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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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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender and Distance Running

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical Approach

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Methodology

Participants

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

Data Collection

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

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

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

Thematic Narrative Analysis

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

Reflexivity and Validity

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

According to Day (2012), reflexivity concerns three interrelated issues: (1) researchers' underlying assumptions about knowledge production (epistemology), (2) issues of power, researchers' identity and positionality, and (3) reflexive techniques to produce good-quality and rigorous qualitative research. Epistemological reflexivity refers to awareness of issues such as,

> how they go about *choreographing* a study, how they write *of* and *about* lived experience or phenomenon, how research papers *create* a particular version of reality through selective (in)visibility of what is included in or excluded from the paper, which is *contingent* on a methodological choice, etc. (Ryba & Schinke, 2009, p. 269)

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

Aware that validity is a contested issue in qualitative inquiry (Sparkes, 1998), we followed Tracy (2010) and focused on eight key criteria: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence. Many of these criteria are at the heart of cultural praxis (e.g., focus on problem formulation, resonance, moral and practical contribution, and ethics; Ryba, 2009; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). Through reflexivity, as discussed above, we have addressed questions related to rigor and sincerity of the research. In line with cultural praxis, the participants were included in the process of deriving the knowledge claims by asking for their feedback on the themes and the analysis, and with some of them we had prolonged contact via email. However, these member checks were not used as a verification technique, but as opportunities for further elaboration and insight into co-construction of research findings (Bloor, 1997; Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2009).

Results and Discussion

In the analysis, we identified five dominant themes: (1) questioning athletic development, (2) transition into vocational development, (3) injuries and overtraining, (4) loneliness, and (5) reconstructed athletic and runner identities. These themes were closely connected with retirement decision-making as well as shifting meaning in the runner identity narrative.

Questioning Athletic Development

A common theme from mastery years across all participants' stories was questioning athletic development. Awareness of limits in talent and bodily changes associated with recovery and training responses started to pose a threat to athletic identities framed by the performance narrative.

> Matti (30): I remember that I started questioning running and training... I became aware that although I was still developing as a runner and improving some of my records, I would probably not reach international level. I just didn’t have the talent. Even if I had worked as hard as possible, I would still not succeed.

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

> I: What were the reasons for retirement?
>
> Elina (32): I did not succeed any more. Sport was everything to me so obviously I was striving for success. And when I did not succeed I was not interested in running.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Transition into Vocational Development

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

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

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

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

Injuries and Overtraining

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

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

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

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

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

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

Loneliness

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Reconstructed Athletic and Runner Identities

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

plot became active and visible in the narrative reconstruction associated with career transition. Regina, who terminated her elite career largely because of a long-term injury, explained:

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

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

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

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

Limitations

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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