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Author(s): Ronkainen, Noora J.; Ryba, Tatiana V.

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51 formation in adolescence evolves. The development of identity in late adolescence is a
52 relational process where peer group (rather than parents) becomes an increasingly important
53 reference group (McLean 2005). Furthermore, role models, mentors and other exemplary
54 adults become increasingly important sources of guidance and inspiration (Gibson 2004).
55 From a career development perspective, the goal for adolescents and young adults is to
56 specify and implement vocational self-concepts through knowledge gathering and exploration
57 (Savickas 2013). A specific challenge for talented adolescent athletes is the required
58 commitment to their athletic pathway, often compromising the time for exploring other selves
59 and future possibilities. The risk of athletic identity foreclosure for talented youth athletes has
60 been well documented (for a review, see Brewer and Petitpas 2017), and it has been noted
61 that elite development environments often prioritise athletic excellence while officially
62 operating within ‘a whole person’ philosophy (Mills, Butt, Maynard, and Harwood 2014).
63 Many social actors in youth athletes’ lives may perpetuate the belief that single-minded
64 dedication is the only way to athletic success, leading them to sacrifice other spheres of life to
65 maximise their chances of ‘making it’ (Carless and Douglas 2013).

66 In the past two decades, a substantive body of qualitative research positioned within
67 cultural, narrative and discursive approaches has complemented the role-based research on
68 athletic identity by offering a more contextualist perspective on the issue (for reviews, see
69 Ronkainen, Kavoura, and Ryba 2016; Schinke et al. 2019). Many of these studies have been
70 positioned within cultural sport psychology (CSP) which originated in the calls in the 1990s
71 for “the exploration into the rich diversity of sport participants’ and scholars’ identities”
72 (Schinke et al. 2019, p. 59). Since then, a number of studies have explored the narrative-
73 discursive resources that are available as ‘building blocks’ for athletic identity in specific
74 socio-cultural locations (e.g. Busanich, McGannon, and Schinke 2016); analysed the
75 construction of athletes’ identities in the media (e.g. Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, and Kettler

2003; McGannon, McMahon, and Price 2017) and traced the psycho-social processes of identity continuity and change (e.g., Carless and Douglas 2013; Ryba, Ronkainen, and Selänne 2015). Scholars have also explored the intersections of athletic identity with other identities pertaining to gender, race, ethnicity, and religion (Blodgett, Ge, Schinke and McGannon 2017; Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, and Ryba 2018). We build on this work and adopt a narrative perspective where McAdams (2001) conceptualised identity as an integrative, evolving story of the self that organises different elements and experiences of the self to bring some degree of coherence, unity and purpose. Analytically, we understand ‘a story’ as a specific tale that people tell about their lives, whereas ‘narrative’ is the background form or template that stories rely on, a genre which contains properties such as structures, contents, tellability, and consequences (Frank 1995). Narrative identity is the complex configuration of stories told by a person which are both personal and social because individual storytelling is always dependent on cultural narrative resources that the individual has an access to (Smith and Sparkes 2008). Furthermore, while the integrative life story situates the self within broader life stages and scripts, people also tell domain-specific stories (as an athlete, student, friend, family member) that are multifaceted and sometimes contradictory. Telling a life story is a complex psychological accomplishment of selecting, abstracting and bracketing tellable episodes (Bamberg 2004) and a skill that starts to develop in adolescence (McAdams 2001). The development of adolescent identity is a process of ‘testing out’ and practising different situated stories in social interaction, focusing not only on the past but also on-going, future and hypothetical events and experiences (Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008). Especially future-oriented identity narratives have a motivational component in offering ‘a compass’ on meaningful actions (Fugate, Kinicki, and Ashforth 2004). Since youth athletes have to imagine a future they have no experience of, they have to rely on ‘experienced others’ in the sport life-world such as older teammates (Phoenix and

101 Sparkes 2007) or coaches (Ronkainen, Ryba, Tonge, and Tikkanen 2019) to provide them
102 with ‘narrative maps’ about how their sporting future might look like and which choices are
103 more desirable than others. The belief in continuity between the present actions and the
104 desired future self allows individuals to sustain motivation in their life projects and orient to
105 actions and experiences that promote the development of competencies in preparing for that
106 future (Savickas 2013).

107 Narrative research on sporting identities has built momentum within the last decade with
108 several in-depth case studies (Carless and Douglas 2013; Douglas 2009; Ryba et al. 2015)
109 detailing the narrative structures and cultural resources that athletes rely on in storying their
110 lives. The work of Douglas and Carless (2009, Carless and Douglas 2009, 2013) has provided
111 a basis for much of this scholarship by identifying three narrative types in elite sport. These
112 are (1) the performance narrative (the dominant narrative): a story prioritising winning over
113 other dimensions of life, sport and self, (2) the discovery narrative: a story focused on
114 exploration and experiencing life in a multi-dimensional sense, and (3) relational narrative: a
115 story focused on interpersonal connectedness rather than a separate self. For Douglas and
116 Carless (2009), the performance narrative implies exclusivity as they described it as ‘a story
117 of single-minded dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of other areas of life and
118 self’ (p. 215). The dominance of the performance narrative in the elite sport culture and its
119 potentially detrimental effects on athletes’ well-being have been further demonstrated by
120 several studies (Jewett, Kerr, and Tamminen 2018; Hudson and Day 2012). However, the
121 mechanisms of how biographical events and day-to-day lived experiences are selected to
122 feature in storytelling to claim a particular type of athletic identity and are still fairly
123 underexplored. Furthermore, a gap in this body of literature lies in its predominant focus on
124 narratives of the past, which is a result of the focus on elite and already retired athletes (for a
125 review, see Ronkainen et al. 2016). In this paper, the contribution lies in our attempt to

150 Jewett, Kerr, and Tamminen 2018). The methodological contribution of the present study is
151 that we draw inspiration from the ‘small story’ tradition which Bamberg (2001) described as
152 ‘a narrative practice’ approach. The small story approach is analytically focused on
153 narratives-in-interaction, how people use small stories, their inconsistencies and
154 contradictions, and the question about what is achieved by particular stories (Bamberg 2011).
155 Bamberg (2004) indicated that the small story approach is particularly suitable with
156 adolescents because they are developmentally at the stage of ‘testing out’ different small
157 stories of the self to eventually construct a ‘big story’ of one’s life. From a small story
158 perspective, creative and interactive methods may be especially useful because they allow for
159 exploring possibilities of storytelling and do not restrict the participants to the format of one,
160 coherent and uninterrupted story as ideally expected in a life story interview.

161 Visual methods where participants are producing the images themselves may be
162 particularly useful with younger participants in giving them more control over the research
163 encounter and making it more engaging and enjoyable (Liebenberg 2009). From a
164 developmental perspective, visual methods such as photovoice can be valuable in offering
165 additional aids of expression to younger participants and help them in exploring who they are
166 and want to become (Strack, Magill, and McDonagh 2004). Similar to verbal narratives,
167 however, visual images do not offer unmediated access to participants’ ‘inner worlds’, but
168 rather are situated performances that participants enact to bring forth certain aspects of
169 themselves while omitting or silencing others.

170 *Participants*

171 The participants were 17 Finnish athletes (nine women). They were aged 17-18 and had
172 been involved in longitudinal mixed methods study already for two academic years. The
173 athletes had participated in two data collection rounds (quantitative and qualitative) before
174 the current study and were interviewed by the same researchers, which helped in building

175 rapport. The participants were recruited in collaboration with the Finnish Sport Federations
176 and Sport Academies and were among the most talented youth athletes across the country.
177 They competed in various sports (alpine skiing, artistic gymnastics, athletics, basketball,
178 cross-country skiing, football, ice hockey, judo, ski orienteering swimming and tennis). The
179 participants were ethnic Finns and mostly came from middle-class families. The full study
180 protocol has been published elsewhere (Ryba, Aunola, Kalaja, Selänne, Ronkainen, and
181 Nurmi, 2016).

182 The first interviews (Time 1) were conducted at the beginning of upper secondary school.
183 In this opening interview, the participants told their stories of how they had become athletes
184 and identified their goals in sport and life. At T1, all participants had the ambition to develop
185 an elite athletic career (e.g., Olympic Games, World Championships, professional athlete).
186 Five athletes were identified to follow a dominantly relational narrative type, and other
187 athletes were drawing dominantly on a performance narrative type (Ryba, Stambulova,
188 Selänne, Aunola, and Nurmi 2017). At T2 (end of the first year of upper secondary school),
189 the youth athletes discussed the adaptation to upper secondary sport school and completed “a
190 dream day” task where they created a visual representation of a best possible day in the future
191 (Ronkainen and Ryba 2018). These previous data gave us a background understanding of the
192 participants’ life histories and their future perspective, but the present analysis is based only
193 on the stories collected at T3 with the aim to understand how the youth athletes construct
194 their identities at the end of the second year of upper secondary school.

195 *Procedure*

196 Participants were contacted via email or other communication apps with the request to
197 create a visual representation of themselves as athletes and to bring the representation to a
198 subsequent interview. They were instructed that they could use photographs, newspaper clips,
199 drawings, cartoons or any other visual materials. We asked them to reflect on how they see,

200 think, and feel about themselves as athletes and what aspects of their athletic identity are
201 important to them. Eleven athletes completed the task.

202 In the interview, we asked the participants to introduce their visual materials, ‘walk us
203 through’ the content and tell us why they had chosen these images. We encouraged the
204 participants to take the lead in identifying and discussing what they considered important in
205 their creative works. We also asked them to think how various aspects of them are visible (or
206 not) in their visual representations. Therefore, the interviews were conversational and
207 unfolded differently. The six participants who had not produced a representation were still
208 interviewed, and they only provided a verbal account of themselves as athletes.

209 *Data Analysis*

210 Narrative scholars have suggested that visual data can be analysed similarly to an
211 interview, focusing on narrative content, form, and performative elements of the story
212 (Riessman 2008; Busanich et al. 2016). We first familiarised ourselves with the visual
213 representations, taking notes about the visual aspects that are not part of a spoken narrative:
214 colours, sizes of objects, where the viewer’s eye is drawn to, and arrangement of the content
215 (Drew and Guillemin 2014). We then held a meeting with two critical friends where we
216 explored the possible interpretations of the images, shared how they made us think and feel,
217 and noted similarities and differences between the visual representations. We also discussed
218 the visual stories in light of the previous data and the interviewers’ interactions with the
219 participants. The first author then read the interview transcripts several times and developed a
220 thematic table identifying themes and storylines from the interviews and visual
221 representations. The authors held several meetings to discuss interpretations and tentative
222 explanations of the stories.

223 Our reading of the visual and verbal narratives followed Spector-Mersel's (2010, 2014)
224 model of analysing the mechanisms of selection of identity narratives. As she argued,
225 Each and every act of narration involves choices and decisions—often unconscious—as
226 regards to what to tell (and what not to tell) and how—that is, how the facts being selected
227 are organized and what meaning is attributed to them (...) Selectiveness is evident in all
228 types of narratives, but is intriguingly apparent in self-narratives' (Spector-Mersel 2014, p.
229 25).

230 Spector-Mersel further suggested the following mechanisms of selection and how they can
231 be identified in interpreting narratives: (1) *inclusion*: noting central events, themes and
232 qualities that are chosen to be told; (2) *exclusion*: focusing on what is omitted (because it is
233 irrelevant) or silenced (because it contradicts the story); (3) *sharpening*: what is emphasised,
234 repeated or overrepresented, perhaps at expense of something else; (4) *flattening*: what is
235 mentioned but reduced or considered not central; (5) '*appropriate*' *meaning attribution*: the
236 acts of assigning new meanings to particular incidents to fit a desired endpoint of the story;
237 and (6) recognising the story's *endpoint* which is the identity that is being claimed. Spector-
238 Mersel (2010, 2014) argued that the organising principle of the narration is the established
239 endpoint – the desired identity that the protagonist seeks to claim. The end point, then, guides
240 the narrator's selection of other components of the story. The narrative analyst works in the
241 narrator's steps, but backwards: tracing first what is included, omitted, or silenced; what is
242 emphasised, de-emphasised, and how it is interpreted; and through that, inductively arriving
243 at the end point of the story and developing explanations of the identified endpoint.

244 In reading the participants' stories, we identified biographical facts (e.g., recent athletic
245 success or failure, changes in coaches, injury, entry to the national team, obtaining a
246 professional contract) and started to consider different ways in which such experiences might

247 be storied. For example, an athletic injury could be given meaning within restitution, quest, or
248 chaos plots (Frank 1995), or athletic success could be storied as a result of hard work, luck,
249 and/or knowledgeable and supportive coaches. Comparing participant stories gave us hints
250 about possible meanings of being a talented athlete and what was possibly omitted by certain
251 individuals. As a final step of the analysis, we compared our findings to the narrative
252 typology developed by Douglas and Carless (2009) to identify the degree to which our
253 analysis converges with performance, discovery and relational narratives.

254 *Considerations of research quality*

255 Although all qualitative data is subject to multiple possible readings, visual
256 representations arguably add another level of complexity to interpretive work (Drew and
257 Guillemin 2014). Our approach to research quality was based on a critical realist stance that
258 considers knowledge as theory-laden, fallible and provisional – yet maintaining that some
259 accounts can be more accurate and plausible than others because meanings and events exist in
260 some ways independent of researchers’ knowledge of them (Maxwell 2017). As Maxwell
261 (2017, p. 120) explained,

262 Realism provides no ‘objective’ or definitive measure of the validity or invalidity of
263 the conclusions of a study. However, this does not entail that reality has *no* role in
264 assessing the validity (trustworthiness, quality) of these conclusions. The reason for
265 this is central to what is called the ‘scientific method’: the possibility of *testing* one’s
266 conclusions against both existing and potential evidence, with the goal of evaluating
267 the plausibility of alternative interpretations or ‘validity threats’ to these conclusions.

268 In other words, validity does not pertain to following standardised procedures in a list-like
269 manner or the methods used, but to how well the accounts and inferences can help us
270 understand the studied phenomenon and whether they have been scrutinised for potentially

271 being *wrong* (Maxwell 2017). Our ‘tests’ to the credibility of our account included inviting
272 alternative interpretations (for both the images and our interpretive account) from critical
273 friends, seeking for disconfirming cases, and comparing our interpretations to analyses of the
274 participants’ previous data. We also presented our analytic strategy in a qualitative study
275 circle and invited critical comments and questions. Similar to participants’ tentative answers
276 to who they are, we acknowledge that our interpretations remain contestable and that other
277 plausible readings from alternative theoretical lenses are possible.

278 **Results**

279 As pre-elite athletes embedded in talent development environments, it is unsurprising that
280 cultural narratives focused on athletic excellence, high performance and winning provided a
281 backdrop and a resource for *all* participants’ narrative activities. Elite sport environment with
282 its competitive structure functioned as the macro context of story production (i.e., the socio-
283 political environment the athletes were embedded in) and framed their everyday lives
284 involving a high volume of deliberate practice and other training-related activities. However,
285 the participants made very different choices in what to include and what to omit to claim an
286 athletic identity. In doing so, the majority of them used many resources besides the
287 performance narrative to develop a positive image of themselves and their prospects of
288 realising their dreams. These alternative resources included the relational narrative identified
289 by Douglas and Carless (2009), but also Nordic cultural narratives about a balanced life
290 involving leisure, time to relax, and sport-as-lifestyle. As we will show, the presence of
291 ‘performance identity narrative’ was further layered to (a) the high-performance athlete:
292 exclusive and non-exclusive forms; (b) the performance, relational and fun athlete; and (c)
293 the lifestyle athlete. After describing these three ways of crafting athletic identities, we attend
294 to two examples of situational and interactive work of selecting narrative materials to
295 establish the desired endpoints: a positive, motivated future perspective and sense of self.

296 *The high-performance athlete: exclusive and non-exclusive forms*

297 In the identity stories centred on athletic success, the selection of narrative materials in the
298 representation of the athlete self was often individualistic (peers, teammates, parents or
299 coaches were omitted, or their influence flattened); internal assets of hard work, dedication
300 and self-belief were lifted to the centre; nutrition, sleep and recovery were storied as
301 instruments to athletic success; and winning and athletic achievement featured as major
302 concerns. Ulla (F, athletics) expressed: ‘Sport is a huge thing to me. I plan everything, food,
303 sleeping, recovery, and of course, training. I believe that I’m doing things better than anyone
304 else in my age’. Notably omitted from these self-stories were enjoyment and fun of playing
305 sport. The lack of these elements could have been their lack of fit or contribution to the
306 identity that was being claimed – that of a prospective elite athlete (rather than ‘a hobbyist’,
307 for example). Furthermore, the stories contained little focus on the relational self. As
308 illustrated in Kimmo’s visual story (see figure 1), whereas other people were absent, training
309 gear, competition and symbols of success were lifted to the forefront.

310 [Insert Fig 1]

311 A central function of the performance identity narratives was to build athletes’ trust on
312 imagined futures – that is, careers as elite or professional athletes. In elaborating on his visual
313 representation, Kimmo (M, orienteering with skis) explained: ‘in the lower right corner I’ve
314 put those trophies to visualise my goals... of course, it is always in my mind what I can still
315 achieve’. Similarly, Topi (M, football), offered: ‘I want to be a part of and play in the
316 national team, now and in the future’. The performance narrative identity’s theorised
317 exclusivity was, however, not often evident. Marko (M, gymnastics) was one of the few
318 developing a story of his athletic identity as excluding the possibility of serious commitment
319 to academic identity:

320 I'm a person who cannot dedicate to two things at the same time. So I have to choose,
321 and I have chosen my sport, and I am trying to succeed. And although I'm trying to
322 do a decent job with the school, it just doesn't seem to work.

323 In other cases, even if the athletic identity narrative focused on being competitive, it did not
324 necessarily imply that 'winning, results, and achievements are pre-eminent and link closely to
325 the storyteller's mental well-being, identity, and self-worth' (Douglas and Carless 2009, p.
326 215). Vilma (F, basketball player) prioritised performance-oriented stories in her self-
327 representation as an athlete and omitted or flattened other stories such as those about fun and
328 social life in sport. She brought a picture of herself winning a situation against a professional
329 player to the interview. Although she said she selected the picture to demonstrate her work
330 ethic and desire to succeed in sport, the performance-oriented sport story did not mean that
331 sport was her only identity. When the interviewer asked about what else she felt she was
332 beside the basketball player, she offered:

333 Basketball, it's such a big part of my life, [but] there are other things also that I would
334 want to do. I want to learn how to play the guitar. And I love travelling, and I would
335 sometimes dream that at some point in my life I'm going to travel a lot (...) Also, well,
336 I love reading. And I would want to be recognized also as me, as a person. Like 'oh
337 she's the funny girl we've been talking to this summer' and yeah... maybe like that.

338 Although Vilma addressed the time demands of her sport that limited the other activities she
339 can pursue, her sense of self was by no means enclosed in sport (as in the 'classic'
340 performance narrative). Similarly, Antti (M, gymnastics) had clear goals of succeeding in
341 national championships in the next month and then entering the men's national team, but he
342 maintained that being an athlete did not consume his whole life:

343 I can also relax and take it easy. I don't have to think [about sport] all the time. How
344 to say it, there must be other things in life than just sports, which you also enjoy.

345 *The performance, relational and fun athlete*

346 Although the participants were aspiring to be elite performers, not everyone developed an
347 athletic identity including *only* hard work, seriousness and aiming to win. Teemu (M, ice
348 hockey) who had already started playing in a professional league believed that sport could be
349 about achievement *and* fun: 'I want to play and do that but it is also fun, it is always nice to
350 go there'. Similarly, although Nea (F, judo) was eager to 'show that hard work brings results
351 (...) I want to be the best', she also wanted to have a good time with her competitors:

352 Hmm, I'm a positive and social person, I smile a lot. If we have trips abroad, for
353 competitions and camps, I try to talk to foreigners. To create a sense of community
354 and good atmosphere. So that everyone would have a good time and it would be nice
355 to spend time together.

356 In her story, performance, discovery and relational narratives could be seemingly integrated
357 to bring meaning to her athletic identity. Similarly, Katri (F, swimming) brought seven
358 photographs of herself and her friends in swimming events and trips, smiling and having fun.
359 In one picture, she and her teammates had medals; in the other six, the social and fun
360 elements dominated and achievement was absent. She explained:

361 I brought many picture of myself and my friends, because I feel that even if I am a
362 very goal-oriented athlete and want to achieve a lot in my career, still, mm, all my
363 best swimming memories and all my best performances have been kind of, when it
364 has been really fun in training (...) To an outsider it may look like I'm just fooling
365 around, having fun and being with friends. However, all my swimming friends, my
366 coach and I know that even if we were wearing flamingo hats when we went to a

367 relay [showing a picture], we performed very well (...) we perform well, and we have
368 worked hard for it.

369 The visual images alone, exemplifying fun and friendships in swimming, could have been
370 interpreted as an anti-performance narrative; however, in her verbal narrative, she included
371 the hard work and achievement to construct a story of herself as both fun-loving and
372 achievement-oriented athlete. In her overall story, however, the work-like element in sport is
373 flattened; it is mentioned, but its importance is reduced to sharpen the message of her story:
374 'If swimming wasn't fun anymore, I don't know how long I would want to continue it.' It is
375 possible that developing a story flattening hard work and omitting possible boredom or lack
376 of fun in swimming (reasons previously listed as contributing to dropout in young swimmers;
377 Salguero et al. 2003) was her strategy of developing a positive identity story to sustain
378 motivation and commitment to her sport life project.

379 *The lifestyle athlete*

380 The only story that consistently de-emphasised athletic performance was developed by Alisa
381 (F, judo). Her visual representation (see fig. 2) included symbols of well-being, happiness
382 and belonging in a team, whereas the elements of hard work, dedication and winning were
383 omitted. She explained:

384 [Insert Fig 2]

385 There [in the middle] is someone who represents me, who is healthy and looks
386 cheerful and reaching towards the sky. Maybe it represents like reaching towards new
387 challenges. And there is the bowl of fruits, and so as an athlete – I feel healthy. So it
388 represents health. And there is the smiley face and a picture of our team – I wasn't
389 there because I did not go to that competition – but it represents that sport is also,

390 there are my friends and family. So it is a bit of a lifestyle. And a bit like recharging
391 and therapy and something like that

392 While including elements that were omitted from many other stories (health, family, sport
393 as therapy, and sport as a lifestyle), Alisa also identified being a perseverant athlete, and
394 continued:

395 I've had many injuries, and because of that I could not train, and I didn't succeed so
396 well in competitions. But still, I haven't quit or thought about anything like that.

397 Interviewer: and in addition to perseverance, what else has kept you going?

398 Alisa: mmm, I want to be good, I like to be good (laughing)

399 Interviewer: (laughing) tell me about that last time [she competed in a major
400 competition], [not just good] but almost like the best?

401 Alisa: I was almost the best, yes. That is always nice.

402 While winning did not feature in her visual representation, the verbal story indicated that it
403 still had significance. Perhaps the omitted trophies and cues about athletic success in the
404 visual image reflected her life as lived – the injuries and not performing at her best. At the
405 time of the interview, she had not fully recovered and explained: 'for example, running has
406 been almost impossible, my knee is swollen and very sore. I couldn't even properly walk
407 with that leg'. These reflections also stood in stark opposition to her visual image manifesting
408 health and well-being, which seemed to reflect her ideal athlete self rather than her actual
409 lived experience.

410 It is possible that the adversity she has experienced had led her to reflect on the meaning
411 of sport in her life, and what else it can offer if she cannot perform at a top level. She
412 explained:

413 If I cannot move or do sport, I start to jump on the walls and become irritated... so
414 sport also has a mental health side that I need to be able to do sport. I would not
415 necessarily even need to compete as long as I'm doing sport in some way (...) Judo is
416 not a sport in Finland that you can make a living from, so I need to take care of
417 studies so that if I stop doing judo or I don't want to be a kind of professional athlete,
418 and judo is not the main thing, then I have something that I can continue from.

419 The shift in her future perspective where professional sport might not be her pathway, in
420 turn, helps to further explain the lack of emphasis on hard work and dedication. Her story is
421 different from other stories and draws on different aspects of her life and self, but similar to
422 other stories, 'works' to sustain a positive future perspective and continuity to the athletic
423 identity. Her construction of sport as a lifestyle provides continuity to a sporting future also
424 past peak athletic performances, a benefit that other youth athletes more explicitly focused on
425 athletic success might be missing.

426 *Selecting stories for specific purposes: the construction of a positive athletic identity*

427 Although all stories were crafted by selectively including and sharpening certain
428 elements while omitting, silencing or flattening others, the narrative work to construct
429 'appropriate' meaning was more at the forefront in some stories than others. The heightened
430 need for this process was related to specific threats to athletic identity. As Geijsel and Meijers
431 (2005) noted, when our identity configuration does not fit the situation we encounter –
432 whether cognitively or emotionally – we need to access discursive resources that give us a
433 'good enough' explanation to restore balance. In two athletes' stories, such situations were
434 acutely evident. These cases illustrate how threats to identity were solved by 'appropriate'
435 meaning attribution to restore positive athletic identities.

436 Ulla (F, athletics) had not prepared a visual representation but offered unique insight
437 into how she had reconciled a potential threat to her positive identity narrative that emerged
438 in a recent dialogue with her friend. Ulla's story illustrated how possible versions of her
439 identity were tested out in a small-story-interaction with the friend. When the interviewer
440 asked her to tell about how she identifies as an athlete, she explained:

441 Ulla: Mm, I could first, maybe... when I started thinking about it – or yesterday when
442 we were having lunch I started thinking about it and I thought, oh this is a difficult
443 question. And my friend there said that she could tell! Well, I will first tell you what
444 she said and then what I think. So, first, she said that I am selfish. That I am very
445 selfish. And I was like, okay, oh, help, I hate selfish people! What on Earth? But then
446 she started explaining that, well, I do everything in a way that I think about the sport.
447 When we had a training camp last weekend, I had said something that I, okay, now I
448 want to sleep, when everyone was in our room. Then, after everyone else had left who
449 didn't sleep there, my friend said that she could never have done that, she wouldn't
450 have the credibility. That I am the kind of person, she related that to ambition. But
451 that I would not have, if, if I did not speak to her, I would not be saying anything like
452 this.

453 As Ulla herself explained, the narrative she shared was not meant to be included in her
454 identity representation but appeared because it was a part of a recent exchange and therefore
455 in her mind. The identity that is being offered contradicted with her ideal self ('I hate selfish
456 people!'), and therefore would have been likely silenced from a more 'worked through'
457 visual identity representation if she had done it. However, in the interaction with her friend,
458 she managed to reappropriate being selfish to a positive characteristic for an athlete, as a sign
459 of ambition and self-confidence. She further explained:

460 In normal life, I would never say something like that to other people. But, in the sport
461 life, what is in the background is that I am good [athlete] and everyone understand
462 that I need sleep. So I recognise that. It is rough, but you have to be selfish.

463 ‘Appropriate’ meaning attribution was also apparent in Topi’s (M, football) narrative,
464 who had encountered a more persistent threat to his athletic identity. He had done the visual
465 representation but was having difficulty in making sense of why his promising football career
466 was stalling. He was experiencing some issues with the coach, had spent a lot of time on the
467 bench, and was contemplating options to go for a loan in a lower division to get playing time
468 again. His visual representation contained selected newspaper clips of quotes including
469 ‘every day you just have to believe in yourself and your own thing. It will be rewarded one
470 day’ and ‘In the long term, the focus has to be on facing the adversity and working hard’. In
471 discussing his visual representation, he reflected ‘I wrote [in the backside of the visual
472 representation] that I think I am a diligent athlete and, I believe that when I train and believe
473 in what I do, at some point it will bring success. As long as you believe, at least you have
474 hope’.

475 Through selecting the newspaper quotes confirming that hard work eventually leads to
476 success, Topi constructed the experienced adversity as a test of his will and work ethic rather
477 than a possible start of a decline in his athletic career. As such, the story allowed for
478 sustaining motivation and a positive vision of a successful athletic future. However, as he
479 further reflected, ‘I’m also very critical of myself, in my view, it might be partly a weakness’.
480 In flattening his self-criticism as a form of weakness, he further sought to assure himself of a
481 bright athletic future: ‘I wrote here that I trust myself and my future even if it is not always
482 easy, the only thing you cannot do is to give up’.

483

Discussion

484 Our study aimed to develop further understandings of the underlying processes of athletic
485 identity development and offer some tentative answers to why youth athletes develop these
486 particular identities. As such, our study contributes to narrative scholarship on the processes
487 of developing a narrative identity in sport (Carless and Douglas 2013; Douglas 2009) with the
488 specific focus on pre-elite athletes' situational answers to who they are. We found that most
489 athletes spontaneously directed their storytelling to their goals and hopes for the future,
490 signalling that the main concern for them is not who they are now, but whom they wish to
491 become (see also Adamson et al. 1999). Therefore, we have argued that youth pre-elite
492 athletes' identity construction is intricately tied to attempts to develop a positive view on the
493 future, and the selection of identity narratives is guided by the *end point* of the story, which
494 for most of them was becoming an elite or professional athlete.

495 Since performing on a high level and winning is a pre-requisite for carving out a
496 professional athletic career, we feel it would be surprising *not* to encounter a performance
497 narrative plot as one ingredient in prospective elite athletes' identity constructions.
498 Performance narratives of elite sport culture are useful resources because they offer clear
499 signposts of how to 'make it' (work hard, believe in yourself) while omitting the insecurities
500 such as inequality of opportunity, the impact of luck, and the stories of not 'making it'. When
501 encountering adversity (e.g., injury, overtraining or difficulties with the coach), the young
502 athletes engaged in reflexive attempts to keep their narratives 'going' by storying the bumps
503 on the road as tests of their will. This psychological work of 'appropriate' meaning
504 attribution (Spector-Mersel 2014) allowed them to develop trust in their prospects and sustain
505 motivation despite disruptive biographical experiences. As such, these stories offered
506 situational answers to the experienced problems that threatened the emerging 'big' story of
507 athletes' lives.

508 Despite the undeniable presence of performance narratives in all youth athletes' stories,
509 we also suggest that the previous representation of performance narratives as all-consuming
510 and exclusive seems to be, at least in our study context, exaggerated. Our findings indicated
511 that some athletes were developing a performance, discovery *and* relational story at the same
512 time (in addition to a lifestyle and a fun-oriented story), which is also consistent with the
513 previous findings on layering the performance narrative from the on-going longitudinal study
514 (Ryba et al. 2017). As an addition to the established typology, we also identified a sport-as-
515 lifestyle narrative, which is about valuing lifelong sport participation and well-being and
516 draws on the Nordic sport-for-all ideology. The lifestyle narrative provided continuity to the
517 athletic identity and a positive future perspective and could be seen as facilitative of
518 adaptation when preparing to leave the elite-level sport.

519 The findings of the layering of performance narrative are aligned with motivation research
520 that has emphasised that sport is both a social and performance domain, involving both
521 intrinsic and extrinsic rewards for participants (Hodge, Allen, and Smellie 2008; Allen 2003).
522 In addressing both performance and social dimensions of athletic identity, the participants
523 could be seen to tap to the motivational component of identity, building a case for themselves
524 why the sport is worthwhile now and in the future (i.e., sport commitment). The co-existence
525 of the achievement and social dimensions of athletic identity in athletes' stories reminds that
526 it is vital to treat cultural narrative types not as fixed and exclusive categories (even in the
527 case of performance narratives), but as ingredients that youth athletes draw on in various
528 degrees to maintain motivation and a positive view on the future. In addition, it is possible
529 that totalitarian athletic identity narratives are not appealing for many youth athletes in
530 Finland, where good education (Niemi, Toom, and Kallioniemi 2016) and work-life balance
531 and leisure (Liikkanen 2004; Crompton and Lyonette 2006) are also culturally important.
532 While aiming to win and be the best, many participants also valued being able to relax, not

533 think about the sport all the time, have fun and socialise, and develop other aspects of
534 themselves, which was also evident in their constructions about their dreams at the previous
535 interview of the longitudinal project (Ronkainen and Ryba 2018).

536 Our study showed the on-going, interactive negotiation of identity narratives, contributing
537 to the ‘small story’ research genre in a sport context. As postulated by small story theorists
538 (Bamberg 2004; Bamberg and Georgakopoulou 2008), adolescent identity development is a
539 relational and situational process where interactions with peers and other people are vital for
540 practising and testing out potential stories of the self. These interactions are used to gain
541 feedback to inform self-construction and to establish ‘acceptable’ identities (e.g., it is good
542 for an athlete to be selfish). However, we found that athletes who completed the visual task
543 more often articulated more coherent, emerging ‘big stories’ of the self, which could be partly
544 due to the process of self-exploration required in preparing the visual representation
545 (Liebenberg 2009). As such, the task we gave to our participants could be useful as a part of
546 career development interventions and sport psychology services with youth athletes, as it
547 engages the participants in the process of selecting narrative materials to make sense of their
548 identities and future aspirations in the ‘bigger’ picture. From an intervention perspective, it
549 might also be useful to engage the athletes to reflect on what they might have omitted or not
550 considered, to prepare them for future challenges better. As Henriksen and Mortensen (2014)
551 argued and our study indicates, too, youth athletes might imagine their future pathways in a
552 linear and overly optimistic manner, with a primary focus on their internal assets (goal
553 orientation, work ethic) and little consideration of external resources that might be needed.
554 These interventions could include interaction with older athletes who could offer additional
555 narrative resources for youth athletes to think about the future.

556 Finally, narrative scholarship (including our own) has frequently recommended that
557 interventions could work to widen the narrative resources that athletes draw on to help them

558 develop more multifaceted identities. This recommendation is justified by athletic identity
559 research that has demonstrated that strong and exclusive athletic identity can compromise the
560 psychological health and well-being of athletes especially if they get injured or de-selected
561 (Brewer and Petitpas 2017), and the work of Douglas and Carless that has suggested that
562 discovery and relational stories that resist performance narratives do not compromise
563 performance excellence (Carless and Douglas 2009, 2013; Douglas 2009). However, Hardy
564 et al.'s (2017) findings challenge the latter point by showing that 'super-elite' athletes were
565 distinguished from elite athletes by being more selfish, ruthless, obsessive and/or
566 perfectionist, and more often single-mindedly focused on sport. This finding brings an ethical
567 dilemma to sport psychology practitioners who are likely to be concerned of both the mental
568 health and the performance potential of their clients. To this question, there is no easy
569 answer, and further research is needed to better understand the interactions of various
570 narratives with athletes' life choices, career transition outcomes, health and well-being, and
571 career success.

572 As a limitation of the present study, not all participants completed the visual task which
573 left the interpretation of their stories reliant on the verbal narratives only. Despite our
574 attempts to engage participants through visual methods as potentially more engaging and fun
575 activities than traditional interviews, we found that adolescent athletes' interest in these
576 activities varies and adding these tasks to their already busy lives with schoolwork and
577 training might not always be fruitful. Secondly, as Carless and Douglas (2013) also pointed
578 out, we cannot know the consequences of these different identity narratives at this point of
579 time to the athletes' well-being and performance in the future. Given that narrative identities
580 are constantly evolving as athletes accumulate more life experience, 'test out' small stories
581 with their peers, and encounter new narratives resources, multiple pathways are open to them.

582 Hopefully, since the data are part of a longitudinal study, further data collection points will
583 help us gain a better understanding of these issues.

584 **Conclusions**

585 The present study used visual and verbal narratives to explore the processes of narrative
586 identity selection in youth pre-elite athletes in Finland. We suggested that the stories were
587 selectively crafted to establish a positive future perspective which most often had the end
588 point of becoming an elite athlete. We argued that performance-oriented narratives need not
589 be exclusive and that often many narrative threads co-exist in youth athletes' emergent stories
590 of the self. The prominent future-oriented content in participants' self-narratives indicates
591 that, especially with younger sport participants, narrative methodologies should focus not
592 only on the past (as traditionally in life story interviews) but also onto on-going, tentative and
593 prospective 'small' and 'big' stories that athletes try out to make sense of who they are and
594 their sporting futures. Continuing to explore 'small stories' and stories about the future
595 present two promising avenues to extend understandings of how narrative identity is
596 configured to answer not only the question of who we have been but also who we will
597 become. When the stories of the past and the future meet, we may better understand who we
598 are now.

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