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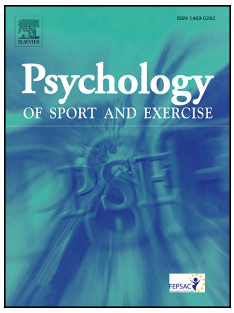

"She is where I'd want to be in my career": Youth athletes' role models and their implications for career and identity construction

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"She is where I'd want to be in my career": Youth athletes' role models and their implications for career and identity construction

RUNNING HEAD: Youth athletes' role models

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"She is where I'd want to be in my career": Youth athletes' role models and their implications for career and identity construction

Abstract

Objectives: While role models have been documented to play a vital role in adolescents' career development and identity exploration, in sport psychology they remain an untapped resource. The present study drew on narrative inquiry to explore the patterns of role model selection by adolescent student-athletes and the narrative maps these role models provide for self-construction. As a second objective, the study sought to understand the impact of gender on the selection and meaning of role models.

Method: Eighteen Finnish student-athletes (10 women, eight men) aged 17-18 participated in conversational interviews. We analysed the data with thematic and structural narrative analyses.

Results: The participants identified two types of role models: elite athletes and family members. Whereas young men were more likely to select the most well-known athlete superstars, young women were more concerned about the relationship and similarities between the role model and the self, engaging in more exploration to find a role model that matched their needs. Most of the youth athletes rejected the totalitarian ideologies of elite sport and chose role models who could have other identities and do other things alongside sport.

Conclusions: Finnish youth athletes are inspired by athlete role models whose lives are not completely constituted by performance narratives of elite sport. From an applied perspective, role models could be incorporated into career counselling with athletes to support identity development and exploration of future selves.

Keywords: adolescent athletes, narrative inquiry, dual career, athletic identity, gender, elite sport

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"She is where I'd want to be in my career": Youth athletes' role models and their implications for career and identity construction

In vocational psychology, role models have been identified as one important element in the construction of adolescent identities and future careers, and a valuable asset in career interventions. Through role models, we become aware of the careers options and ways to overcome obstacles in our career journeys. At the same time, role models help us envision what kind of people we want to become and what is possible for us. As Savickas (2013) asserted, 'the choice of role models is indeed a decision about self-construction and the character one prefers to enact in life's drama' (p. 152). In athletic career research, it has been noted that youth athletes benefit from interactions with senior elite athletes who act as potential role models (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017); however, no studies have specifically focused on the presence, types, and potential psychological functions of role models in youth pre-elite athletes' lives.

Gibson (2004) described role models as "cognitive constructions based on an individual's needs, wants, and ambitions" (p. 134). Role models differ from mentors in that they need not be in any direct contact with the individual, although they can be. Research on the impact of role models on young people's career development has indicated that they have several potential benefits. For example, role model exposure has been found to be important for intentions to pursue a specific career (Austin & Nauta, 2016). Role models offer building blocks for identity (which is the main developmental task of adolescence; Erikson, 1968), and can be important for career adaptability, motivation and persistence in the chosen career pathway (Garcia et al., 2019; Herrmann et al., 2016; Savickas, 2013). Gibson (2004) suggested that role models are selected based on similarity and the desire to increase this similarity (of skills, characteristics, social behaviour, achievements and so forth). If we believe that we can become like our role models, they can offer inspiration and motivation to

our daily lives. In contrast, superstars whose successes are perceived unattainable might actually provoke self-deflation (Lockwood & Kunda, 1997). Furthermore, role models who are not related to adolescents' career aspirations might have low or no benefit in relation to career development (Valero, Keller, & Hirschi, 2019). Therefore, it appears that certain types of role models – that is, those who have pursued a similar educational/career path, who are perceived to be similar, whose pathways the participants know well enough, and whose achievements are considered attainable – are more beneficial from a career development perspective than others.

Many researchers have argued that women in male-dominated fields (which sport arguably is) may especially benefit from female role models because they convey the message that success in this field is possible (Faucett et al., 2017; Herrmann et al., 2016). This said, young women pursuing executive positions (a typically masculine domain) might be unable to identify with senior women (their potential role models), perceiving them mean and competitive and thus incompatible with their own identities (Ezzedeen, Budworth, & Baker, 2015). As such, young women who pursue atypical careers face challenges in negotiating their career identities and identifying exemplary narratives that 'work' for them.

Studies into role models in sports have predominantly focused on the motivational impact they may have on children's and adolescents' physical activity, rather than on their role in athletic career development (e.g., Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Dunn, 2016; Vescio et al., 2005; Young et al., 2015). While researchers have generally found that role models have a positive impact on young people's physical activity, a concern has been raised that young girls and women have few sporting role models and are much less likely to have them than young boys and men. For example, Vescio et al. (2005) found that young Australian girls most often chose a family member or celebrity role model, and only 8.4 per cent chose a sports role model. Furthermore, although it has been found that girls predominantly identify

with female role models, they might find it difficult to identify female sporting role models because they can appear ideologically contradictory (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008). That is, the characteristics of 'an ideal' woman (as caring, relational and kind) and 'an ideal' athlete (as tough, aggressive and competitive) might not easily fit together.

In one of the few studies on role models in relation to athletic career development, Fleming, Hardman, Jones and Sheridan (2005) found that male, youth rugby players chose exclusively male athlete role models and their reasons of admiration revolved around technical skills and competencies, decision-making in the game, physical characteristics, and character (e.g., aggression, fearlessness and professional attitude). The identified qualities were instrumental in athletic success, and very few non-instrumental or moral qualities were identified. At the same time, elite female athletes' choices for their career role models are largely unknown. Over 40 years ago, Greendorfer (1977) explored women's sporting role models across the lifespan and found that female athletes were not significant role models for female athletes. Also more recently, female elite footballers in the UK reported that when they had grown up, very few female sport role models had been available (Dunn, 2016).

In sport, the lack of media visibility of women's sport has been previously connected with the lack of female athletic role models for young girls and women (Meier, 2015). Despite the occasional increases in women's visibility in sport in major events such as the Olympics (McGannon, Gonsalves, Schinke, & Busanich, 2015), the overall TV coverage of women's sport continues to be dismally low (Cooky, Messner, & Musto, 2015). This gender difference in the access to career role models in sport might potentially contribute to the difference in student-athletes' career orientations, with young men more likely to invest more exclusively in their athletic careers whereas young women also often strongly committing to academic achievement (De Brandt, Wylleman, Torregrossa, Defruyt, & Van Rossem, 2017; Ryba, Stambulova, Selänne, Aunola, & Nurmi 2017; Skrubbeltrang, Karen, Nielsen, & Olesen,

2018). These findings are also congruent with research on gendered processes of career construction and identity development, which has indicated that young women explore more their vocational identities than young men (Negru-Subtirica, Pop, & Crocetti, 2015).

Despite some recent encouraging findings of growing opportunities for women in sport and their placement as positive role models for the younger generation of female athletes (Dunn, 2016), many scholars have stressed that elite sport remains dominated by the masculine discursive practices that celebrate aggression, dominance over others, risk-taking and mental toughness. They have argued that mere increase in women's participation does not, in itself, produce a more gender-equal culture (Cooky & Messner, 2018; Fielding-Lloyd & Meân, 2011; Kavoura, Kokkonen, Chroni, & Ryba, 2018; Kavoura et al., 2015). In elite sport, women's presence has primarily grown as athletes, but less so as managers, coaches, or athletic directors. In addition, the key socialising agents for young women in sport are often fathers and other men (Cunningham, 2008; Kavoura et al., 2015). Although an extensive body of literature already exists on gender inequality in sport (Cunningham, 2008), girls' and women's identity tensions in sport (Krane, 2001; Kavoura et al., 2015) and media representations that work to sustain the gender order (Daniels, 2012; Trolan, 2013), less is known about how today's youth pre-elite athletes construct their gendered career pathways and what resources they draw upon to look towards realising their ambitions in sport and life.

Given the paucity of literature on the potential impact of role models in youth athletes' career development, the present study invited these talented adolescents to tell about their role models and the qualities associated with these exemplary individuals. Our study extends previous literature on athletic career and identity development by scrutinising the patterns of the selection of role models and the narrative maps these role models provide for self-construction. As a secondary objective, we explored whether there is a gendered pattern in the selection of role models. The following research questions guided our inquiry: (1) Who

are adolescent student-athletes' role models? (2) What qualities are important in the selection of role models? (3) What are the gendered patterns in the selection of role models?

Methodology

Several scholars have recently argued for the benefits of narrative inquiry on studying athletes' identities and experiences (McGannon & McMahon, 2019; Ronkainen, Kavoura, & Ryba, 2016). More specifically, narrative inquiry has become an increasingly favoured methodology in offering an avenue to understand how identities, motivations, thoughts and emotions are fashioned within a pre-given cultural world, thus offering a balanced perspective on structure and agency (McGannon & Smith, 2015). In addition to its analytic benefits (e.g., offering contextualised, temporal and emotional portrays of individual lives), narrative inquiry often produces research reports that are accessible to a broad readership (Smith, 2010). Narrative inquiry is typically participant-led in that the focus is on their story construction, and therefore aligns with recommendations to use open and inclusive questions with adolescent participants (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). In the present study, we draw on a narrative approach from a realist philosophical position. The fundamental assumption of realism is that reality, including social reality, exists independently of researchers' conceptions of it (ontological realism) while maintaining that our knowledge is always theory-laden, concept-dependent and fallible (epistemological constructionism) (Wiltshire, 2018). While sport psychology scholars have often associated narrative methods with relativism, a realist perspective on narrative, identity and discourse is increasingly been applied in other social science fields (Mahoney 2012; Roscoe, Carson, & Madoc-Jones, 2011).

For the study, we have conceptualised role models as providers of 'narrative maps' for youth athletes' career and identity development. The concept of narrative maps was introduced by Pollner and Stein (1996) who argued that, when people try to think of an

unknown future, they draw knowledge and guidance from experienced others who have already been there. The narrative maps offered to people – whether from familiar people, autobiographies, or ancient tales – can be influential in shaping how they imagine their futures, approach obstacles, and engage in actions in preparing for the future (Monforte, Pérez-Samaniego, & Devís-Devís, 2018; Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006; Sparkes & Stewart, 2016). For example, Phoenix and Sparkes (2006) used the concept of the narrative map to analyse how youth athletes imagined embodied ageing. They suggested that young athletes were only familiar with narrative maps drawn from family members, older teammates and sports sciences that projected ageing as a process of decline and withdrawal. As such, young athletes had little guidance on how to find positive meaning from ageing and look forward to it. That is, the less variety we have in the narrative maps that are at our disposal, the more easily we get 'locked in' a specific storyline that limits our ways of being and becoming.

Participants

The research participants were 18, Finnish adolescent athletes (10 women, eight men) aged 17-18 from a longitudinal mixed methods study exploring risk and resilience factors in the construction of dual career pathways (i.e., the combination of sport and education). The project was approved by the university ethics board and the participants were identified in collaboration with the Finnish Sport Academies and Sport Federations to include the most talented youth athletes across the country. At the beginning of the study, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the procedures (e.g., the audio recording of the interviews) and their rights (e.g., confidentiality, the right to withdraw from the study at any time). The participants provided written informed consent (in Finland, young people aged 15 and older can provide the consent independently). The data presented in this study is from the third wave of interviews with the participants.

At the time of the interviews, the athletes were considered elite in their age group, and a few had already transitioned to the senior sport. The participants mostly came from middle-class families and were ethnic Finns, but lived in different parts of Finland and competed in team (football, basketball, ice hockey and artistic group gymnastics) and individual (judo, cross-country skiing, swimming, tennis, artistic gymnastics, alpine skiing, ski orienteering and athletics) sports. In a previous interview, all participants had indicated that they aspired to become elite or professional athletes. The study protocol with a full description of the participants and methodology is published elsewhere (authors, 2016).

Procedure

Aware of the power relationships that exist in research relationships and especially when interviewing young participants, the interviews were conducted using a conversational approach where the researcher and participant collaboratively constructed the discourse (Eder & Fingerson, 2002). The interviews were focused on the theme of identity, with a visual task which is described elsewhere (authors, under review), and the role models as another topic of conversation. A few weeks before the interviews, we sent the participants a message: “Who is your role model? She or he can be anyone and relate to any area of life. Please send the name before the interview”. The participants were then invited to take part in the conversational interviews where the interviewer (the second or the third author) explored the role models with them. In these interviews, we focused on exploring the (gendered) qualities of the role models and the perceived similarity between the participant and the role model. We started the dialogues surrounding role models by asking the participants to tell a little bit about them. When participants started telling about the role models, the interviewers followed up with questions that tapped into different qualities of the role models (e.g., “What kind of qualities does she or he have? What do you value in her or him”), the perceived similarity between the self and the role model (e.g., “Are you like that? Can you do that, too?”), and the desired

similarity between the self and the role model ("What qualities does your role model have that you would also hope to have?). We also asked about the relationship between the participant and the role model ("How did you get to know your role model? Have you met him or her? How do you follow him or her, or how do you keep in touch?"). However, in keeping with the conversational approach, each interview unfolded differently and some participants spontaneously developed a long uninterrupted story about the role models, whereas with others the researchers were asking more questions to learn more about the role models and their perceived importance. The interviews were audio-recorded and they lasted between 27 and 71 minutes with an average of 47 minutes.

Narrative Analysis

After the interviews were transcribed, we read the transcripts several times, made notes and discussed their content and form in the author team meetings. The first author inductively coded the interview passages that were relevant to the research questions, seeking to identify repeated patterns and themes that run through the stories. We then worked with thematic narrative analysis which focuses on identifying patterns within the specific discourse of stories (Smith, 2016). We first focused on one case at the time, trying to understand the internal logic and patterns within each person's story (Tod, Hardy, Lavallee, Eubank, & Ronkainen, 2019). In line with Smith's (2016) recommendations, we were cautious not to 'overcode' and fragment the data and remained mindful of how the themes gained meaning in the broader context of the person's story. After working on each story separately, we compared the findings across cases, identifying similarities and differences in the patterns of story construction. The developing narrative themes were interpreted against previous literature and relevant contexts (of elite sport, youth culture and national culture) to trace the resources that shaped the story construction.

As a second step of the analysis, we worked with a structural approach to narrative, seeking to identify the key plot(s) and types of narratives in the data (Smith, 2016). We paid attention to the level of complexity of the stories, the ambitions expressed by the storytellers, and the overall messages the stories contained about an ideal life course and personal identity (in other words, what kind of narrative map was being developed). From each individual role model story, we listed the narrative themes forming the story and started identifying overall storylines that bind the themes together. We wrote short descriptions of each participant's role model and then started clustering them together to a set of ideal types. After working inductively to identify ideal types, we then analysed the building blocks of these stories in light of previously identified narrative types in sport (e.g., performance, discovery and relational elite athletic career narratives; Douglas & Carless, 2009; contrapuntal, monophonic and dissonant dual career narratives; Ryba et al., 2017). We then developed concise names for each narrative and sought to identify disconfirming cases to challenge our initial interpretations and to revise the typology. Throughout the process, the second author acted as a critical friend, offering feedback and her interpretations of the emerging themes.

Validity

From a realist perspective informing our study, validity "is not a matter of procedures, but of the relationship between the claim and the phenomena that the claim is about" (Maxwell & Mittapalli, 2010, p. 158). As such, validity pertains not primarily to the design and methods (although they are important, too), but the quality of inferences that are made from the data. Although it is not possible to test our accounts against objective reality, we can scrutinise these accounts against other evidence about the studied phenomenon and try to identify how we might be wrong.

In our study, the authors had several meetings to discuss the participants' perspectives and meanings they gave on role models (interpretive validity; Maxwell, 2017). In identifying

narrative types, we constantly sought for negative cases that did not fit the categories, and the second author acted as a critical friend highlighting features of participant stories that did not seem to fit the developing categories. We also consulted the previous interviews conducted with the participants to explore how our understanding of role model narratives 'fits' our analyses of the previous data, while being aware that the young participants' identities and content of life design constantly evolve and shift. We also spent time discussing the interview situations, how participants' stories were co-constructed with the researcher, and how that potentially affected the performance of the stories (Maxwell, 2017). To address theoretical validity we discussed our explanatory account in research group meetings with other researchers working in areas of developmental psychology and sport psychology to gain feedback on the credibility of our account and to invite alternative theoretical explanations. For example, the gender differences in role models were discussed in relation to different conceptual frameworks and ideas (mindfulness skills, hegemonic masculinity scripts, cultural discourses sustaining the marginalisation of women's sport) to identify plausible explanations. The formal peer review acted as a further 'test' to our account.

Results

The adolescent athletes identified 25 role models, with everyone except for one participant identifying at least one role model. The participant who did not name a role model had decided to terminate her elite athletic career in the months preceding the interview which is could explain the lack of (athletic) role models. From the 25 role models, 15 were international elite athletes, nine were family members (parents, an older brother and a grandfather), and one was a coach (see table 1). In the following sections, we explore the narrative types associated with the role models and gendered patterns in the selection of these role models.

[Insert table 1 here]

The abstract athlete hero

Four young men told ‘athlete hero’ stories where the selected role models were the superstars (e.g., Olympic champions, world champions or team captains) of the young athletes’ own sport. These hero stories aligned with notions of hegemonic masculinity (tough, competitive, and independent) and generally included very little complexity, reproducing the dominant constructions of ultimate success in sport (e.g., winning the Olympic gold medal). Marko, an aspiring gymnast, described his role model:

Well, yes, it's Kohei Uchimura. He has done very well, or well, he is a world champion and an Olympic champion. So almost everything he does in the competitions is almost perfect. And I just try to model him, and even I’m not able to do the same, I still try to do my best.

The participants often struggled to identify other qualities beyond the athletic success that were attractive in the role model:

Interviewer: can you tell me why this player [Pavel Datsyuk] appeals to you?

Teemu: Well, maybe because he is so skilled and can do good things on the ice. That is why I have followed him a lot.

Interviewer: do you know anything about his background? For example, if he came from a poor background, or how he got into ice hockey?

Teemu: No, I do not really know about his background

Interviewer: yes. And do you have any other athlete or person or an imaginary figure, or anyone who has the kind of qualities that you could admire?

Teemu: Well I do like Bolt, the sprinter

Interviewer: right

Teemu: well, he has dominated the sprints, and so I do like him.

These storytellers generally had little background knowledge of the role models' biographies, personal characteristics, or lives outside of sport. As such, these narrative maps provided the young men with very few resources for navigating dilemmas or setbacks (e.g., injuries, choices concerning education/other career, relationship issues, teams and coaches) on the pathway to success. The exemplary athletic identity was constructed within the performance narrative plot, and other stories were omitted either because the participants were not aware of them, or because they were irrelevant. Most likely, the performance narrative plot worked to omit relational identities, athletic failures and emotions, because they are not part of culturally privileged stories of what it means to be a successful athlete. When some qualities were mentioned, they were performance-related and included the ability to produce a top performance in an important competition, focus on training despite distractions, 'being talented to train' (work ethic), and self-confidence. The stories provided the young men with a sense of control because the role models conveyed the message that success depended on self-determination and not social support or other conditions beyond the individual. However, the stories contained little advice on how these individual qualities could be obtained (or whether they were considered innate). When anything beyond sport was mentioned, Timo explained that Teemu Selänne (a Finnish ice hockey star) was also 'an amazing' and 'reasonable' person. Notably, the athletes struggled in explaining any similarities between themselves and their role models, beyond trying to become as successful as the role models were or had been. In other words, these stories depicted very few resources available for connecting the present self with the desired future self to guide identity construction.

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The athlete hero who is also a 'good guy'

Another narrative map, constructed exclusively by male participants, similarly emphasised the heroic qualitites of elite athletes. However, the two young men offering these stories also tapped into broader cultural resources to tell about their role models' lifestyle and other social identities. Jani offered:

Jani: Roger [Federer] has always been my role model and probably will be. He does things well, and at least now, he is enjoying what he does. Even if he had an injury and he was away for half a year, he came back and won everything again. I guess he did what he felt the best for himself, took a break for half a year when the game did not go well, and then he returned with a positive mind.

Interviewer: have you met him or followed his life or…?

Jani: well not especially, but I know that he has a wife. And he is a father while playing tennis and he is also a humorous guy. He is joking and so on.

Jani's story demonstrates a more multifaceted narrative map than the previous story, with some importance given to the role model's other identities and life contexts that were not instrumental to athletic success. Other indices of 'a successful life' were further explained by Antti, an aspiring gymnast:

Well, Louis Smith, he got a silver medal in the 2012 Olympics on the pommel horse which is also my favourite, so that is the first thing that relates to my life. And you can see that he does not take sport too seriously even if he has succeeded. He has done those things well that he wants to do. And so he has a fancy Nissan GT-R and so on, and it looks like everything is well in his life. And other than that he looks like a person to look up to. We visited the UK 1, 5 years ago and we had a training camp at their gym, and I got to meet him. And he seemed like a nice guy!

Interviewer: And do you have other things that you admire about him than being relaxed and yet trying his best?

Antti: well, I heard he had done some modelling and things, he has had a lot going on, like his clothing brand, and different businesses besides gymnastics.

Antti's admiration of the attitude of not taking sport too seriously develops a counter-narrative to the dominant performance narrative where single-minded dedication to sporting excellence is the only way to succeed. The narrative map accessed by these young men offers a view on the future where it is possible to become a successful athlete and keep the sport in perspective, while also developing other identity narratives while pursuing an elite athletic career. However, similar to the abstract athlete hero stories, these stories are thin in terms of how the young athletes have come to identify with these great athletes and how the non-sport related qualities resonate with their own lives. As such, they offer only limited guidance on how to navigate from the present to the idealised future, or how their own identities can be connected with their ideal self in the future.

The successful athlete who is like me

While young men's stories more often started from selecting one of the most well-known contemporary sport stars and then, upon the researcher's follow-up question, trying to identify similarities between the self and the role model, young women were more reflective of the self and matching the role model with the story of the self and their own specific needs. Six athletes (five women) selected role models that had some biographical similarities or specific qualities that they also had. The role models were, again, all highly successful in what they were doing, but not necessarily the contemporary stars of participants' own sport. However, the type of personality and perceived similarities were also important factors in choosing the role model. Riina (gymnastics) explained:

[Maddie Ziegler] is a dancer, so she is doing something very close to what I am doing. She is also my age. Maybe the biggest reason for her being my role model is her personality; it touches me. She always does things and gets involved in new things even if she has never done them before.

Interviewer: Do you see any similarities in her personality and your personality?

Riina: Yeah I think we may have small similarities in our personalities. We are both spontaneous people.

Three athletes also described their role models as people who had succeeded against the odds. 'Katri' a short swimmer, chose a role model who was also a short swimmer but had become an Olympic champion in the late 1980s by developing her unique style of swimming. In contrast to athlete hero narrative maps, this map also offered some guidance on how to overcome potential barriers to success. The story of the role model ensured the young swimmer that despite having a 'deviant' swimming body, it was possible to succeed if she focused on developing a specific style of swimming.

The participants also admired role models who had succeeded despite the lack of resources and institutional support for their sport in their home countries – partly reflecting their situations in their own sports. As Unto (Judo) explained: "previously Finnish people haven't been that great in skating, [but] he has been able, as an individual skater, to become successful internationally. It's the same thing in judo – there is the connection." Collectively, these role models offered the young athletes narrative maps that assured that success was possible even if they would not have the ideal environmental or physical resources for achievement.

One of the most nuanced and detailed reflections on her role model was offered by Vilma, a young basketball player:

Vilma: There is not really a player whose career I would think "that's what I want to be" or "that's the path she's gone through, and I would want to go the same path". But Ana Dabovich is like a player, I have watched her and the way she plays… She seems like she knows what she does on the court. She is confident about herself, but then she is not selfish. She plays for her team. She also takes this kind of shots that I would like to be able to do. I just feel like she is the kind of player I want to be.

Also, she is European so – she plays in WNBA, but she also has played in Europe. So she is kind of my role model because she is where I'd want to be in my career. I don't know her path if she has an education, because that is the thing I want to do while I play basketball. I want to go to an American University and get the Bachelors' degree, but when I come back, I want to do the Masters' degree also, like after it. Not wait till my career is over and then do it. But then [sighs]… I don't know any players that have done it.

As Vilma illustrates, she considers the role model's athletic qualities, personal qualities (not to be "a selfish" player), and the broader life path including education important. Her frustration on lacking the 'right' kind of role model illustrates that media stories may portray athletes in limited ways that do not communicate what other identities they have besides their athletic identities. More specifically, there appears to be a gap in narrative maps available for youth student-athletes to project on a future that would include both athletic and educational achievements. While only one athlete lamented on the exclusion of educational identities in public athlete narratives, her being female connects with previous literature showing that young women more often find it important to invest in both athletic and educational identities.

A mentor with knowledge and the right attitude

From the participants, only young women chose their athletic mentors as their role models. These two athletes' mentors (one man, one woman) were successful athletes who were in close contact with the participants in their daily lives. The narrative maps provided by these role models were much more detailed than those provided by athlete heroes because the young athletes had detailed knowledge of the role models' lives. In these stories, however, the focus was also on the received guidance on how to become a successful athlete, whereas other identities were not included. Ulla (athletics) described her male mentor role model and her ambition to become more similar to him:

> *Ulla: I thought of him [a Finnish skier] because, he has been a kind of role model, always. Because he is a professional skier and so the elite athlete's life has been close to me through him. He helped me when I was younger and didn't know anything about sport, or what you truly need to become a good athlete. I've noticed like; if he eats in a certain way, I also want to eat that way. And I listen to advice from him. He has competed against the very best in the world, and he has self-confidence, whereas I am still at the beginning of my athletic career and not used to competing abroad, for example. And through him - and I have also realised that you cannot always be very serious, that sport is not so serious after all.*

Mentor role models could offer detailed narrative maps on behaviours, characteristics and attitudes of elite athletes, and are likely to be more facilitative of career adaptability than abstract athlete heroes. The stories illustrated that close contact with the role models had allowed young women to observe their daily life and choices to understand the demands associated with this ambitious life project. Katri (swimming) offered:

She has had a very fine and long career, and although she has got older, she has always had a passion for swimming. Even when things were not coming her way, she has worked harder and changed her ways of doing things. She is a bit like a mentor in my own career. I'm privileged to have been so close to her.

Besides the instrumental qualities (hard work, dedication) and practical choices (what to eat, how to train), the young women admired the role models' career longevity and the broader perspective on elite sport. Their admiration of the mentors' attitude to sport—that is, not being overly serious despite being elite athletes—further illustrates that Finnish youth athletes do not seem to believe that a totalitarian attitude to sport is the only way to international success.

The parent(s) who has helped and cared for me

Six participants (four women) chose parents or grandparents as their role models. None of the participants specifically referred to their mothers; instead, two participants generically talked about their parents, three focused on their fathers, and one chose her grandfather as the role model. In these stories, the primary emphasis was often on what the role models had done *for* the young athletes in giving practical and emotional support, rather than their identities, achievements or other things they had done in life. In addition, the stories mainly focused on the sport domain, showing that the family members the youth athletes relied upon in sport-related matters were mostly men. Alisa, a pre-elite judoka, endorsed her father for the help he was giving to her and her team:

My father just always supports me, and he is also, in general, the kind of person I would like to be. He just takes care, and not only of me but of everyone in our team. He is kind of a father figure to everyone. He is interested in how well I do, and also in my

schoolwork. He is interested in everyone's schoolwork and well-being in our competition team, and anyone from our team can go and talk to him if they have any difficulties.

This narrative map offers guidance on how to be a parent for a young athlete and a relational person who cares for others but is somewhat disconnected from participants' personal situations and it is unclear how this guidance is important for the youth athletes and their identity construction at this moment of time. In the overall interviews beyond the role model story, the participants mainly focused on their current life situations and their ambitions and challenges, rather than caring for and helping others. Therefore, we assume that the participants with the parental role model map approached the question from a social support perspective, thinking about who are the important people in their sport-lives helping them to pursue their dreams. While the participants discussed a desire to become like these role models (caring, a good parent), it is likely that at this moment of time the participants' focus was more on receiving from them, rather than being like them. Besides caring qualities, few other things were mentioned, including work ethic, 'finding one's own way' and success in work.

The parental role models with no explicit link to the participants' educational or athletic identities are unlikely to be significant influences from a career development perspective. However, similar to the mentor role models, the participants are likely to have detailed narrative maps offered by the parental role models due to their proximity, and therefore might be important for youth athletes' personal development in a longer time perspective. These stories, constructed within a relational narrative focused on care and connectedness, might be an important counterbalance to the highly individualistic narrative maps provided by the abstract athlete heroes of the sport-world.

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Discussion

For adolescent athletes whose identities are arguably under construction, the access to narrative maps through role models is one key resource for imagining possible future selves. In the present study, the adolescent student-athletes focused on two types of role models: elite athletes and parents. A key finding of our analysis was that, although the participants predominantly constructed stories of elite athletes and their achievements, many of them rejected totalitarian narrative maps circulating in the elite sport culture where athletes' identities are constructed within a narrow performance narrative enclosing them to a single narrative plot focused on athletic success. Although the performance narrative has been identified as the dominant cultural storyline available for identity construction in elite sports (Douglas & Carless, 2009), many youth athletes were drawn to alternative narrative maps offered by the role models who did not take sport 'overly seriously' and had other identities and interests in life. That is, successful athletes were the preferred source of admiration for the majority of participants, but for most of them, the performance narratives were not the only ingredient in the role models' identities. Therefore, through selecting these role models the athletes also gained assurance that they could have other identities besides their athletic identities without compromising their chances for athletic success.

The findings reflect the Finnish societal context, where younger generations place growing value on leisure time and family, while also considering work important (Pyöriä, Saari, Ojala, & Siponen, 2013). Finnish people have shorter work hours compared to many European counterparts, and they report low work-life conflict (Crompton & Lyonette, 2006); the youth athletes' role model choices reflect in part the broader social arrangement of work (as not all consuming) and culturally valorised 'ideal' life. Albeit the work ethic, competitiveness and ambition remained vital elements that made the role models admirable, having other life roles and interests was not constructed as contradictory to an elite athlete's

life. However, we also noted that only a few youth athletes talked about their role models' romantic lives, or social relationships more generally. This omission of relational identities might be partly due to the lack of knowledge about this aspect of their lives, as many elite athletes prefer to keep their relationships out of the public domain. In addition, because role models also reflect the participants' present identity concerns, the youth athletes could have dismissed the role models' romantic lives as irrelevant. Indeed, the mean age of marriage is postponed in Finland to over 30 (when the elite athletic career is presumably often over) (Mayseless & Keren, 2014).

Despite such emphasis on 'having a life' besides sport, the educational identity and vocational pathways besides sport featured only in one role model story, where a female participant lamented for her lack of a dual career role model. The talented adolescents' stories brought forward sport as their primary career identity, whereas they did not develop stories about role models for other careers alongside or after elite sport. The participants' inclusion in the study because of their status as highly talented student-athletes could have partly led them to tell sport-related stories because they might have assumed that this is the researchers' primary interest. We also recognise that interviewee responses are performed to certain audiences, and in our study, the male interviewer, who had conducted most of the interviews, could have influenced participants' choices to align their stories with traditional masculine narratives of sport. In addition to the performativity of the stories to prioritise athlete identities, it is also possible that dual career role models were missing because they are not easily available for athletes through the media that tends to focus on athletes' sport achievements, and for female athletes, on their appearance (Trolan, 2013). When we asked our athletes to tell about their role models' broader lives, many of them had little knowledge to share. Similarly, when we searched online for the role models athletes' educations and non-sport occupations, we found limited information.

As a second objective of the study, we sought to identify gendered patterns in the role model stories. Consistent with most previous studies, young men's role models were only men (except once when 'parents' were mentioned), whereas young women chose both men and women (Adriaanse & Crosswhite, 2008; Fleming et al., 2005; Giuliano, Turner, Lundquist, & Knight, 2007). Our findings indicated that for young women it is more challenging than for young men to identify role models who link with their identities as young women and prospective elite athletes. Adriaanse and Crosswhite (2008) argued that female athletic role models do not fit the gender dichotomy, and to be accepted as a sports role model, a female athlete can hardly embody a dominant form of femininity. From a career development perspective, it appears that many pre-elite female athletes lack career role models who could offer narrative maps specific to a woman's athletic career, which could potentially hinder the ability to envision a future pathway for themselves in elite sport (see also Faucett et al., 2017). The male role models' stories (e.g., fathers, mentors) are unlikely to offer guidance for the young women on how to navigate specific gendered elements of athletic careers, such as the conflict between the sport life project and the cultural life scripts pertaining to an 'ideal' woman's life, and questions about whether and how to combine motherhood and sport.

While young women are generally disadvantaged compared to young men in terms of availability and exposure to female athletic role models, our study also showed that they engaged in more explorations of role models that connected with their identities and needs. In contrast, the abstract athlete hero stories told by some of the young men were thin in terms of providing guidance on how to traverse the unknown terrains of the future. Having complex and multifaceted narrative maps available has been argued to be facilitative of identity development and adaptability, and through their role models (who more often were mentors or parents) the young women arguably accessed more detailed narrative maps than young

men. Therefore, while women's challenge appears to be the lack of role models that match their specific needs, the young men would likely benefit from exposure to more detailed and nuanced stories about athletes' lives, challenges and identities that do not exclusively perpetuate performance narratives embedded within hegemonic masculinity scripts.

Applied Implications

Vocational psychologists have suggested that role models can offer career counsellors ways to get to know their clients, help engage the clients in self-reflection, and also provide tools for career intervention (Savickas, 2013). In our study, the invitation to tell about role models triggered the young people to think about what kind of athletes they want to become and what kind of lifestyles they would like to lead. As such, the research was already a type of intervention with potential personal benefits for the participants. We suggest that similar conversations around role models in applied sport psychology and athlete career counselling can help athletes in developing self-awareness and a clearer understanding of their interests and needs. Asking young athletes to identify role models and to find out *how* these role models reached success can be valuable in increasing athletes' awareness of how that pathway might look like, and what resources they might need on that journey. Furthermore, we suggest that developing interventions to espouse athletes to a broad variety of potential role models (e.g., in career development workshops) can be valuable given that identity construction depends on the narrative resources available to the individual (McGannon & Smith, 2015). The study highlighted the specific lack of dual career role models who could offer young athletes with narrative templates of how to balance these two achievement domains. Given that many countries and educational institutions nowadays offer structural support to dual careers of athletes, these programmes could incorporate lectures or workshops with former dual career athletes to provide the youth athletes with potential role models. Similarly, many athletes use blogs and other social media to share their stories, and sport

psychologists and career counsellors could use them to expose youth athletes to various stories about how to live an elite athlete's life.

Conclusions

The present study explored youth athletes' role models to understand what kind of narrative maps they have at their disposal and what these role model narratives can tell us about their athletic and gender identity construction. We found that most youth athletes admired successful and highly skilled athletes with commitment and work ethic, but also aspired to live a balanced life where sport does not exhaust their lives and identities. Young women developed more nuanced stories and chose role models with closer proximity than the young men, indicating that they might have the advantage of accessing more detailed narrative maps to guide action. Helping adolescent student-athletes access multiple role models and especially dual career role models would offer them valuable resources to develop more multifaceted identity narratives and offer guidance on how to navigate the challenging task of combining sport with education. Having a broader range of narrative maps at youth athletes' disposal would be vital for adaptability, sustaining well-being, and restorying personal identity not tied to elite sport if the need arises.

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Pseudonym (Gender)	*Sport*	*Role Models*
Hanna (F)	Cross-country skiing	Father
Kimmo (M)	Orienteering on skis	Older brother (cross-country skier)
		Petter Northug (a Norwegian cross-country skier)
Antti (M)	Artistic gymnastics	Louis Smith (a British artistic gymnast)
Alisa (F)	Judo	Dad
Anni (F)	Judo	Majlinda Kelmendi (a Kosovo Albanian judoka)
Sanna (F)	Football	Neymar Jr (Brazilian footballer)
Timo (M)	Ice hockey	Teemu Selänne (Finnish ice hockey player)
Topi (M)	Football	Mum and dad
Marko (M)	Artistic gymnastics	Dad
		Kōhei Uchimura (a Japanese gymnast)
Katri (F)	Swimming	Janet Evans (an American former swimmer)
		Hanna-Maria Seppälä (a Finnish swimmer)
Vilma (F)	Basketball	Ana Dabović (a Serbian basketball player)
Teemu (M)	Ice hockey	Pavel Datsyuk (a Russian ice hockey player)
		Usain Bolt (a Jamaican sprinter)
Ulla (F)	Athletics	Martti Jylhä (a Finnish skier)
Jani (M)	Tennis	Roger Federer (a Swiss tennis player)
Riina (F)	Artistic group gymnastics	Maddie Ziegler (an American dancer, actress and model)
		Coach
		Mum and Dad
Nea (F)	Judo	Grandfather
Unto (M)	Judo	Mika Poutala (a Finnish speed skater)

Table 1. Participants' role models

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Highlights:

- We studied youth pre-elite student-athletes' role models in Finland
- Participants' role models were elite athletes and family members
- Men continue to be the dominant role models in sport
- Young women developed more nuanced stories and accessed richer narrative maps
- Most Finnish youth athletes reject totalitarian ideologies of elite sport

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