborative coaching relationships where they  
394 were allowed to challenge their coaches. Our finding of the gendered pattern in coaching  
395 relationships is consistent with previous research reports (Granito, 2002; Kristiansen et al., 2012).

396 **Loneliness**

397 Both men and women discussed the lonely dimension of being an elite athlete. Indeed,  
398 distance running is a sport where loneliness is an inextricable part of the experiential and cultural  
399 landscape (Ronkainen, Harrison & Ryba, 2014). For some of the female athletes, loneliness was  
400 connected with retirement decision-making:

401 Regina (33): It was so lonely, the training. I believe that if I had more support in the  
402 final years of my career, if someone would have been interested, motivated or  
403 supported me, I could have gotten more out of myself. I felt I was all alone.

404 For many women, the experience of loneliness was intensified in the face of injuries and  
405 overtraining. Female athletes may seek for more social support in these situations than men  
406 (Granito, 2002; Kristiansen et al., 2012; Ogilvie 1998), but our participants suggested that very  
407 limited support was available. Even female athletes' parents were withdrawing their support for  
408 sport during the mastery years and expected their daughters to (re-)align their life trajectories to the  
409 cultural script of a 'normal' life. Male athletes' experiences were different in two important ways:  
410 first, relational sport narratives were increasingly important in later stages of their careers, and  
411 secondly, loneliness in running was mainly storied as a positive experience leading to self-  
412 knowledge. Similar to previous research (e.g., Curry, 1991), men's narratives constructed sport as a  
413 primary sphere of male bonding. This was explicated in the importance of "the Sunday long run"  
414 with other runners and training camps as a site of comradeship and a source of motivation.

415 Jaakko (28): In the training camps you're never alone, you always have your mates  
416 there (...) I also talk with other runners almost daily on the phone. One of my friends  
417 told me yesterday he is quitting running, he is only going to be a recreational athlete  
418 from now on. I tried to convince him to still join us in the training camp next winter...

419 Secondly, men's narratives of loneliness in running drew from Finnish cultural imagination  
420 of runners as solitary heroes whose ascetic dedication is constructed as a virtue (Alaoja, 2014).

421 Many men had developed these narratives at early years of their careers, and maintained that they  
422 enjoyed and, occasionally, preferred solitary training runs.

423 Tommi (34): Athletes know themselves better than average, learn to know how they  
424 feel in each moment. And, in the end, loneliness and getting along with one's own  
425 head are essential parts of life. Especially in endurance sport you develop a lot in that.

426 Women were also familiar with these narratives surrounding loneliness and running, but as  
427 they were maturing as athletes, they increasingly disengaged from this narrative:

428 Emmi (28) ... I started to feel that the distance running family is just boring. Or I  
429 mean, there are so many lonely wolves, and I simply did not admire that any more.

430 However, after retirement also women started to develop positive accounts of solitary  
431 running where it became "time for oneself" and a form of stress release, something which we will  
432 explore in more detail later. There may be several reasons for why women and men experienced  
433 loneliness in such different ways. As the cultural narratives surrounding lonely heroes of running are  
434 indeed male narratives, it may be that these resonate better with men. Moreover, Sherrod (1987)  
435 asserted that men and women construct different meanings in friendship, suggesting that men's  
436 friendships are derived from doing things together whereas women value disclosures and emotional  
437 closeness. However, as literature on loneliness in sport psychology is scarce, future research needs  
438 to tap into this experience, especially in relation to gender and sport sub-cultural contexts.

### 439 **Reconstructed Athletic and Runner Identities**

440 Finally, most athletes talked about positive changes in their running experience after  
441 disengagement from highest level of competition. Albeit some runners experienced a narrative  
442 wreckage (Frank, 1995) of their elite athlete identities, the identity narratives associated with  
443 experiential world of running provided them with continuity amidst transition. Especially for  
444 women, bodily experiences and meanings that had been suppressed by the performance narrative

445 plot became active and visible in the narrative reconstruction associated with career transition.

446 Regina, who terminated her elite career largely because of a long-term injury, explained:

447 Regina (33): I was thinking that when the injury will heal, I will be able to run again,  
448 as much as I want. It is a great feeling, that's what I used to love. It is a way of  
449 releasing stress and the way of feeling like myself. It's difficult to explain, maybe you  
450 know what I am talking about, [in running] you are most strongly there for yourself.

451 It has been noted that immersion into values and practices of elite sport culture may lead  
452 some athletes to lose authenticity in their athletic practices (Roderick, 2014). This feeling and a  
453 sense of returning to original motives was expressed by many women who explained that, when the  
454 internal and external pressures to perform had dissolved, the bodily pleasure and sense of presence  
455 in running returned. Also male athletes mentioned increased enjoyment and presence in running  
456 after passing over their peak career years. Yet, whereas females disengaged from competition, many  
457 men continued competing, explaining that they enjoyed the challenge and the social aspect of the  
458 races. Indeed, men felt more aligned with masculine values and narratives of competitive sport  
459 (Sparkes & Smith, 2002), whereas women experienced a need to take some distance to the  
460 institutional practices and social world of elite running.

461 Our findings challenge the body of research suggesting that sustaining a strong athletic  
462 identity post-retirement is problematic, a function of denial or due to lack of alternative life projects  
463 (e.g., Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004). Instead, there is a need for more layered  
464 delineating of meanings assigned to identity in sport and their impact on well-being and adaptation  
465 to career transitions. For example, several male athletes developed identity narratives where  
466 performance, challenge, friendship, enjoyment and 'being' were intertwined to constitute  
467 meaningful involvement in competitive sport, which remained central for them also in post-elite  
468 years. Due to multiplicity of meanings in athletic identity narratives, some athletes' subjective

469 careers extended into Veteran athletics and they did not consider themselves as fully ‘retired’. These  
470 narratives do not fit career discourses of sport psychology where athletic career is understood as a  
471 project of youth, aimed at reaching the peak of athletic performance. There is a danger, therefore,  
472 that career discourses in sport psychology may be legitimizing and perpetuating the performance  
473 narratives of elite sport, while simultaneously alienating and silencing those experiences which do  
474 not comply with the dominant storyline (Carless & Douglas, 2013; Ryba, 2009).

#### 475 **Limitations**

476         Despite the potential of thematic narrative analysis on identifying common patterns across  
477 multiple stories, the analysis often loses the richness and uniqueness of each personal story. Another  
478 potential danger in doing comparative analysis is to essentialize gender and reproduce stereotypes,  
479 thus neglecting the fluid and dynamic ways in which gender is performed and (re)constructed within  
480 different contexts. In this paper, we have aspired to emphasize that gender and athletic identity are  
481 not fixed constructs but that they are experienced and performed differently across the lifespan.

482         The initially separate interview studies had different objectives, which influenced decisions  
483 concerning participant recruitment. The men’s study focused on personal and spiritual meanings  
484 assigned to sport across the career lifespan, whereas women’s study focused specifically on athletic  
485 retirement. Therefore, it is possible that the male sample represented mainly athletes who had many  
486 positive experiences in sport in the course of their long athletic careers. Some female participants, in  
487 contrast, had terminated their elite careers at a very young age. While we acknowledge that  
488 sampling possibly contributed to polarization of gender differences, from a narrative perspective the  
489 study findings are credible in mapping out the Finnish cultural landscapes of elite endurance sports  
490 within which the participant stories were rendered meaningful (Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

#### 491 **Conclusions**

492 Analyzing personal stories allowed us to discern how these were relationally and selectively  
493 constructed from available cultural narratives. It was evident that most women understood  
494 competitive running as a project of youth and were lacking exemplary narratives on prolonged  
495 athletic careers and especially on being a mother-athlete. Their stories were drawing from  
496 incompatible narratives of athletic performance and exemplary gendered life, which resulted in  
497 psychological distress and loneliness during result stagnation and health problems in final years of  
498 their elite athletic careers. In contrast, male athletes had broader and more flexible narrative  
499 resources for negotiating their athletic identities as mature athletes. The experiential dimensions and  
500 joys of running were central to all athletes, especially after retirement from elite sport.

501 The transmission of sporting narratives takes place through exemplary athlete stories and  
502 coaching practices. In this study, all but one athlete had trained with a male coach. Also, when  
503 female athletes discussed parents' involvement in their athletic career, mothers were not mentioned,  
504 but fathers were considered as the main supporters. Therefore, not only is the running culture  
505 dominantly masculine, but also family members socializing female athletes into sport are most often  
506 men (see also Kavoura et al., 2015). Moreover, male athletes expressed much more interest and  
507 perceived competence for coaching than female athletes, whose main barriers related to lack of  
508 time, lack of expertise and bad experiences with their own coaches. This gender positioning and  
509 consequent lack of women entering coaching was therefore working to sustain the situation where  
510 sporting narratives offered to young and novice runners are predominantly male narratives.

511 Fortunately, some changes are taking place in the Finnish sport culture: women's  
512 involvement in coaching is increasing (Pihlakoski, 2014), and women's narratives have become  
513 visible through runners' blogs in Finland as in elsewhere (e.g., Dolson, 2011). Blog writing has  
514 provided female runners an unmediated way of sharing experiences, potentially challenging the  
515 dominant narrative landscapes. Indeed, research into Finnish martial arts has illustrated that when



516 women actively take up coaching, administration duties, and promotion of women's participation,  
517 change towards more inclusive culture is possible (Kavoura, Chroni, Kokkonen, & Ryba, in press).  
518 At the same time, we must be aware that women's increased participation in itself does not  
519 necessarily lead to cultural changes, and other studies have demonstrated that female athletes and  
520 coaches often continue to reproduce the hegemonic masculine narratives (Kavoura et al., 2015;  
521 Tomlinson & Yorganci, 1997). Our female participants were cautious of this and hesitant to start  
522 coaching to avoid continuing the culture practices learned from their own coaches. For a change to  
523 take place, it is crucial that athletes become aware of the narratives within which they have been  
524 embedded and that alternative narratives exist.

525 A cultural praxis approach combined with narrative methodology was useful for  
526 understanding how gender impacts construction of meaning in athletic practices. This study  
527 illustrated that the notions of exemplary narratives and narrative identity can help us in gaining a  
528 better understanding of why male and female athletes may recount very different career experiences.  
529 The typology of career narratives (Douglas & Carless, 2006) was a useful tool for narrative thinking  
530 on athletic career, but as they themselves suggest, it is not exhaustive and has room for further  
531 development. Moreover, it is important to be aware that most athletes develop multiple, possibly  
532 conflicting storylines, which may go through several reconstructions as new meanings emerge.

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## **What can Gender Tell us About the Pre-Retirement Experiences of Elite Distance Runners in Finland?: A Thematic Narrative Analysis**

### Highlights

- We examined Finnish distance runners' experiences of the mastery stage of athletic career
- The study contributes to understanding of gendered construction of elite athletic careers
- Qualitative interviews were analysed with thematic narrative analysis
- Women struggled with injuries and loneliness whereas men developed relational narratives in sport
- This cultural praxis study seeks to instill practical changes in elite running culture in Finland