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1 **Identity Tensions in Dual Career: The Discursive Construction of Future**
2 **Selves by Female Finnish Judo Athletes**

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11 **Identity tensions in dual career: The discursive construction of future**
12 **elves by female Finnish judo athletes**

13 To date, few studies have explored how changes in the practices, policies, and politics
14 of sport and education may be implicated in how young athletes think about and plan
15 for the future. Drawing on *cultural praxis* and feminist poststructuralist frameworks,
16 this paper explores whether and how dual career (DC) policies and practices in Finland
17 guide female judo athletes' imaginings about their future. Discourse analysis was used
18 to analyse interviews with three adolescent (aged 16) and three young adult (aged 20,
19 23, and 27) elite female judo athletes. Differences were found in the ways the athletes
20 in the different age groups constructed their future athletic, civic and gendered selves.
21 We argue that some female judo athletes may experience identity tensions and lower
22 their athletic aspirations in seeking to meet the new societal expectations embedded in
23 the DC discourse. We conclude with recommendations for future policy and practice.

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25 Keywords: cultural praxis; cultural sport psychology; feminist poststructuralist theory;
26 gender; martial arts and combat sports

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39 **Introduction**

40 Several studies have researched transitions in sport life, including athletes' geographic
41 relocation (Agergaard and Ryba 2014; Blodgett and Schinke 2015; Ryba et al. 2012, 2015),
42 athletic retirement (Cosh, Crabb, and LeCouteur 2013; Ronkainen, Ryba, and Nesti 2013)
43 and injury (Ronkainen and Ryba 2017; Stoltenburg, Kamphoff, and Lindstrom Bremer 2011),
44 and transitions from one sport or educational level to another (MacNamara and Collins 2010;
45 Pummell, Harwood, and Lavallee 2008). However, researchers have rarely addressed the
46 transitions that occur in athletes' life trajectories due to changes in the policies and practices
47 that inform their daily lives. In response to the call from the editors of this special issue for
48 contributions to a new research agenda on *Transitions in Sport Life*, we explore whether and
49 how shifts in practices in the politics of sport and education impact athletes' understandings
50 of who they are and what they want or ought to be. Specifically, we focus on dual career
51 (DC) policies and practices in Finland and their effects on female judo athletes' discursive
52 construction of their future selves.

53 Based on foundational literature, dual career refers to the combining of elite sport
54 with studies or work (Guidotti, Cortis, and Capranica 2015; Stambulova and Wylleman
55 2019). According to Guidotti and colleagues (2015), the term first appeared in European
56 policy documents in 2007 that drew attention to the need to protect young athletes and
57 guarantee their rights to education and the labour market. Subsequently, the European
58 Commission (2012) issued the *Guidelines on Dual Careers of Athletes*, recommending
59 specific actions to better support athletes' careers and educational demands. Since the 2012
60 guidelines, the DC discourse has gained traction in Europe, not only providing DC
61 stakeholders with common ground in terms of communicating and cooperating on different
62 levels with each other (Stambulova and Wylleman 2019) but also in shaping athletes'
63 thinking and imaginings about their future (Henriksen and Mortensen 2014; Ronkainen and

64 Ryba 2018; Ryba et al. 2017). Researchers have played a key role in generating knowledge
65 centred on the DC discourse. Indeed, a considerable amount of funding has been allocated to
66 national and transnational DC research projects that have examined various issues associated
67 with dual career construction (for reviews see, Guidotti, Cortis, and Capranica 2015;
68 Stambulova and Wylleman 2019).

69 Despite the persistence of cultural narratives that construct sporting performance as
70 the number one priority of student-athletes (Carless and Douglas 2013b), research is
71 increasingly showing that young athletes aspire to equal levels of achievement in both their
72 academic and sport careers (Aquilina 2013; Brettschneider 1999; Jonker et al. 2010). The
73 literature further highlights that to be successful in both and to achieve a ‘balanced’ DC path
74 (Stambulova et al. 2015), athletes must develop the ‘right’ skills (Jonker et al. 2010) and
75 employ the ‘right’ strategies (Aquilina 2013; Brown et al. 2015). Other scholars have alerted
76 us to the effects of neoliberal understandings that hold the individual solely responsible for
77 navigating the demands of education and career (Brunila et al. 2011; Holmegaard, Ulriksen,
78 and Madsen 2014; Leccardi 2014; Pless 2014) and instead emphasise the role of the cultural
79 and discursive contexts in athletes’ ability or inability to plan for the future (Cosh, Crabb, and
80 Tully 2015; Ronkainen and Ryba 2018; Ryba and Wright 2010; Skrubbeltrang 2018;
81 Skrubbeltrang et al. 2018). It has been suggested that young peoples’ aspirations are
82 influenced by narratives of gender (Ekengren et al. 2019; Skrubbeltrang 2018) and age
83 (Henriksen and Mortensen 2014) as well as by the dominant belief systems, values, practices,
84 and policy discourses that circulate in their national contexts (Leccardi 2014; Pless 2014).
85 There is clearly a need to develop a better understanding of the role of these cultural factors
86 in young athletes’ career aspirations and decision making.

87 The present study was undertaken in the context of elite judo in Finland (discussed in
88 detail below), with special focus on female adolescent and young adult athletes and the

89 different ways in which they construct their future selves. As Behr and Kuhn (2018) have
90 stated, DC research in martial arts and combat sports is scarce, and we know very little about
91 how to support young martial artists in their career planning. Lack of understanding on the
92 ways that gender might intersect with DC experiences has also been noted (Gledhill and
93 Harwood 2015; Skrubbeltrang et al. 2018). Feminist and critical scholars of sport have long
94 argued that female athletes have to deal with extra demands and challenges, due to pervasive
95 gender hierarchies in sport, and the different societal expectations for men and women (e.g.,
96 Baird 2010; Halbert 1997; Kavoura et al. 2018; Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; McGannon
97 et al. 2012; Ronkainen, Watkins, and Ryba 2016). Several studies also warn us that the risk
98 of dropping out of sport is higher for young female athletes than for their male counterparts
99 (Baron-Thiene and Alfermann 2015; Skrubbeltrang 2018; Slater and Tiggemann 2010). In
100 addition, Skrubbeltrang and colleagues (2018) found that female athletes are
101 underrepresented in DC programs and that they report fewer positive and more negative
102 experiences than male student-athletes. According to Ekengren et al. (2019) sport-related
103 cultural narratives encourage male athletes to be single-minded towards elite sport, while
104 female athletes need to invest in multiple contexts (sport, studies and family) in order to be
105 appreciated.

106 In this study, we extend the research on DC and transitions in sport life by
107 contributing a new perspective on the shifting discourses that inform athletes' construction of
108 their future selves. This study also seeks to enhance understanding of the gender issues
109 related to combining elite judo with education. The aims of the study were twofold: (1) to
110 explore the different ways in which female Finnish judo athletes of different ages
111 discursively construct their future selves and (2) to understand whether and how DC policies
112 and practices in Finland guide female judo athletes' imaginings about their future.

113 **Theoretical perspective**

114 This research draws on feminist poststructuralist theorising and particularly in the works of
115 Butler (1990, 1993), Foucault (1972, 1977, 1978), and Weedon (1997). Critical scholars of
116 sport have proposed feminist poststructuralist theory as a suitable framework for examining
117 the experiences and identities of female athletes, as it offers tools for tracing the complex
118 processes through which women become subjected to specific (gendered and culturally
119 appropriate) ways of understanding themselves and others (Baird 2010; Kavoura 2018;
120 McGannon and Busanich 2010; Ryba and Wright 2010). Following the above-mentioned
121 authors, we adopt a particular understanding of the concepts of *identity*, *discourse*, *subject*
122 *position*, and *subjectivity*. We understand identity as a cultural construction constituted
123 through the negotiation of various discourses (i.e. sets of knowledge, beliefs, ideas, values
124 and practices). For example, culturally dominant ideas related to what constitutes ‘success’,
125 ‘a good life’, ‘a good athlete’, and ‘a good citizen’ are implicated in the ways in which young
126 women make sense of who they are and what they want to be in the future (Carless and
127 Douglas 2013a, 2013b; Ryba et al. 2017). These cultural ideas and understandings are also
128 nuanced and accessed by individuals based on aspects of their identity (Butler 1990; Weedon
129 1997). This means that while a range of discursively constructed subject positions is available
130 to women to construct their identity, these subject positions are constantly shifting in cultural
131 and historical time. When athletes adopt a certain subject position, certain forms of
132 subjectivity (i.e. conscious and subconscious ways of thinking and feeling) are made
133 available to them (Davies and Harre 1990; Kavoura 2018). For example, those who position
134 themselves as elite athletes might feel guilty over failing to regulate their bodies (Cosh et al.
135 2012) or skipping training in favour of studying. Therefore, tracing the subject positions
136 available to young athletes and the meanings associated with those positions could be

137 insightful with regard to understanding how they project their identities into the future
138 (Ronkainen and Ryba 2018; Ryba 2018).

139 As in our previous work (Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni 2015; Kavoura et al. 2018), we
140 situate this study within *cultural praxis* (Blodgett et al. 2015; Ryba and Wright 2005, 2010),
141 a framework that aligns well with feminist poststructuralist theory (McGannon and Busanich
142 2010; McGannon and Smith 2015). Articulated within feminist poststructuralist theorising,
143 cultural praxis challenges rigid understandings of athletes' identities and advocates the
144 production of culturally reflexive and inclusive work in sport psychology (Ryba et al. 2013).
145 In this article, building on previous applications of the cultural praxis framework within the
146 *cultural praxis of athletes' careers* paradigm (Blodgett and Schinke 2015; Ryba et al. 2015;
147 Stambulova et al. 2015; Stambulova and Ryba 2013, 2014), we explore female judo athletes'
148 discursive construction of their future selves.

149 **Gender and career in the Finnish judo context**

150 Approximately 120 judo clubs with 12 500 active participants are estimated to exist in
151 Finland (<https://www.judoliitto.fi/judo/alasivu/>). Despite this interest, the number of those
152 who practice judo at an elite level is very small. For example, only 97 athletes, including 31
153 females, participated in the 2018 Finnish National Championships
154 (<http://www.judoliitto.fi/tulosporssi/miesten-ja-naisten-sm-kilpailut-helsinki/>). The numbers
155 are even lower when it comes to Finnish participation in international competitions. In terms
156 of Olympic success, the Finnish team has thus far achieved two seventh places, both by male
157 judoka: Reino Fagerlund in 1980 and Juha Salonen in 1988 (Sport Museum of Finland and
158 Finnish Olympic Committee 2016). With such a small pool of elite athletes and modest level
159 of international success, judo is neither a dominant nor favoured sport in Finland, a situation
160 reflected in the number of career opportunities and financial resources available to talented

161 young judo athletes.

162 According to Skrubbyeltrang (2018), female athletes in ‘small’ sports face double
163 marginalisation. ‘Marginality of one’s gender and the marginality of one’s sport can each
164 independently contribute to one’s sense of what is possible for one’s future’ (Skrubbyeltrang
165 2018, 13). While gender equality is an important societal value in Finland (Brunila and
166 Ylöstalo 2015) and in the Finnish judo culture (Kavoura 2018), a closer scrutiny reveals that
167 characteristics labelled masculine are nevertheless perceived as more valuable than those
168 labelled feminine in the Finnish judo context, leading to persisting gender hierarchies
169 favouring male athletes (Kavoura et al. 2018). DC programs that ignore these hierarchies and
170 processes of marginalisation may eventually fail in their attempts to support young athletes
171 (Skrubbyeltrang 2018).

172 In Finland, while the national talent development program enables talented young
173 athletes to construct DC paths through adolescence, less defined structures exist at the level
174 of higher education (Ryba et al. 2016). Currently, Finland has 15 sport high schools
175 (urheilulukiot). Three of these have a judo coach (appointed and employed by the Finnish
176 Judo Federation) and offer school-based morning practice for judo athletes, four offer club-
177 based morning practice in collaboration with the local judo clubs, and the remainder offer no
178 judo coaching, although judo athletes can pursue an individual training program monitored
179 by the school (M. Pekkola, personal communication, May 25, 2018).

180 In general, a typical day for a sport high school student-athlete includes two training
181 sessions (one morning and one evening session). The time between the training sessions is
182 reserved for academic studies. Sport high schools select students based on their combined
183 academic and athletic merits along with recommendations from the sport federations. This
184 means that the DC path facilitated by the national system is accessible only by adolescent
185 athletes who have already achieved good results both academically and in their sport.

186 Moreover, for young judoka, DC possibilities are unevenly distributed across the different
187 Finnish cities and socioeconomic strata. Many young athletes are forced to move to another
188 city (or commute daily) to access the DC path, and their family needs to be able to bear all
189 the financial costs related to accommodation/transportation.

190 **Methodology**

191 *Interviews and participants*

192 This study is based on interviews with female, Finnish, elite judo athletes. The interviews
193 were conducted in connection with two separate research projects, namely (1) the first
194 author's ethnographic PhD research project on female judoka experiences and identity
195 negotiation (see Kavoura 2018), and (2) a longitudinal project on athletes' DC in which the
196 second author is the principal investigator (see Ryba et al. 2016). Despite their different aims,
197 the two projects shared a social constructionist view on identity, which was examined in
198 relation to athletes' goals and aspirations.

199 The data taken from the first author's research consist of semi-structured interviews
200 with three adult (aged 20, 23, and 27) elite judo athletes. These interviews took place in
201 March 2014 and lasted from 27 to 35 minutes. During the data collection period, one athlete
202 was transitioning from secondary to higher education, one was pursuing vocational
203 education, and one was transitioning to the labour market. For other publications based on
204 these data (but exploring different research questions), see Kavoura et al. (2018) and Kavoura
205 (2018). The data taken from the second author's research consist of interviews with three
206 adolescent (16-year-old) elite judo athletes. These interviews took place in August 2015 and
207 lasted from 33 to 43 minutes. At the time of data collection, these participants were at the
208 beginning of their first year in sport high school. Their data were included in a narrative
209 analysis of dual career styles published elsewhere (see Ryba et al. 2017).

210 For this study, we chose to work with data from three adolescent and three adult judo
211 athletes as we were interested in how female athletes from different age groups tap into
212 dominant discourses in making meaning about themselves and their lives. All six interviews
213 were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Informed consents were signed before all the
214 interviews. All participants' names have been changed to pseudonyms.

215 ***Data analysis***

216 The interview transcripts were analysed following Willig's (2008) stepwise approach
217 to Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA). Other scholars have discursively analysed
218 interview data, focusing, for example, on how people with eating disorders construct their
219 future selves (see Malson et al. 2011). First, we identified and coded all direct and non-direct
220 references to future selves (i.e. interview extracts related to thinking about and planning for
221 the future, especially with respect to sport, education, and work). Second, we placed these
222 discursive constructions of future selves within the wider sporting and societal discourses
223 circulating in Finland. We then explored how the female Finnish judoka negotiated their
224 identities by considering (a) what possibilities were offered to the athletes within the
225 discursive context, (b) what subject positions were available, and (c) what the practical and
226 psychological implications were of adopting or rejecting the available subject positions. The
227 remainder of the paper is organised as follows. First, we present the discursive constructions
228 of future selves that we identified. Second, we discuss the identity tensions of DC athletes.
229 We conclude by offering suggestions for future research, practice, and sports policy.

230 **Discursive construction of future selves**

231 Our discursive analytic procedure revealed that the female judo athletes' (in)ability to
232 construct future selves was related to the discursive resources available to them. Below, we

233 present how athletes from the two different age groups selected and interpreted dominant
234 cultural discourses to construct their future (1) athletic, (2) civic, and (3) gendered selves.

235 *Athletic selves*

236 Confirming previous results (e.g., Cosh and Tully 2014; Ronkainen, Watkins, and Ryba
237 2016), our analysis revealed that the interviewed female Finnish judo athletes predominantly
238 drew on the athletic performance and elite sport discourses to make sense of their present
239 experiences and construct their future selves. While sport was a priority for all participants
240 (see also Kavoura et al. 2018; Ryba et al. 2017), the athletes differed by age in the ways in
241 which they imagined the achievement of athletic excellence. The adult athletes projected high
242 athletic aspirations, such as becoming an Olympian. For instance, in reply to the question
243 ‘What are your goals for the future?’, Milla (aged 20) stated, ‘I think the Olympic Games’.
244 Similarly, Nea (aged 23), whose target was also the Olympics, stated, ‘I was discussing with
245 the coaches about starting to get [qualification] points this year. If I work hard and do the
246 training and go in for some smaller competitions, I can maybe make it to the 2020
247 [Olympics]’.

248 In contrast, the adolescent athletes constructed the Olympic dream as unrealistic, and
249 projected lower aspirations. For example, Sofi (aged 16) said, ‘Well maybe European
250 Champion is closer to my dreams. When I was younger, I wanted Olympic gold, but ... I like
251 to have realistic dreams and goals’. In turn, Krista (aged 16) said, ‘I have been dreaming of
252 the world champs. I’ve never dared to dream about the Olympics, because it is so... it is so far
253 away...’.

254 The choice on whether to target the Olympic Games or not was left to the individual
255 athlete who had to engage in self-evaluation and take responsibility for the decision:

256 Today the coaches [of the national team] were asking us to start thinking about whether
257 we would like to enter tournaments which could give us qualification points for the
258 Olympics. So, we don't have to [go] if we think we're not good enough. It's ok...we
259 can try again at the next [Olympics]. (Nea, 23)

260 These results indicate that the younger generation of female athletes moderated their athletic
261 goals. Skrubbeltrang and colleagues (2018) have also found that female student-athletes are
262 more likely to start lowering their athletic aspirations compared to their male counterparts
263 and less likely to aim at a professional career in sport. 'This may be an indication that
264 women's elite sports simply is not a career path on its own but has to be combined with a
265 non-athletic career' (Skrubbeltrang 2018, 14). Indeed, all the athletes who participated in our
266 study had problems in imagining a professional career in judo.

267 Judo is nice, and it's like a lifestyle, but I really think that you should also have
268 something else in your life, because what do you really get [from judo]? Nice
269 memories, yeah, but you need to do something that pays the bills. (Milla, 20)

270 Given that an elite judo career was perceived as something that cannot of itself guarantee 'a
271 good life' in the future, the present female judo athletes felt that it was important, beyond
272 their athletic selves, to invest in their future civic selves.

273 *Civic selves*

274 To understand young athletes' choices, dreams, and hopes, it is important to look at the
275 broader contexts of the politics of sport and education (Brunila et al. 2011; Pless 2014; Ryba
276 et al. 2017). During recent years, EU-led projects and activities aimed at creating active,
277 competitive, trainable and employable citizens, have spread to Finland (Brunila et al. 2011).
278 In the world of elite sport, DC is being promoted to young athletes as the road to becoming a
279 good and autonomous citizen (Thomsen and Nørgaard 2018). This neoliberal idea of athletes
280 excelling in both sport and education is a newly emerging DC discourse (Stambulova and

281 Wylleman 2019). Differences were found between our two different age groups of athletes in
282 their subjectification to these new cultural ideas.

283 The young adult athletes prioritised their sport careers as their core pathway to
284 success. In their educational choices, Nea (aged 23) and Vilma (aged 27) had chosen
285 vocational paths. Vocational education was perceived as compatible with the demands of an
286 elite judo career, and as a quick route into working life (Brunila et al. 2011). This choice
287 would allow one to pay one's bills while continuing to practise judo:

288 I would really like to do judo as a professional athlete...to get paid for it. It's my
289 dream. But it's hard in Finland. We don't have sponsors or anything like that.
290 Sometimes I think ...why am I doing this? I get nothing. So, I will graduate [from the
291 vocational school] in May, and then maybe start working in a part-time job, and do
292 judo in the same time. That's my plan. (Nea, 23)

293 The adolescent athletes, in turn, rejected vocational training, a path that in the
294 neoliberal discourses is constructed as less prestigious or privileged than higher education
295 (Brunila et al. 2011). To the question 'Do you know what you definitely won't be?', Sofi
296 (aged 16) replied, 'Not at least a nurse or a bus driver'. Being socialised to DC practices and
297 neoliberal discourses from a very young age, Sofi projected high academic aspirations for her
298 future selves:

299 I would like to go to university or such, or then some sports... some kind of athletically
300 related career. So, I've thought quite a bit...about different professions that combine
301 sports and other things. I've for example looked into sports medicine, or maybe a
302 police degree.

303 'I have been dreaming about a career as a doctor' Krista (aged 16) said. Liisi (aged 16) also
304 said that she would like to be a doctor.

305 The ways in which the adolescent athletes talked about their high educational
306 aspirations suggest that young people in today's Western society experience increased

307 anxiety about being acknowledged as competent individuals. To meet the new societal
308 demands and maintain an attractive position in a constantly changing society, young athletes
309 are forced to work continuously on multiple tasks (Leccardi 2014; Pless 2014). A wide range
310 of possibilities of becoming are available in this new social landscape (Pless 2014). However,
311 these possibilities are marked by insecurity, being either available or withheld based on
312 specific aspects of identity, such as gender (Ekengren et al. 2019; Ryba 2018; Skrubbeltrang
313 2018; Weedon 1997).

314 *Gendered selves*

315 The neoliberal discourses emphasise individual responsibility and ignore cultural barriers,
316 such as those produced by gender hierarchies (Brunila et al. 2011; Brunila and Ylöstalo
317 2015). In similar vein, DC policies and practices ignore the gender inequalities that exist in
318 the male-dominated sport fields (Baird 2010; Halbert 1997; Kavoura, Ryba, and Chroni
319 2015; Kavoura et al. 2018; Ryba et al. 2015; Skrubbeltrang 2018; Skrubbeltrang et al. 2018)
320 and instead emphasise importance for the individual of working hard and making the ‘right
321 choices’ (Pless 2014, 236). Being subjectified to the forces of these discourses, and to the
322 belief that gender equality is now guaranteed in Finland (Brunila and Ylöstalo 2015), the
323 female Finnish judo athletes downplayed the role of gender in their judo careers. For
324 example, Nea (aged 23) reported that girls are often isolated in judo (or quit judo altogether)
325 owing to their personal disposition (such as being shy or soft) and not to the
326 underrepresentation and marginalization of females in the sport:

327 Nea: Maybe after a year the other girls quit and then because I was really shy when I was
328 a child, I wanted to train with my brother... and he didn't like it. He preferred to practice
329 judo with his friends but I was begging him... ‘Please! Please!’.

330

331 Interviewer: So, it was difficult being the only girl there.

332

333 Nea: Maybe it was, but I think it was good for me, because it helped me not to be so shy.

334

335 Interviewer: I see. Do you know why these girls quit judo? Did they say anything?

336

337 Nea: I don't know...well... they didn't like it...and I don't know how to explain it....

338 they were soft...I think it was that.

339 The adolescent athletes especially were incapable of linking gender to their past and present
340 experiences in judo or to what they saw as possible or available to them in the future. Instead
341 they adopted an 'up to me' attitude (Pless 2014, 241) in dealing with the pressures of
342 combining elite sport with education. To the question 'What do you think, will you be able to
343 combine this demanding sport and studying?', Krista (aged 16) replied, 'I believe so. It has
344 been going fairly well...I work hard for both'. Liisi (aged 16) agreed:

345 I don't think it will be a problem [combining elite judo with education]. Maybe if I have
346 to miss a lot of school. For example, when I have training camps and competitions and I
347 have to miss many classes. Maybe at that point it might get a little difficult. But, at the
348 moment, it seems to me that there won't be any problems.

349 This individualistic attitude is not only promoted within the DC discourse in Finland,
350 but has been also found to be the 'effect' (Butler 1990) of national ideals of womanhood that
351 idealise the subject position of the 'strong Finnish woman' (Koivunen 2013, 114).
352 Embodying this subject position, our participants constructed their present and future selves
353 as women capable of surmounting all obstacles.

354 You need to have something in your personality...so that you do it [judo] one hundred
355 per cent...there is no other way. [...] And you need to have discipline. This was very
356 important when I was doing my studies and I had to schedule my time. You need to be
357 effective. If you have morning training, and then school, and then evening training...if
358 there is like half an hour of free time, then you need to do your homework. And if you
359 have tests you need to study for, you check your schedule that week, and whenever
360 there is a free hour, then you must do it. You can't just leave it for later, because you

361 know...there'll be no time later. [...] And if I decide to do something, I just do it.
362 Like...I don't give up easily. (Vilma, 27)

363 **Identity tensions in DC athletes**

364 To deal with the uncertainty that characterises today's world (Leccardi 2014), our study
365 reveals that, whether out of choice or necessity, the female Finnish judo athletes were serious
366 about constructing sustainable dual careers. Educational decisions were made based on what
367 seemed to be compatible with elite sport, and the female athletes reported being motivated to
368 do all the extra work that they perceived as necessary to successfully combine sport with
369 education. However, differences were found in the ways in which these judoka of different
370 ages processed their understandings of themselves and what seemed to be possible for them
371 on their DC path. For example, the adolescent athletes perceived the sport high school as an
372 option that would allow them to pursue very ambitious academic goals (e.g. medical studies)
373 while continuing with elite judo. Similarly, Milla (aged 20) perceived university as a choice
374 compatible with elite sport:

375 Of course, I want to go to university, but I'm not sure where and what I want to study.
376 Anyway, I think I'll study [at university]. Because, I understand that at university it's
377 not so important to attend classes. You can do a lot of work from home or when you
378 are travelling or something like that, and you can finish it when you want.

379 In line with the findings of Henriksen and Mortensen (2014), the present young athletes
380 expressed a naïve optimism and were clearly unprepared for the challenges of a dual career
381 path. The smooth (successful) paths that they imagined for their future differed widely from
382 those experienced by the older athletes. For example, Nea (aged 23) vividly described the
383 tensions of trying to combine elite judo with education:

384 When I started the school I'm in now, it was a really stressful time because I had so
385 much to do. I wanted to graduate in two years, and do the training, so I woke up
386 like...before 5 o'clock to train, and then school and then training again, and I couldn't

387 sleep. It was a really stressful time. But then I took a break from everything... like for
388 two or three weeks...and told the school that I wanted to graduate in three years...and
389 that made it easier (Nea, 23)

390 These findings suggest that the national DC discourse, embedded in the neoliberal
391 discourses that promote 'choice' and an 'up to me' attitude, along with the 'strong woman'
392 narratives that circulate in the Finnish society, provide subject positions for the younger
393 generation of female judo athletes to construct themselves as succeeding simultaneously in
394 their multiple athletic, civic and gender roles. Yet, as the demands on them increase during
395 the transition to adulthood (and DC options become less structured), they experience tensions
396 in keeping up with all the sport and societal demands they encounter.

397 Feminist and critical scholars of sport and education have warned about the several
398 complexities inherent in the neoliberal ideals of active citizenship (Brunila et al. 2011;
399 Kavoura et al. 2018; Lappalainen, Mietola, and Lahelma 2013; Pless 2014; Ryba et al. 2017;
400 Skrubbeltrang 2018). For instance, while the DC discourse has heightened the societal
401 expectations of young athletes, social institutions (like school, family, and the sport system)
402 have become less and less capable of offering support or providing guarantees for a
403 prosperous future (Brunila et al. 2011; Leccardi 2014; Pless 2014; Ryba 2018; Thomsen and
404 Nørgaard 2018). Because the responsibility for success or failure is placed on the individual,
405 young athletes experience increased anxiety over choosing the right pathway and are left
406 feeling 'a failure' when they find themselves unable to meet the socio-cultural demands
407 placed on them.

408 The pressures are intensified in a societal climate where young women are expected
409 to live up to the Finnish 'strong woman' ideal. Strong women are expected to live
410 independent lives without complaining about societal (and patriarchal) pressures (Koivunen
411 2013). This makes it difficult for young female athletes to seek help or even acknowledge

412 their need for support. Thus, the rhetoric of individual responsibility makes young women
413 more vulnerable, further complicating their DC construction processes.

414 *Practice implications*

415 To assist young female athletes in designing their lives in a new era and in coping with
416 feelings of anxiety, uncertainty and self-doubt, it is necessary to provide new forms of
417 support. Instead of constructing the (in)ability to sustain a dual career as a sole consequence
418 of athletes' personal choices, future sport-related structures, strategies and policies, should
419 take account of the various socio-cultural factors and processes of marginalisation that may
420 be at play. Moreover, if we want to help female judo athletes adhere to their high athletic
421 aspirations, efforts should be made to widen the spectrum of career opportunities available to
422 them within the sport. In addition to supportive structures and measures, future interventions
423 could also aim at raising young athletes' awareness of (and preparation for) their forthcoming
424 career challenges.

425 *Limitations and future research directions*

426 This study is a partial and positioned interpretation (Haraway 1988) of how female Finnish
427 judo athletes think and plan for their future. Our feminist poststructuralist framework leads us
428 to acknowledge the subjective nature of our findings and to recognise that these data can also
429 be read in other ways. More research is needed to initiate a discursive change in how we
430 understand young athletes' aspirations and decision making. Data collected from different
431 sports and national contexts could help us to map the various cultural and discursive forces
432 that young athletes are subjected to when trying to keep up with the heightened demands of
433 the DC trajectory. Moreover, combining multiple data sources (e.g. combining interviews
434 with analysis of policy documents) could provide a better picture of how policy discourses
435 are embedded in the experiences and subjective narratives of athletes.

436 **Conclusion**

437 In this article, we analysed interview data from three adolescent (aged 16) and three young
438 adult (aged 20, 23, and 27) elite female judo athletes in Finland, focusing on the different
439 ways that they perceived and discursively constructed their future selves. We argued that the
440 complexities and contradictions embedded in DC policies and practices (along with the
441 neoliberal discourses and the ‘strong woman’ narrative that circulate in Finland), shape
442 female judo athletes’ subjectivities, and their ability (or inability) to construct their future
443 athletic, civic and gendered selves. Despite the positive changes that the DC discourse has
444 brought to the elite sport culture, young athletes now face new demands and challenges, as
445 they are expected to succeed in multiple spheres of life. While young female athletes may, to
446 be ‘realistic’, lower their future athletic aspirations, they may nevertheless find themselves
447 unprepared for the challenges of the DC path as they transition to adulthood. The emphasis
448 on individual responsibility makes female athletes even more vulnerable, as it becomes
449 difficult for them to even acknowledge the need for institutional aid. Future initiatives ought
450 to acknowledge that dual career construction is context-dependent. Failure to recognise the
451 effects of these contextual, cultural and discursive dimensions can compromise the quality
452 and effectiveness of DC programs.

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