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

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Identity tensions in dual career: The discursive construction of future selves by female Finnish judo athletes

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Theoretical perspective

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

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

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

Gender and career in the Finnish judo context

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

young judo athletes.

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

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

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

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

Methodology

Interviews and participants

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

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

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

Data analysis

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

Discursive construction of future selves

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

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

Athletic selves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Civic selves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gendered selves

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

> Nea: Maybe after a year the other girls quit and then because I was really shy when I was a child, I wanted to train with my brother… and he didn't like it. He preferred to practice judo with his friends but I was begging him… 'Please! Please!'.
>
> Interviewer: So, it was difficult being the only girl there.

> Nea: Maybe it was, but I think it was good for me, because it helped me not to be so shy.
>
> Interviewer: I see. Do you know why these girls quit judo? Did they say anything?
>
> Nea: I don't know…well… they didn't like it…and I don't know how to explain it…. they were soft…I think it was that.

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

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

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

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

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

Identity tensions in DC athletes

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Practice implications

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

Limitations and future research directions

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

Conclusion

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

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