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

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

Running head: NARRATIVE AND DISCURSIVE PERSPECTIVES

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

2 **Abstract**

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

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

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

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

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

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

26 In the recent decade, there has been an increasing number of books and theoretical
27 articles in sport psychology calling for rethinking athletic identity through cultural
28 epistemologyⁱ (Fisher & Roper, 2015; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005;
29 Ryba, Schinke & Tenenbaum, 2010; Schinke, Stambulova, Lidor, Papaioannou, & Ryba,
30 2015). These authors have argued that athletic identity cannot be understood in isolation from
31 culture and language practices that promote certain understandings of self and the sport world
32 while silencing and marginalising others. As Schinke and colleagues (2015) observed, “the
33 cultural practices in most sports marginalise female, gay, ageing, racialized bodies that are
34 socially constructed in opposition to white heterosexual masculine standards, taken as
35 normative in defining and giving meaning to sport activities” (p. 4). The cultural scholarship
36 has aimed to destabilise the common sense and taken-for-granted meanings in athletic
37 identity as a singular sport role. It has also aimed to open up the field for more nuanced
38 examinations of athletic identities of those who might not conform to the dominant norms,
39 who could be, for example, positioned as minority athletes, disabled athletes, or female
40 athletes (McGannon & Johnson, 2009; Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013).

41 Much (although not all) of cultural scholarship has been framed as cultural praxis (e.g.,
42 McGannon & Smith, 2015; Ryba & Wright, 2005; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane,
43 2012; Schinke, et al., 2015). Cultural praxis is an approach to sport psychology which
44 emphasises blending theory with social practice in order to produce progressive social
45 change. Issues of sociocultural difference, social justice, and the impact of scientific research
46 practices on producing privilege or marginalisation of certain identities and experiences are at
47 heart of cultural praxis scholarship (Ryba & Wright, 2005; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al.,
48 2015). In addition to raising awareness of participants’ various cultural identities, cultural

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

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

72 also ascribed to individuals, thus limiting their choices and behaviour (Cosh, LeCouteur, et al.
73 2013; McGannon & Smith, 2015).

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

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

85 **Method**

86 **Identifying Relevant Articles**

87 We conducted searches in three databases (ScienceDirect, SPORTDiscus, and Google
88 Scholar) using keywords “narrative identity” + athlete + psychology, “athlet* identity” (in
89 Google Scholar: athletic and athlete identity) + “psychology”, “athlet* subjectivity” (in
90 Google Scholar: athletic and athlete subjectivity) + psychology, and “subject position” +
91 athlete + psychology (to reduce search results, in Google Scholar: “sport psychology”). The
92 search terms subjectivity and subject positions were used because discursive approaches
93 often prefer these terms over the traditional concept of identity (McGannon & Busanich,
94 2010; McGannon & Mauws, 2010). For ScienceDirect (165 search results) and SportDiscus
95 (81 results), we read abstracts of all studies; for Google Scholar (4923 results), the initial

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

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

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

120 **The Meta-study Method**

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

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

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

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

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

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

141 **Narrative Identity**

142 **Meta-theory**

143 In this review, we identified a total of 18 narrative studies into athletic identity. While
144 narrative studies can have different emphases, the fundamental assumption of narrative
145 research is that identity is developed in the act of storytelling (Crossley, 2000). It is
146 postulated that each identity narrative contains unique and idiosyncratic features, and that it is
147 our psychological need to infuse our experiences with meaning to construct coherent
148 narratives of how and why we have come to be as we are (McAdams, 1993). At the same
149 time, identity narratives are always dependent on cultural narratives available to the
150 individual (Spector-Mersel, 2010). In addition to these common assumptions, narrative
151 theorists also have some differences in their conceptualisations of identity. Smith and Sparkes
152 (2008) identified five perspectives (the psychosocial, the inter-subjective, the storied
153 resource, the dialogic, and the performative perspectives) on narrative identity, which form a
154 continuum between “a thick individual and thin social relational” perspective at one end, and
155 “a thin individual and thick social relational” perspective at the other end (Smith & Sparkes,
156 2008, p.5). Scholars positioned in the former end of the continuum align with realist ontology
157 and phenomenological perspectives and tend to emphasise the inner world of the individual,
158 authenticity, and narrative coherence. For example, McAdams (1987, 1993) built his theory
159 of narrative identity on Erikson’s (1968) stages of psychosocial development, and suggested
160 that narrative identity is a psychological structure that evolves over time and infuses our lives
161 with unity and purpose. In the reviewed studies, this perspective was employed in part by
162 Gearing (1999) who studied identity reconstruction of former professional footballers in the
163 United Kingdom. In the middle ground of the continuum, researchers typically adopt
164 relativist ontology and epistemology, giving equal emphasis on personal and social processes
165 in identity development and negotiation. The reviewed studies mostly occupied a middle
166 position with leanings towards social constructionist end of the continuum. For example, the

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

175 [insert table 1 here]

176 **Meta-method**

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

188 Narrative methods are variously classified to thematic, structural, dialogic/performative,
189 visual, and ethnodramatic creative analytic practices (Riessman, 2008; Smith & Sparkes,
190 2009). Most narrative studies into athletic identity have followed the “traditional” path and

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

202 **Meta-data-analysis**

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

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

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

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

240 A total of four studies focused on disordered eating and narrative identity. Papathomas
241 and Lavallee (2012) conducted a case study of an athlete with eating disorder and sexual
242 abuse and found that, due to lacking previous opportunities for storying these experiences,
243 the athlete's story was fragmented and conflicting. Busanich et al. (2014, 2016) and
244 Papathomas and Lavallee (2014) built upon the notion of performance narrative and found
245 that, within this narrative, the lean body was constructed as normative for athletic success.
246 Eating disorders emerged as an attempt to develop or restore narrative alignment with
247 performance narrative (Busanich et al., 2014, 2016); however, Papathomas and Lavallee
248 (2014) also found that whereas self-starvation was first constructed as a means of athletic
249 achievement, it later transformed to an achievement goal in and of itself.

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

257 **Synthesis and Future Directions for Narrative Studies**

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

262 researchers have drawn from this work. Despite the benefits of such approach, Riessman
263 (2005) warned that working with typologies can lead to fitting participant stories into a single
264 narrative type and omitting contradictions and multiple storylines that people develop
265 simultaneously: “What happens to ambiguities, ‘deviant’ responses that don’t fit into a
266 typology, the unspoken?” (p.3) Therefore, “investigators might search for coexistent realities
267 – selves and communities that are pulling together and pulling apart at the same time”
268 (Riessman 2008, p.191). For those continuing to work with cultural narrative types and their
269 impact on athletes’ identities, it is important to stay flexible and seek to expand and revise the
270 typology proposed by Douglas and Carless (2006). For example, in motivation literature there
271 is the distinction between task and ego orientations, and intrinsic and extrinsic motivation
272 (Duda, Chi, Newton, & Walling, 1995), whereas the “performance narrative” appears to only
273 concern extrinsic outcomes and ego orientation. In light of motivation research it is likely that
274 many athletes construct identity narratives which focus on personal development, learning,
275 and mastery of skills (rather than solely the outcome), something which is not presented in
276 the current typology.

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

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

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

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

313 **Discursive Identity**

314 **Meta-theory**

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

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

334 particular subject position, a person sees the world from the perspective of that position and
335 certain ways of being in the world are made available (Davies & Harre, 1990). Certain
336 discourses, and the subject positions that they constitute, are more privileged than others; and
337 thus certain ways of being and certain identities become culturally dominant while others
338 remain in the margins (Weedon, 2004). Referring to who we think we are and how we situate
339 ourselves in the world, subjectivity is constituted through learning and using certain
340 discursive practices, always drawing on the discourses that the subject has access to (Butler,
341 1990, 1993; Davies & Harre, 1990). Whilst individuals are not passive in positioning
342 themselves in discourses, it is important to recognise that the site of subjectivity one occupies
343 in a discourse can also be ascribed to individuals, limiting their possibilities to certain
344 conventions as to how to feel, think and behave (Foucault, 1977, 1983; Weedon, 2004).

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

358 moreover include the method of identifying interpretive repertoires (Wetherell & Potter,
359 1988), the Discursive Action Model (Edwards & Potter, 1993), and DP informed by
360 conversation analysis (e.g. Hepburn & Potter, 2011). DP was first brought into the field of
361 exercise psychology by McGannon and Mauws (2000), and issues related to self-identity in
362 exercise settings have been explored through a DP perspective by McGannon and Spence
363 (2010) and McGannon and Schinke (2013). Within sport psychology, a DP perspective has
364 been employed to study athletes' accounts of athletic performances (Locke, 2004, 2008) and
365 sport fans' identities (Miller & Benkwitz, 2016). In our review, this approach was used by
366 Cosh and her colleagues (Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, & Kettler, 2012; Cosh, Crabb, &
367 LeCouteur, 2013; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013; Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2015) to
368 study athletic identity.

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

380 [insert table 2 here]

381 **Meta-method**

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

393 The reviewed DP studies broadly referred to discursive psychological analysis without
394 providing detailed descriptions of their analytic procedure. One of the papers specifically
395 referred to the synthetic approach of discursive psychological analysis, other papers cited
396 methodological resources such as Edley (2001) and Edley and Wetherell (1999), and one
397 study referred to the principles of conversation analysis. The FDA paper combined Willig's
398 (2008) discursive analytic approach with thematic analysis and explicitly described the stages
399 of the analytic procedure.

400 **Meta-data-analysis**

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

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

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

426 **Synthesis and Future Directions for Discursive Studies**

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

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

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

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

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

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

469 **Concluding Reflections**

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

478 reviewed studies suggested that the dominant conceptions of athletic identity are reinforced
479 by the (Western) sport culture and also by sport performance researchers (Douglas & Carless,
480 2006), and therefore challenged the assumed value-neutrality and cultural universality of
481 traditional athletic identity research. As such, these studies carried an important message:
482 through research, we may contribute to marginalisation rather than creation of more inclusive
483 spaces. As researchers, it is important that we recognise our own taken-for-granted
484 assumptions and how they guide our thinking and theorising around athletic identity.

485 In narrative studies, athletic identity was seen as an evolving story of the self which
486 individuals developed by drawing from available narratives, and analytical focus was on
487 individual meaning making and changes in identity narratives over time. Using mainly in-
488 depth life story interviews, these studies could shed light on how athletic identities gained
489 and shifted meaning across athletes' career span, therefore moving beyond a static role-based
490 conception of athletic identity. Discursive studies, on the other hand, focused less on
491 individual agency and analysed how certain subject positions were socially constructed as
492 either privileged and desired or non-appropriate. These studies helped us to understand how
493 certain socio-political systems and institutions (e.g. the media, sport institutes, and
494 patriarchy) regulate and normalise athletes' identities. The dominant narratives or discourses
495 were identified either by studying how they were reproduced in the media (Cosh et al., 2013,
496 2015), or how they were integrated into athletes' spoken or written narratives about their lives
497 (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Douglas 2009; Ryba et al., 2015; Sparkes, 1998).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Table 1. Narrative studies on athletic identity

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

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

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

Table 2. Discursive studies on athletic identity.

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

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

Highlights:

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