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Developing narrative identities in youth pre-elite sport: Bridging the present and the future

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Abstract

Narrative research has contributed to understandings of athletic identity as an evolving story of the self that is creatively put together by the agentic individual but necessarily dependent on broader narratives within which we all live our lives. However, most studies in sport have focused on retrospective ‘big stories’ of athletes’ lives, rather than on-going, future-oriented identity construction through storytelling. In this study, we explored Finnish pre-elite athletes’ emerging stories of the self to understand the processes associated with the narrative selection and the resources they tap into in making sport meaningful to them. Nine women and eight men aged 17-18 were invited to create a visual representation of themselves as athletes and discuss them in conversational interviews. In the narrative analysis, we identified three storylines, ‘the high-performance athlete’, ‘the performance, relational and fun athlete’ and ‘the lifestyle athlete’ and explored how stories were selected to construct a positive athletic identity and sustain motivation. We argue that the end point of the identity narratives was to establish a positive future perspective and hope in the face of adversities. The future-oriented narrative content signals a need for more diverse narrative methodologies in sport beyond retrospective approaches such as the life story interview, especially with younger participants.

Keywords: athletic identity, futuring, small stories, narrative selection, youth sport

Developing narrative identities in youth pre-elite sport: Bridging the present and the future

The potential of athletic identity to function as ‘Hercules’ Muscles or Achilles Heel’ (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder 1993) has occupied sport psychologists and sociologists for several decades with a body of literature accumulated on its relationships to adaptation, performance and well-being (Brewer and Petitpas 2017; Douglas and Carless 2009, 2013). Researchers have demonstrated that strong athletic identity can be a positive asset in fostering motivation and sport commitment; however, a combination of strong and exclusive athletic identity has been shown to leave athletes vulnerable to psychological distress if they encounter poor performance, severe injury or athletic retirement (Brewer and Petitpas 2017; Grove, Lavalley, and Gordon 1997). Furthermore, student-athletes with strong athletic identity have been reported to have lower career maturity than their non-athlete peers, indicating that they might encounter additional challenges when making career choices and transitioning to the job market (Houle and Kluck 2015; Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer 1996). Therefore, supporting the development of multifaceted identities to safeguard adaptability and well-being has been lifted as a central concern for those working with athletes, including sport psychologists, coaches, career counsellors and lifestyle advisors (e.g., Schinke, Blodgett, Ryba, Kao, & Middleton 2019).

Although identity development is a lifelong process, adolescence is considered the prime time of exploration of and commitment to identities and activities that come with them. For Adamson, Hartman, and Lyxell (1999), ‘identity formation during late adolescence consists of integrative issues: *to balance and control one’s needs and wishes in relation to others*’ and *to find a place for oneself in the future*’ (p. 30). They also suggested that, although individuals commit to different identity domains at different paces, concern for the future could be seen as an organising principle and a core existential issue around which identity

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

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

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

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

understand how aspiring athletes who are ‘not there yet’ select and claim identities and for what purposes.

The present study aims to understand how Finnish, pre-elite youth athletes narrate their athletic identities. Given that questions of identity are abstract and potentially challenging to answer, we draw on both visual and verbal methods to provide youth athletes with different ways to express themselves. In doing so, we aim to advance understandings of youth athlete identity construction, the processes of narrative selection, and the narrative resources that prospective elite athletes have at their disposal. In addition to theoretical and methodological contributions, we provide applied reflections for sport psychologists, career counsellors, coaches and lifestyle practitioners on how to support youth athletes' identity development and exploration.

Methodology

We approach narrative inquiry from a critical realist philosophical position (Bhaskar 2011) which implies the assumption that social reality has an existence independent of the researcher's conceptual activity (i.e., ontological realism). At the same time, critical realism embraces epistemic relativism, maintaining that knowledge production is a social activity, contingent on socio-historical conditions, and always fallible (Bhaskar 2011). Smith and Sparkes (2008) noted that narrative identity can be theorised from both realist and relativist ontological positions and, indeed, scholars in other fields have increasingly been developing a critical realist approach to the study of identity, discourse and narrative (Fairclough 2005; Mahoney 2012).

Previously, many narrative researchers studied athletic identity within ‘a big story’ approach that focuses on how sequences of events are put together in life story interviews (Bamberg 2011), to understand how identities develop over time (Carless and Douglas 2009;

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

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

Participants

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

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

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

Procedure

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

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

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

Data Analysis

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

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

Considerations of research quality

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

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

[Insert Fig 1]

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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