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

Noora J. Ronkainen, Anna Kavoura, & Tatiana V. Ryba

Running head: NARRATIVE AND DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVES

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

Abstract

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

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

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

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

Keywords: meta-study, epistemology, narrative identity, subject positions, cultural praxis

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

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

Much (although not all) of cultural scholarship has been framed as cultural praxis (e.g., McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012; Schinke, et al., 2015). Cultural praxis is an approach to sport psychology which emphasises blending theory with social practice in order to produce progressive social change. Issues of sociocultural difference, social justice, and the impact of scientific research practices on producing privilege or marginalisation of certain identities and experiences are at heart of cultural praxis scholarship (Ryba & Wright, 2005; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2015). In addition to raising awareness of participants’ various cultural identities, cultural

praxis scholars have called for researchers to reflexively explicate how their own identities, values, and positioning impact methodological choices and their interactions with research participants (McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Schinke et al., 2012). The recent special section on intersecting identities in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* (Schinke & McGannon, 2015) further demonstrates that cultural conceptualisations of identity are gaining popularity in sport psychology.

Narrative inquiry and discourse analysis are two growing methodologies that align closely with central tenets of cultural praxis articulated through critical cultural studies (see McGannon & Smith, 2015; Fisher & Roper, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005). Discourse studies is a general term for different traditions and strands of work on discourse (discussed in details later). Narrative and discursive approaches differ from traditional identity theories in conceptualising identity as a cultural construction, rather than an entity or a trait residing within the individual. Both approaches understand identities as fluid and multiple (rather than stable and singular), and acknowledge that identities are performed in a social context and cannot be assessed in isolation from the cultural context (Carless & Douglas, 2013b; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013). However, narrative studies tend to focus more on coherence and continuity of identity narratives, whereas discursive approaches conceptualise identities as fragmented, fluid, and multiple. Moreover, both approaches suggest that identity construction takes place as interplay of individual agency and contextual narrative or discursive possibilities. Yet, narrative approaches often put more emphasis on individuals' agency in selectively crafting narratives from available repertoire, while recognising that some narratives can be silenced or denied and therefore not accessible to people. Discursive approaches, on the other hand, suggest that some subject positions are privileged and can be

also ascribed to individuals, thus limiting their choices and behaviour (Cosh, LeCouteur, et al. 2013; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

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

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

Method

Identifying Relevant Articles

We conducted searches in three databases (ScienceDirect, SPORTDiscus, and Google Scholar) using keywords “narrative identity” + athlete + psychology, “athlet* identity” (in Google Scholar: athletic and athlete identity) + “psychology”, “athlet* subjectivity” (in Google Scholar: athletic and athlete subjectivity) + psychology, and “subject position” + athlete + psychology (to reduce search results, in Google Scholar: “sport psychology”). The search terms subjectivity and subject positions were used because discursive approaches often prefer these terms over the traditional concept of identity (McGannon & Busanich, 2010; McGannon & Mauws, 2010). For ScienceDirect (165 search results) and SportDiscus (81 results), we read abstracts of all studies; for Google Scholar (4923 results), the initial

screening was done based on title and source (4632 rejected). The first and the second author completed the database searches, and all three authors hand searched for additional articles from their own collections. We also searched from reference lists of already obtained articles, and from publication lists of scholars whose work had been identified as relevant in the database searches. Thirty-eight studies were read in full by all authors to decide whether they should be included in the review.

The inclusion criteria were defined as follows: the articles had to be (1) published in peer reviewed academic journals, (2) written in English, (3) positioned in sport psychology or psychology (not sociology), (4) empirical, (5) focused on athletes (and not, for example, on coaches, fans, administrators, or recreational exercisers; however, mixed samples of athletes and exercisers or non-athletes were included), (6) available in full text, and (7) use narrative or discursive approach as a theoretical perspective and as a method of analysis.

Inclusion criteria 3, 5 and 7 were problematic. Since narrative and discursive approaches are interdisciplinary, in many studies it was difficult to assess how the studies were positioned; for this review, articles had to be positioned within psychology. Some articles discussed “runner identities”, “tennis identities”, or “sport persons” and it was unclear whether these terms related to organised competitive sports or recreational exercise. We followed authors’ positioning of the article (e.g., if the study aim was to understand exercise behaviour or experiences, it was excluded). Several studies discussed athletic identity, narratives, and discourses in some parts of the article, but only studies which systematically used narrative or discursive perspective to theorise and analyse athletic identity were included in this review. A total of 23 peer-reviewed research articles met these inclusion criteria. The study topics, source journals, theoretical frameworks, methods of analysis, and type of data are described in tables 1 and 2.

The Meta-study Method

A meta-study is a method designed to analyse and synthesise qualitative research into the chosen topic (Paterson et al., 2001; Thorne et al., 2002). After establishing the study objectives and primary data, a meta-study involves four interrelated phases:

(1) meta-theory: analysis of the conceptual and theoretical frameworks and how they led researchers to formulate their topic, research questions, and subsequent methodological choices;

(2) meta-method: analysis of the methodologies, methods, and processes of knowledge production, and their impact on analytical moves and interpretation of findings;

(3) meta-data-analysis: synthesis and reinterpretation of findings in the identified primary studies in light of findings in other studies;

(4) meta-synthesis: a synthesis of three previous phases in order to identify patterns between theorising, methodological choices, and interpretation of findings, and to develop new knowledge about the studied phenomenon.

The meta-study method involves critical analysis of how theory in primary studies has informed subsequent studies and how epistemological and theoretical stances have led to certain methodological decisions and interpretations of findings. Through meta-study method, we can identify dominant ideas in each research tradition, methodological challenges, and directions for future studies (Clarke et al., 2015). In the present study, we will first analyse narrative and discursive studies separately, and then conclude by a synthesis of key issues, limitations of the present study, and future directions.

Narrative Identity

Meta-theory

In this review, we identified a total of 18 narrative studies into athletic identity. While narrative studies can have different emphases, the fundamental assumption of narrative research is that identity is developed in the act of storytelling (Crossley, 2000). It is postulated that each identity narrative contains unique and idiosyncratic features, and that it is our psychological need to infuse our experiences with meaning to construct coherent narratives of how and why we have come to be as we are (McAdams, 1993). At the same time, identity narratives are always dependent on cultural narratives available to the individual (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In addition to these common assumptions, narrative theorists also have some differences in their conceptualisations of identity. Smith and Sparkes (2008) identified five perspectives (the psychosocial, the inter-subjective, the storied resource, the dialogic, and the performative perspectives) on narrative identity, which form a continuum between “a thick individual and thin social relational” perspective at one end, and “a thin individual and thick social relational” perspective at the other end (Smith & Sparkes, 2008, p.5). Scholars positioned in the former end of the continuum align with realist ontology and phenomenological perspectives and tend to emphasise the inner world of the individual, authenticity, and narrative coherence. For example, McAdams (1987, 1993) built his theory of narrative identity on Erikson’s (1968) stages of psychosocial development, and suggested that narrative identity is a psychological structure that evolves over time and infuses our lives with unity and purpose. In the reviewed studies, this perspective was employed in part by Gearing (1999) who studied identity reconstruction of former professional footballers in the United Kingdom. In the middle ground of the continuum, researchers typically adopt relativist ontology and epistemology, giving equal emphasis on personal and social processes in identity development and negotiation. The reviewed studies mostly occupied a middle position with leanings towards social constructionist end of the continuum. For example, the

research question for Carless and Douglas (2013b) was “how are the personal stories of male athletes affected by elite sport culture?” (p. 28). Finally, researchers aligned with a performative perspective have often been influenced by discursive psychology and a view of identities as situational, fluid, multiple, and contextually negotiated. Two of the reviewed studies were influenced by the performative perspective, and analysed discourses that athletes drew from their narrations (Busanich, McGannon, & Schinke, 2014; Ryba, Ronkainen, & Selänne, 2015). However, most studies drew from theorising in both ends of the continuum and did not explicitly position their studies with a particular view on narrative identity.

[insert table 1 here]

Meta-method

Life story interviewing has traditionally been a preferred method of data collection in narrative studies due to its ability to produce in-depth, contextual and sequential stories; in our review, it also proved the most common method of data collection (13 articles). In addition, five studies used semi-structured or narrative interviews, two studies used focus groups, one study used autoethnography, one study used expressive writing, and one study used visual representations; in six studies, more than one method of data collection was used (e.g., focus groups and individual interviews; Carless & Douglas, 2012). Recent calls for using alternative methods to allow participants express their experiences in more creative ways beyond spoken words (Riessman 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009) were in part answered by Busanich, McGannon, and Schinke (2016) who asked participants to produce a visual representation of their experiences as runners.

Narrative methods are variously classified to thematic, structural, dialogic/performative, visual, and ethnodramatic creative analytic practices (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Most narrative studies into athletic identity have followed the “traditional” path and

used content or thematic analysis and/or structural narrative analysis. These studies focused on identifying common themes/elements across participant narratives, and discerning how participant narratives were organised and selectively constructed from available narrative resources. It is noteworthy that, despite the emphasis on co-construction and performativity of stories in many theoretical works on narrative inquiry (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2009), only two studies used a performative analysis (in combination with other analytical techniques). Therefore, it is evident that the potential of performative narrative analysis for understanding athletic identities has not been fully realised. Finally, in four studies the analytical strategy was not framed as a specific narrative method. More recent studies were more explicit about the types of techniques used, which might reflect the development in methodological literature or more strict review processes demanding methodological detail and justification.

Meta-data-analysis

The narrative studies into athletic identity have focused on five broad themes: athletic retirement (seven studies), identity development in elite sport (five studies), eating disorders (four studies), coping in sport (one study), and athletic identity in disability sport (one study). The first narrative studies focused on understanding the impact of career termination on narrative identity. Gearing (1999) studied retirement experiences of professional footballers, whereas Sparkes and Smith (Sparkes, 1998; Sparkes & Smith, 2002) examined athletic identity disruption in illness or spinal cord injury. These studies illustrated the biographical rupture associated with (especially involuntary) career termination, and concluded that dominant narratives surrounding sport and hegemonic masculinity may restrict access to alternative narratives. However, Gearing (1999) also suggested that memories of the athlete self could be a positive source of meaning in later life.

Most extensive research into narrative identity in sport has been conducted by Carless and Douglas (2009, 2012, 2013a, 2013b; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Douglas, 2009). Drawing from Frank's (1995) concept of narrative type as "the most general storyline that can be recognized underlying the plot and tensions of particular stories" (p. 75), their early work focused on delineating cultural narratives that female golfers drew from in constructing their identity stories. They suggested that *performance narrative*, focused on winning, achievement and total dedication, is the dominant narrative type in elite sports (Douglas & Carless, 2006), whereas *discovery* and *relational* narratives were alternative storylines where athletic identities gained meaning from exploration or relationships. They further tested the typology in other sports, and provided more evidence of the dominance of the performance narrative in elite sport. However, they also identified ways of resisting the dominant narratives (i.e., developing stories about the self that were not tied to athletic performance; Carless & Douglas, 2013b).

Many subsequent studies have (in part) drawn upon the typology developed by Douglas and Carless (2006) and agreed that performance narrative forms the dominant cultural narrative in sport (Busanich, et al., 2014, 2016; Hudson & Day, 2012; Papathomas & Lavalley, 2014; Ronkainen, Ryba, & Nesti, 2013; Ronkainen, Watkins, & Ryba, 2016; Ryba et al., 2015). The accumulated studies have shown that athletes drawing upon performance narrative may experience emotional distress when encountering such sport stressors as injury, major competition, and migration (Hudson & Day, 2012) or performance decline and ageing (Ronkainen et al., 2013). Two recent studies examining gendered career development (Ryba et al., 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2016) reported that female athletes drew strongly from the performance narrative, but it was often in conflict with cultural life scripts for women. It was suggested that sporting narratives which are largely created by men are often in conflict with

narratives of femininity, therefore creating challenges for women in crafting their elite athletic identities (Ronkainen et al., 2016).

A total of four studies focused on disordered eating and narrative identity. Papathomas and Lavalley (2012) conducted a case study of an athlete with eating disorder and sexual abuse and found that, due to lacking previous opportunities for storying these experiences, the athlete's story was fragmented and conflicting. Busanich et al. (2014, 2016) and Papathomas and Lavalley (2014) built upon the notion of performance narrative and found that, within this narrative, the lean body was constructed as normative for athletic success. Eating disorders emerged as an attempt to develop or restore narrative alignment with performance narrative (Busanich et al., 2014, 2016); however, Papathomas and Lavalley (2014) also found that whereas self-starvation was first constructed as a means of athletic achievement, it later transformed to an achievement goal in and of itself.

Perrier and colleagues (2014) used an inductive approach to identify narratives of athletic identity after acquiring a physical disability. Participants constructed a master narrative of an athlete which involved physical qualities including performance and skills, and psychological qualities including commitment and goal orientations. It was found that those who associated athletic identity with the physical qualities could not imagine being athletes after acquiring the disability, but those who relied on the psychological qualities could still define themselves as athletes.

Synthesis and Future Directions for Narrative Studies

Narrative studies have revealed how cultural values and assumptions shape athletes' identities in accord with dominant life scripts, and supported the notion that elite sport involvement may restrict athletes' identity development. The typology developed by Douglas and Carless has been a useful conceptual tool for studying athletic identities, and many

researchers have drawn from this work. Despite the benefits of such approach, Riessman (2005) warned that working with typologies can lead to fitting participant stories into a single narrative type and omitting contradictions and multiple storylines that people develop simultaneously: “What happens to ambiguities, ‘deviant’ responses that don’t fit into a typology, the unspoken?” (p.3) Therefore, “investigators might search for coexistent realities – selves and communities that are pulling together and pulling apart at the same time” (Riessman 2008, p.191). For those continuing to work with cultural narrative types and their impact on athletes’ identities, it is important to stay flexible and seek to expand and revise the typology proposed by Douglas and Carless (2006). For example, in motivation literature there is the distinction between task and ego orientations, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Duda, Chi, Newton, & Walling, 1995), whereas the “performance narrative” appears to only concern extrinsic outcomes and ego orientation. In light of motivation research it is likely that many athletes construct identity narratives which focus on personal development, learning, and mastery of skills (rather than solely the outcome), something which is not presented in the current typology.

Much of narrative research into athletic identity has been influenced by Frank’s (1995) ideas about narrative types, and many studies have sought to identify cultural narratives of sport that are used as “building blocks” in athletes’ identity narratives. Focusing their analytical gaze on overall storylines, sport psychology researchers (as narrative scholars in other fields) have situated their work almost exclusively within the “big story” tradition of narrative inquiry. Participants were most often interviewed with the life story method and asked to tell stories about their lives as a whole; the researchers’ analytical task, then, was to construct the grand narratives of their lives (Georgakopoulou, 2006). However, this approach may involve reducing language to a referential function and neglect “small stories”, those

mundane narrations told in interactions which do not necessarily refer to important turning points or even to actual events and experiences (Bamberg, 2006). By shifting focus from overall storylines to small interactions between the researcher and the interviewee, sport psychology researchers could develop more insight to performative aspects (the *hows*) of athletic identity, what speakers may seek to accomplish by telling particular stories, and what are the aspects that have chosen to be silenced (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2009).

Finally, accumulated research has been mostly positioned in social constructionist end of narrative theory, and less attention has been given to the “inner world” of the individual. The construct of athletic identity appears to be mainly about participation in cultural narratives rather than the individual’s creative interpretation of their lived experiences in a social context. To address this gap, future scholarship could draw from existential psychology and phenomenological ideas; for a comprehensive discussion on theoretical integration of existential and narrative approaches, see Richert (2010). From an existential view, an experience of being-in-the-world precedes possessing any identity (May, 1983), and our selves emerge in our actions and in the relationship we develop with the social and physical world and our own being (Richert, 2010). In drawing from existential thought, narrative researchers could develop more insight to phenomenological experiencing and how athletes develop authentic ownership of their identity narratives in and through various sporting contexts. From an existential perspective, it should also be emphasised that, despite the findings related to harmful effects of the performance narrative on well-being in times of hardship, some athletes may nonetheless feel authentic ownership of the values and meanings associated with this kind of identity narrative. Strive for winning and excellence in sport can be a positive source of meaning in many athletes’ lives, and researchers as well as applied practitioners should be sensitive to and respect these views. However, working towards

widening the narrative context created in clubs and teams should be encouraged, because bringing alternative narratives for athletes' consideration may help them in evaluating which meanings provide them with greatest personal significance.

Discursive Identity

Meta-theory

In sport psychology, the study of discourse is a relatively new approach, and only five studies were identified in which athletes' identities have been conceptualised as discursively constructed. *Discourse studies* is an umbrella term for a number of approaches to analyse discourse. For example, Wetherell, Taylor, and Yates (2001) presented a range of different approaches of discourse analysis coming from five major traditions in discourse research, namely conversation analysis, sociolinguistics, discursive psychology, critical discourse analysis, and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Although important differences exist in the ways that each approach conceptualises identities (or even defines what discourse is), discursive investigations generally agree on the central role of language in the dynamic process of identity construction (see for example, Markula, 2014; Taylor, 2001; Willig, 2008). Language comes to constitute the individual by shaping certain ways of seeing (and being in) the world. Within discursive research, identities are theorised as fluid and multidimensional, and as something that people do or perform, rather than have (Butler, 1990; Willig, 2008). This implies that people can do/perform multiple (and often conflicting) identities, according to the cultural context in which they are displaying their selves and the discursive resources that are available to them (Butler, 1990; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Weedon, 2004).

Tightly connected to the discursive conceptualisation of identity are the notions of *subject position* and *subjectivity* (Markula, 2014; Weedon, 2004). A subject position is a location for people within discourse, consisted of specific rights and limitations. Once having adopted a

particular subject position, a person sees the world from the perspective of that position and certain ways of being in the world are made available (Davies & Harre, 1990). Certain discourses, and the subject positions that they constitute, are more privileged than others; and thus certain ways of being and certain identities become culturally dominant while others remain in the margins (Weedon, 2004). Referring to who we think we are and how we situate ourselves in the world, subjectivity is constituted through learning and using certain discursive practices, always drawing on the discourses that the subject has access to (Butler, 1990, 1993; Davies & Harre, 1990). Whilst individuals are not passive in positioning themselves in discourses, it is important to recognise that the site of subjectivity one occupies in a discourse can also be ascribed to individuals, limiting their possibilities to certain conventions as to how to feel, think and behave (Foucault, 1977, 1983; Weedon, 2004).

In the reviewed studies, two discursive approaches were used: Discursive Psychology (DP) and Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). DP emerged from conversation analysis and was first introduced to social psychology by Potter and Wetherell (1987). In opposition to psychology's preoccupation with cognition, DP treats psychological issues and phenomena as context-dependent and culturally constructed through language and discourse. Within DP, discourse is principally defined as talk and text, and identities are theorised as complex cultural and psychological constructions built selectively out of a variety of pre-existing linguistic resources (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Researchers following this approach have a preference for the use of naturalistic material and tend to focus on *how* people use discursive resources and with *what* effects (Willig, 2008). However, even within DP there are large variations, and researchers doing DP work might be influenced by multiple sources, such as by linguistics and ethnomethodology, or by Foucault's view on discourse and subjectivity (for an overview of the field see Potter, 2010, and Wetherell, 2007). Different strands of DP

moreover include the method of identifying interpretive repertoires (Wetherell & Potter, 1988), the Discursive Action Model (Edwards & Potter, 1993), and DP informed by conversation analysis (e.g. Hepburn & Potter, 2011). DP was first brought into the field of exercise psychology by McGannon and Mauws (2000), and issues related to self-identity in exercise settings have been explored through a DP perspective by McGannon and Spence (2010) and McGannon and Schinke (2013). Within sport psychology, a DP perspective has been employed to study athletes' accounts of athletic performances (Locke, 2004, 2008) and sport fans' identities (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). In our review, this approach was used by Cosh and her colleagues (Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, & Kettler, 2012; Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015) to study athletic identity.

FDA emerged from poststructuralist theory, and especially from the works of Michel Foucault (1969, 1971). For FDA researchers, discourse is more than talk and text and researchers need to consider how discourse constitutes people's everyday practices. Researchers that follow this approach theorise discourse as a system of representation that entails sets of knowledge and social practices, produces meanings, and shapes our understandings and realities (Foucault, 1969, 1971). Moreover, FDA is concerned with power dynamics that underlie discursive strategies (and identity negotiation) of research participants. The first FDA article positioned in cultural sport psychology was published by Roy and Ryba (2012). In our review, this approach was employed by Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni (2015) to explore how women judo athletes' experiences and identities are shaped by dominant cultural discourses surrounding gender.

[insert table 2 here]

Meta-method

Researchers positioned in DP and FDA draw on different theories, have different objectives, and ask different kinds of research questions that have implications for methodological choice (Willig, 2008). Within discursive psychology, there is a preference for the use of naturalistic material such as, audio or video recordings of human interactions occurring in everyday lives or in institutional settings, or media accounts. The reviewed DP studies analysed media articles (three studies) and audio-recordings of interactions (one study). On the other hand, researchers following a Foucauldian approach to discourse analysis draw on a much broader definition of discourse. Any symbolic system could be the subject of FDA, including human practices and interactions, cultural artefacts such as movies and photographs, the architecture of buildings, fashion, and more. The identified FDA study was based on interview data.

The reviewed DP studies broadly referred to discursive psychological analysis without providing detailed descriptions of their analytic procedure. One of the papers specifically referred to the synthetic approach of discursive psychological analysis, other papers cited methodological resources such as Edley (2001) and Edley and Wetherell (1999), and one study referred to the principles of conversation analysis. The FDA paper combined Willig's (2008) discursive analytic approach with thematic analysis and explicitly described the stages of the analytic procedure.

Meta-data-analysis

Cosh and colleagues (2012) examined elite athletes' management of their identities in interactions that occur during body composition testing. This study offered insights into how body regulation is carried out in practice, and into the role of institutions in the surveillance of athletes' bodies. The authors argued that the expectations surrounding an athlete's body are problematic and might even contribute to eating disorders, or difficulties with identity

management, when athletes are unable to present a desirable athletic identity. They suggested that institutional practices of body surveillance in the sporting context should be reconsidered. In their later work, Cosh and colleagues focused on athletic retirement (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013), return back to sport following retirement (Cosh, LeCouteur et al., 2013), and career transition difficulties (Cosh et al., 2015). Drawing on DP, they found that certain decisions and identity positions around retirement were privileged, while others were considered as non-appropriate. By discursively constructing (and repeatedly privileging) a certain time as the “right time”, an inevitable “reality” was shaped around athletic retirement, constraining athletes’ decision-making (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013). Moreover, the athlete who decided to return back to elite sport after retirement was constructed as motivated by emotion and impulsion (Cosh, LeCouteur, et al., 2013), and after retirement, only limited identities and actions were made available for the athletes (Cosh et al., 2015).

Kavoura and colleagues (2015) published the first feminist poststructuralist study in sport psychology that articulated athletic identity through subject positions. Drawing on FDA, they explored identity negotiations of female Greek judo athletes and examined cultural discourses through which female athletes articulate their sporting experiences. They found that dominant patriarchal beliefs and gender stereotypes were reflected in the ways in which female athletes negotiated multiple identities. It was argued that as women try to become accepted and appreciated in the male culture of sport, they themselves reproduce women’s subordination.

Synthesis and Future Directions for Discursive Studies

Discursive studies have suggested that athletic identity is a cultural construction produced within dominant discourses (of gender, age, class, race, and so forth). Research conducted within DP illustrated how cultural beliefs and expectations around age, athletic performance,

and the athletic body, shape our understanding of what it means to be an athlete. Athletes who do not meet or do not want to meet the cultural ideals might experience psychological tensions, and feel socially excluded or less privileged than the athletes who meet these ideals. Research that drew on Foucauldian and feminist poststructuralist theorising, explicated the complex power dynamics that underlie identity negotiation of women athletes.

To date, only a handful of studies have examined athletic identity from a discursive perspective, and these have mainly drawn on DP. It is evident that the potential of FDA for understanding athletic identities has not yet been realised. FDA provides the possibility to analyse almost any kind of symbolic system. Thus, in future studies, researchers could discursively analyse versatile and non-traditional data-sets, analyse more than one type of data (instead of interview data only or media data only), and combine discourse analysis with other methodologies (e.g., ethnography). In this way, the phenomenon could be understood from more than one angle, opening up multiple forms of knowledge.

As a myriad of issues regarding athletes' identities remain uninvestigated, we trust that both discursive approaches (DP and FDA) can be used to advance our knowledge-base. However, despite the potential of these approaches, Shi-xu (2005) has warned us for a Western bias that dominates the major discursive traditions and theories. Therefore, researchers who are studying cultural and marginalised identities of athletes, and are looking for theories and methodologies that would enable culturally-inclusive discourse analysis, might consider approaches suggested by Scollo (2011). For example, Bloammaert's *Critical Discourse Analysis* could allow researchers to investigate the effects of power in today's globalised sporting world and to inquire for marginalised voices of athletes, as well as the consequences of this lack of voice on athletes' identities and well-being (Scollo, 2011). Moreover, Shi-xu's *Cultural Approach to Discourse* (2005) could provide the means for

politically engaged research that seeks to undermine those discourses that exclude or discriminate against certain identities and groups of athletes, and to advocate for new discourses that are inclusive and non-hegemonic. Both of these approaches align well with the tenets of cultural praxis and share the same political commitment of “resisting discursively produced power and domination through critical research” (Shi-xu, 2005, p. 6).

Finally, instead of simply theorising identity, future discursive research should continue moving into praxis, deconstruct culturally repressive discourses that constrain athletes, and seek to craft new or alternative ones (Markula, 2014; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Shi-xu, 2005). Fairclough (1992) argued that social changes are linked to changes in discourse and that this relationship has a double orientation. Thus, attempts to engineer progressive social change should include attempts to change discursive practices. Researchers outside of the sport and exercise realm increasingly realise the value of conscious discursive interventions in tackling oppressive discourses and practices (see for example Haghighat, 2008, on deconstructing the meanings associated with schizophrenia). We keep the faith that such mobilisation might likewise occur in discursive athletic identity research.

Concluding Reflections

The aim of this meta-study was to review and synthesise studies into athletic identity in narrative and discursive approaches and to examine how identity has been conceptualised and studied in these traditions. In contrast to traditional views of identity as a sole product of psychological processes within the individual, these approaches theorised athletic identity as constituted within cultural narratives and discourses available to the individual. The reviewed studies moved the research focus from examining the relationship between athletic identity and other variables (e.g., adaptation to athletic retirement, career maturity, or burnout) to analysing the powerful impact of sociocultural factors on athletic identity development. The

reviewed studies suggested that the dominant conceptions of athletic identity are reinforced by the (Western) sport culture and also by sport performance researchers (Douglas & Carless, 2006), and therefore challenged the assumed value-neutrality and cultural universality of traditional athletic identity research. As such, these studies carried an important message: through research, we may contribute to marginalisation rather than creation of more inclusive spaces. As researchers, it is important that we recognise our own taken-for-granted assumptions and how they guide our thinking and theorising around athletic identity.

In narrative studies, athletic identity was seen as an evolving story of the self which individuals developed by drawing from available narratives, and analytical focus was on individual meaning making and changes in identity narratives over time. Using mainly in-depth life story interviews, these studies could shed light on how athletic identities gained and shifted meaning across athletes' career span, therefore moving beyond a static role-based conception of athletic identity. Discursive studies, on the other hand, focused less on individual agency and analysed how certain subject positions were socially constructed as either privileged and desired or non-appropriate. These studies helped us to understand how certain socio-political systems and institutions (e.g. the media, sport institutes, and patriarchy) regulate and normalise athletes' identities. The dominant narratives or discourses were identified either by studying how they were reproduced in the media (Cosh et al., 2013, 2015), or how they were integrated into athletes' spoken or written narratives about their lives (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas 2009; Ryba et al., 2015; Sparkes, 1998).

Examining key topics in these traditions revealed that the field of narrative and discursive studies into athletic identity is diverse. Reflecting the research topic of athletic identity in general, athletic identity in career transitions or other boundary situations was a common topic. However, narrative and discursive studies had also moved from studying rupture in

athletic identity to examining everyday experiences of athletes and how they developed narrative identities through selectively engaging with culturally dominant or subjugated narratives which gave them a particular perspective on life (e.g., Carless & Douglas 2013a, b; Ryba et al., 2015), or how they were subjected to dominant discourses offering only limited subject positions for identity construction (Cosh et al., 2013; Kavoura et al., 2015).

In addition to synthesising key concepts and methodological directions in narrative and discursive studies, our analytical interest was in discerning how these studies had contributed to understanding marginalised sport participants' identities. The reviewed studies consistently suggested that there are powerful cultural narratives/discourses in sport which privilege performance-focus, youth, and able-bodyism; for athletes who do not fit these ideals it can be difficult to construct acceptable athletic identities (e.g., Perrier et al., 2014). Several studies examining female athletes' identity negotiations suggested that the offered cultural narratives and performance discourse practices were in conflict with the feminine ideals and broader life scripts for women (Douglas, 2009; Douglas & Carless, 2009; Kavoura et al., 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2016; Ryba et al., 2015). It was observed that men tend to socialise female athletes into sport, and women may end up internalising the dominant performance-based identity narratives (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2009; Ronkainen et al., 2016) and continue reproducing gendered discourses of women's subordination (Kavoura et al., 2015).

From an applied perspective, the reviewed studies have a number of implications. Firstly, it is clear that applied practitioners need to be aware of the multidimensionality of the person who is an athlete, as other aspects of cultural identity are necessarily intertwined to sporting experience and also performance. Secondly, the reviewed literature consistently shows that athletes may have limited discursive or narrative resources to draw from in the process of their athletic identity construction. Given the harmful implications of a narrowly

performance-based athletic identity on well-being, working to widen the discursive or narrative context in teams and clubs is an important task. Making alternative narratives or subject positions available through interventions increases athletes' agency to construct their identities, so that they are not only subjected to certain narrowly defined positions. Finally, the reviewed studies indicated that women's increasing participation in sport has not transformed sport into an inclusive space, but that traditional gender norms are often reproduced by coaches and also by female athletes themselves. Applied practitioners need to be sensitive to gender discourses and practices that may continue to marginalise women.

As a limitation to the present study, the methodological approach we used requires heightened abstraction and limits consideration of idiosyncratic features and complex situational dynamics of participant accounts as well as research processes. However, we hope that we have been able to offer researchers a clear overview of this scholarship and how these methodologies have been used in knowledge production. In future research, further methodological diversity can be valuable to meaningfully engage with issues of sociocultural difference and identity/subjectivity for the advancement of cultural praxis. While narrative and discursive approaches reviewed in this study are well suited for cultural praxis scholarship, they should not be advocated as the only suitable or superior approaches for such work. It is clear that there is much space for future research within the cultural praxis framework to uncover marginalised athletic identities and engage with issues of social justice and change. It would be valuable if the reviewed methodological approaches would be used in more diverse cultural contexts to inform development of cultural competence and safe delivery of applied services in multicultural spaces.

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

Table 1. Narrative studies on athletic identity

	Author(s)	Journal	Study Topic	Theoretical Framework(s)	Method(s) of Analysis	Type(s) of Data
1	Busanich et al., 2016	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>	Eating disorders	Narrative theory	Visual narrative methods: thematic and dialogic/performance analysis	Narrative interviews A visual representation
2	Ronkainen et al., 2016	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Gender, career development & transitions	Narrative theory	Thematic narrative analysis	Life story interviews Semi-structured interviews
3	Ryba et al., 2015	<i>Journal of Vocational Behavior</i>	Life design processes in elite sports	Career construction Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Structural analysis	Life story interviews
4	Busanich et al., 2014	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Eating disorders	Narrative theory	Structural and performative narrative analysis	Semi-structured interviews
5	Papathomas & Lavallee, 2014	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Eating disorders	Narrative theory	Thematic and structural narrative analysis	Life story interviews
6	Perrier et al. 2014	<i>Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly</i>	Athletic identity narratives after acquiring physical disability	Narrative theory	Abductive approach Categorical-content analysis Structural narrative analysis Analytic bracketing	Semi-structured interviews

7	Carless & Douglas, 2013a	<i>The Sport Psychologist</i>	Identity development in elite sport	Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Narrative analysis of structure and form	Short life story interviews
8	Carless & Douglas, 2013b	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Identity tensions in elite sport	Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Narrative analysis of structure and form	Focus groups Life story interviews
9	Ronkainen et al., 2013	<i>Journal of Aging Studies</i>	Experiences of performance decline and aging	Existential psychology Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Structural analysis	Life story interviews
10	Carless & Douglas, 2012	<i>Reflective Practice</i>	Athletes' stories of success / athletic identity development	Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Narrative analysis of structure and form	Focus groups Life story interviews
11	Hudson & Day, 2012	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Experience of expressive writing about sports stressors	Reversal theory Narrative theory	Written narratives: Narrative analysis of content and structure Interviews: Hierarchical content analysis	Participant writing Semi-structured interviews
12	Papathomas & Lavalley, 2012	<i>Journal of Loss and Trauma: International Perspectives on Stress and Coping</i>	Narrative construction of anorexia and sexual abuse	Narrative theory	Thematic analysis Structural analysis Analytic bracketing	Life story interviews
13	Carless & Douglas, 2009	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise</i>	Career transitions / athletic retirement	Narrative theory	Narrative analysis of structure and form	Life story interviews

14	Douglas, 2009	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport and Exercise</i>	Identity development and negotiation in elite sport	Narrative theory	Narrative analysis (not specified)	Participant writing (autoethnography)
15	Douglas & Carless, 2009	<i>Journal of Applied Sport Psychology</i>	Athletic retirement in golf	Narrative theory	Content analysis Narrative analysis of structure and form	Life story interviews
16	Sparkes & Smith, 2002	<i>Men and Masculinities</i>	Spinal cord injury, loss of athletic identity	Interpretive interactionism Narrative theory	“Indwelling” “Data analysis spiral” Thematic and reflexive analysis	Life story interviews
17	Gearing, 1999	<i>Journal of Aging Studies</i>	Athletic retirement in football	Narrative theory Life course perspective on aging	Narrative analysis	Biographical interviews
18	Sparkes, 1998	<i>Qualitative Health Research</i>	Premature athletic retirement, illness narratives	Identity levels 5 stages of dramatic self-change Narrative typology of illness	Abductive “Indwelling”	Life story interviews

Table 2. Discursive studies on athletic identity.

	Author(s)	Journal	Study Topic	Theoretical Framework(s)	Method(s) of Analysis	Type(s) of Data
1	Cosh et al., 2015	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Post-career difficulties; media representation of retired athletes	Discursive psychology	Discursive psychological analysis	Media articles
2	Kavoura et al., 2015	<i>Psychology of Sport and Exercise</i>	Identity construction/negotiation of female Greek judo athletes	Cultural praxis Foucauldian theory Feminist poststructuralism	Thematic analysis, Foucauldian discourse analysis	Semi-structured interviews
3	Cosh, LeCouteur, et al., 2013	<i>Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health</i>	Transition back into elite sport; media representations of career transitions	Discursive psychology	Discursive psychological analysis Synthetic approach	Media articles
4	Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013	<i>Australian Journal of Psychology</i>	Media representations of athlete identities and choices around retirement	Discursive psychology	Discursive psychological analysis	Media articles
5	Cosh et al., 2012	<i>Journal of Health Psychology</i>	Interactions that occur during body composition testing of elite athletes	Discursive psychology	Discursive psychological analysis informed by conversation analysis	Audio-recordings of interactions

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

- We systematically reviewed narrative and discursive studies into athletic identity
- The studies were analysed with the meta-study method
- Both approaches provide a cultural conceptualisation of identity
- Elite sport offers limited narrative resources or subject positions for athletes