



IDENTITY IN AUSTRALIA: A CASE STUDY ON THE ROLE OF SPORT IN THE EGO IDENTITY FORMATION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how sport in Australia contributes to and informs the ego identity formation of an individual. A single female participant between the ages of 18 and 25 years participated in a series of interviews. The participant was selected on the basis of their chosen career path (i.e. PD/H/PE teaching) and their constant involvement in sport. Data collected from the interviews was analysed using grounded theory, principles of constant comparative analysis. Findings from the study indicate that identity is a single, multidimensional structure comprised of interrelated dimensions. In addition, further key findings indicate that sports act as a vehicle for individuals to ‘perform’ their identity to society. Through processes of self-enhancement and protection individuals protect their identity from threats, maintaining or enhancing the value placed upon it by others. Their choice of self-enhancement or protection and the consequent behaviour is determined by their self-concept (determined by social comparison) and societal values. The implications of this study lie with those in the education and sporting industries. Sport programs need to be positive, enjoyable and allow students to experience self-determination for optimal identity development and efficient function in society.

Keywords: Ego identity, Australia, Sport, Erikson, Psychosocial stage development theory, Ego identity theory, Australian social landscape, Identity configurations, Identity achievement.

Received: 25 May 2016/ Revised: 23 June 2016/ Accepted: 24 August 2016/ Published: 16 September 2016

1. INTRODUCTION

Cashman (1995) described Australia as a “paradise of sport” for participants and spectators alike. Sport infuses every aspect of the Australian culture from the language to the social discourse with Keith Dunstan (1973, cited in Georgakis and Light (2005)) referring to it as the “Ultimate Australian super-religion”. It serves, both within schools and outside schools, as an educational and socialising tool teaching valuable social and moral lessons (Georgakis and Light, 2005). Percy (2007) argues that the socialisation process in sport has a critical impact on character development and identity formation via its ability to promote a healthy sense of competence in sport participants (pp.25 &27). In Australia organised sport is an integral part of the social landscape with (Georgakis and Light (2005)) 73% of young people between the ages of 8 and 25 years participating in organised sport (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2006).

Sport holds a significant place within Australian culture. It provides opportunities for social acceptance and mobility. Athletically gifted people are awarded value and status from the Australian community as is clearly evident in the number of Australian of the Year awards (i.e. an award that recognises the achievements and contributions of Australian citizens) going to athletes. For example, Cathy Freeman, Evonne Goolagong and Steve Waugh have been awarded ‘Australian of the Year’ while Ian Thorpe and Leyton Hewitt have received the ‘Young Australian of the Year’ (National Australia Day Council, 2010).

Sport is a dominant form of public discourse in Australia, thus the media have used it to sell various products. In doing so, sport popularity and participation is reinforced as valuable within society and various social and gendered identities (such as sportsmen drinking and smoking) (Cashman, 1995) are also portrayed as being valuable. Berzonsky (2005); Cote (2006) and Schwartz (2007) argue that as a result of an increase in mass media and its influences on society, a healthy sense of identity is now more crucial than ever before.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the role of sport in informing the development of an individual's ego identity. Whilst there are a number of studies that explore athletic identity (Grove *et al.*, 2004; Stephen and Brewer, 2007) there have been very few that explore the more psychological literature around ego identity development (Erikson, 1950;1971). This small explorative study represents an addition to the literature through expanding an understanding of the ways in which the social conditions pertaining to sport influence ego identity development. This study is one of very few studies that have investigated and explored the contextual factors that may influence identity formation and configuration within the sporting milieu in Australia. This study contributes to the existing literature by building upon previous research that has explored the social conditions within the familial and educational setting (Kroger, 2004).

This study is comprised of five sections. Section two consists of a review of the current and significant identity literature with the purpose of providing background to and outlining the context of the current study. Section three contains the methodology section. This section clearly identifies the methodological and theoretical framework of the study in addition to the data collection method and analysis of data. Section four is the results and discussion section. This section presents the findings of the study and explores and interprets them using previous research as a basis for the discussion and analysis of these findings. Section five contains the conclusion of the study, which identifies the key findings of the study and any implications and limitations as well as opportunities for further study.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

There has been an accumulation of identity studies in both the social sciences and psychology domains over the past 50 years. This corpus of literature was inspired by Erikson (1950) first writings on identity. Following the publishing of Erikson's work, the concept of identity has been debated in both the social science (Schwartz, 2001, p.8) and psychological literature. As a result, the broad field of identity studies has led to a proliferation of literature surrounding the concept of identity and its development. This resulted in numerous approaches to understanding identity structure and formation, leaving it in an emerging state (Yakushko *et al.*, 2009). Very few studies examine identity within a specific domain, with less examining identity formation within a sporting domain. The majority of identity studies focus on specific aspects of identity such as gender or race. Some studies (Schwartz, 2001; Berzonsky, 2005; Yakushko *et al.*, 2009) examine particular aspects of identity as separate entities with others (Rattansi and Phoenix, 1997) referring to multiple identities. This is problematic as it assumes that individuals must select one identity over another (Yakushko *et al.*, 2009). Individuals are left feeling repressed and struggle to achieve a sense of continuity and sameness, a sense that is central to Erikson's definition of identity.

Lawrence Friedman referred to Erikson as 'identity's architect' (Sollod *et al.*, 2009). Erikson proposed two closely related theories: an ego psychology theory and a psychosocial stage development theory. His psychosocial stage theory emphasized how identity is shaped across the life span. His theory focuses on how individuals interpret and act upon the interactions and relationships they share with others and how this contributes to their perception of themselves (Sollod *et al.*, 2009). This subjective sense of who one is refers to Erikson's definition of ego identity (Cote, 2006). Erikson's ego psychology theory posited three levels of identity: ego identity, personal identity and social identity. Despite ego identity being considered the most fundamental level of identity by Erikson, the majority of research has focused on personal identity (Schwartz, 2001). This lack of research concerning ego identity is an issue within the literature as it is considered to be an internal subjective awareness of the ego's

synthesizing methods, recognized by others as an individual style. It can be argued that this individual style (recognized by others) is actually our personal identity, as personal identity is how other people perceive us (Sollod *et al.*, 2009). As Erikson (1971) states, this “style of ones individuality... coincides with the sameness and continuity of ones, meaning for significant others in the immediate community” (p.50), thus the current study challenges the notion of multiple identities by focusing on how the ego identity is informed by and through sport participation.

Erikson defined ego identity as ego synthesis and reorganization of childhood identifications into a single structure in an attempt to create a sense of sameness and continuity of character Schwartz (2001) across the life span. Erikson theorized that individuals experience eight epigenetic (i.e. stepwise sequence of genetically determined development influenced by environmental factors (Sollod *et al.*, 2009)) stages during their development. Each stage comprises of a psychosocial ‘crisis’. It is the resolution of these crises that shape identity formation and development (Weiten, 2007; Sollod *et al.*, 2009). An Individuals identity adapts and changes in response to these crises through dynamic and complex processes involving social comparisons in an array of diverse contexts (Yakushko *et al.*, 2009) in an attempt to resolve the crisis and achieve a sense of sameness and continuity. This enables identity achievement (i.e. successful resolution of a crisis) and commitment to an identity (Marcia, 1966). Thus ego identity, for Erikson, is seen as the development of a clear sense of who and what one is within the cultural and environmental framework in which they find them self (Sollod *et al.*, 2009).

Brettschneider and Heim (2001) integrate Erikson’s Ego Identity Theory with self-concept and the sporting domain. They assume that self-concept and identity are closely linked as one can only have an identity if they have a developed self-concept. Brettschneider and Heim (2001) argue that sport has gained importance and value within society and is concerned with how this societal emphasis on sport and the body has impacted upon adolescent physical self-concept and identity development. Brettschneider and Heim (2001) define self-concept as information about oneself based on their perceptions of themselves and their abilities in comparison to others. This links into Erikson’s theory that ego identity develops and adapts to the identity crisis faced by individuals via processes that involve comparison with other individuals or social groups in a variety of contexts. Brettschneider and Heim (2001) suggest that self-concept is composed of a variety of self-knowledge and perceptions gained from various areas of ones life. This self-knowledge then comes together to form an individuals overall ego identity as these various self-perceptions and values are integrated into a single structure. From an Eriksonian perspective, Brettschneider and Heim (2001) self perceptions and knowledge would be considered identity components that, through crisis resolution processes, are merged into a single identity structure.

Studies by Stephen and Brewer (2007) and Grove *et al.* (2004) further develop Brettschneider and Heim (2001) notion of self-concept and identity by specifically relating self-concept to athletic identity. They conceptualise self-concept as a multidimensional structure composed of various identity components, with athletic identity being the most salient and important for individuals involved in sport. Athletic identity is defined as the extent to which an individual identifies and defines themselves with the athlete role and the similarities they share with other athletes (Grove *et al.*, 2004; Stephen and Brewer, 2007). Athletic identity comprises of two components: public athletic identity (i.e. commendation and recognition by others as an athlete which is internalised into the individual athletic identity) and private athletic identity (i.e. the internalisation of the individuals identity as an athlete and the public commendation of their athletic status as part of their self-concept) (Stephen and Brewer, 2007). Thus athletic identity has a social dimension that determines the extent to which an individual identifies themselves as an athlete. In this respect it is similar to Cooley’s (1902, cited in Stephen and Brewer (2007); Brettschneider and Heim (2001)) ‘looking glass self’ in which ones identity is derived from the judgements and attitudes of others towards oneself. This is similar to Erikson (1971) who states that ego identity depends on the way others perceive them (p.129). Studies by Grove *et al.* (2004) have revealed that individuals employ self-enhancement (i.e. the use of cognitive/behavioural processes to magnify the positive aspects of one’s self) and self-protection (i.e. the use of

cognitive/behavioural processes to lessen the negative aspects of one's self) mechanisms as a way to maintain a positive self identity in response to the judgement placed on them by others (p.76).

Findings from [Stephen and Brewer \(2007\)](#) study on the determinants of athletic identity provide further support for [Brettschneider and Heim \(2001\)](#) notion of the physical self-concept. The study revealed a social and physical dimension of sport that contributes to the formation of athletic identity. [Stephen and Brewer \(2007\)](#) conclude that via the physical appearance and performance of the body within the athlete role, individuals derive a self-definition (i.e. athletic identity), self-worth and affirmation that is directly related to their ability to physically perform their athletic identity (i.e. the athletes role) (p.76).

Although the athletic identity, literature examines identity in relation to sport, it fails to acknowledge the involvement of other influences on identity outside of the sporting domain such as university experiences and family values. Therefore, the athletic identity, literature also fails to examine identity construction and structure (i.e. identity as a single, interrelated multidimensional structure or as various identity dimensions that do not interact but exist separately).

Despite Erikson's definition of identity, there appears to be great confusion about the overall structure and definition of identity within the literature. [Cote \(2006\)](#) argues that identity has become an "overextended rubber sheet" concept. He attributes the conflicting ideas to the differing research focus areas, with chosen epistemology and individual vs. social focus the major determinant of the selected approach. This leads to the debate of a single versus multiple structure of identity. Erikson defined identity as a multifaceted and multidimensional structure comprised of identity components such as career, religion, culture and sport that are merged together by the ego to form a single structure, creating a sense of sameness and continuity ([Schwartz, 2001](#)).

[Berzonsky \(2005\)](#) and [Yakushko et al. \(2009\)](#) also argue in support of Erikson's theory. They state that identity is a single all encompassing structure as opposed to the idea of multiple identities as argued by [Rattansi and Phoenix \(1997\)](#). [Berzonsky \(2005\)](#) argues that the structure of identity does not exist as a separate entity from its constituent parts, rather it attempts to unify and organize these separate parts in an attempt to provide a sense of unity and continuity within an individual. Likewise, [Yakushko et al. \(2009\)](#) extend the support for a single structure of identity, arguing that continued emphasis on multiple identities may force individuals to choose one identity over another. This process creates a feeling of oppression as one is left feeling incomplete as parts of themselves are rejected or 'cut off'. Thus, their recent study presents an Identity Salience Model for clinical practice and psychotherapy. The model was generated partly in response to [Reid \(2002\)](#) and Silverstein's (2006, cited in [Yakushko et al. \(2009\)](#)) call for the need to acknowledge and attend to multiple contexts and components of identity. The model places emphasis on the inability to separate individual components of identity. [Yakushko et al. \(2009\)](#) refer to these 'components' as intersecting multiple identities of an individual. Their model is grounded in Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel, 1978](#)) and aims to aid an individual in achieving a sense of wholeness by revealing their salient identity whilst considering their multiple identities.

One limitation with [Yakushko et al. \(2009\)](#) model being grounded in Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel, 1978](#)) is that, in aiming to uncover an individual's 'salient' identity, the model contradicts their intention to operationalise identity as a single, all encompassing structure. The presence of a salient identity implies that the individual has more than one identity. Social Identity Theory ([Tajfel, 1978](#)) is similar to that of Identity Theory ([Stryker, 1968](#)) in that both propose a hierarchy of identities. The theories posit that individuals have multiple identities that overlap and become 'activated' at different times depending on the group one categorises him or herself with (i.e. Social Identity Theory) or the role that an individual holds (i.e. Identity Theory). Both theories assume that identity is determined when an individual views themselves as an object and categorises or names themselves in relation to other categories or classifications (i.e. social groups or roles) ([Stets and Bourke, 2000](#)). For example, Social Identity theorists would argue that an individual who categorises themselves as a teacher does so because they identify with the social category 'teachers', thus sharing common values and perceptions. Identity theorists would argue that an

individual who teachers would identify themselves as a teacher as this is the role they inhabit. For identity theorists, focus is on role performance rather than group membership (Stets and Bourke, 2000). Despite their slight differences, both theories posit that different identities become activated and salient (i.e. prominent) as the group or role changes and that an identity is not salient unless it is first activated by particular situations (Stets and Bourke, 2000). This implies that the salient identity changes depending on the role or group one categorises themselves with at a particular time, suggesting that identity is not a single or stable structure.

The fact that Yakushko *et al.* (2009) study is grounded in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) has resulted in further critique of their work. In their attempt to define and operationalise 'Identity', Yakushko *et al.* (2009) refer to identity as a single structure made up of multiple aspects, however they propose a model that emphasizes the inseparable intersections of an individual's multiple identities, like that of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978). They also state the need for a more holistic view of identity; however they continuously use 'components of identity' and 'multiple identities' as interchangeable phrases throughout their research. The issue here is not with their model, but rather their confusion in defining identity. As argued by Berzonsky (2005) in his critique of Rattansi and Phoenix (1997) study, there is an error in using the term 'multiply identities' to refer to components of identity. The term suggests that individuals possess more than one identity as opposed to the term 'components of identity', which implies singularity. Identity defined from an Eriksonian perspective, a perspective supported by Berzonsky (2005) and Yakushko *et al.* (2009) is considered to be a multidimensional single structure comprised of merged identity components such as sport, race or gender and not as separate identities that exist independently of each other. For example, sport would be considered on the basis of its role in informing an all encompassing single structure of identity as opposed to a sporting identity as a single identity structure unrelated to other identities such as gender identity. Individuals are thought to have a single sense of self that is developed throughout the lifespan via complex ego processes that merge identity components and 'childhood identifications' into a single holistic sense of self (Erikson, 1971).

A variety of researchers have taken Erikson's all encompassing definition of identity and developed various models, the most notable being James Marcia. He developed the first neo-Erikson identity model that stimulated significant research within the identity literature (Schwartz, 2007). Marcia empirically operationalised Erikson's concept of personal identity, focusing on the independent dimensions of exploration and commitment identified by Erikson. Marcia developed and presented four identity statuses in his Identity Status Model. Each status represents a combination of a level of commitment (i.e. the level of investment in a identity demonstrated by an individual (Marcia, 1966) with a level of exploration (i.e. Marcia's behavioural equivalent to Erikson's 'crisis' and involves a period of experimentation with alternative identities (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001); (Schwartz, 2001). Many studies have used Marcia's model as the main methodology guiding their study. This focus has led to a gap in the literature examining the ego processes that are involved in the merging of various identity components into a single structure. The problem here is that Marcia's identity statuses can be considered character types rather than development stages, as each status is associated with a distinct set of personality characteristics that describe the personality of individuals (Schwartz, 2001). His model places emphasis on identity 'types' and 'stages' as opposed to identity 'processes' involved in merging various identity components into a single structure and thus is not a developmental theory (Bosma and Kunnen, 2001; Schwartz, 2001). This leads to concerns over the validity of the model and those studies that have employed it as a means of studying identity formation and configuration.

Apart from Marcia's model emphasizing identity stages as opposed to identity processes, Marcia's model focuses on personal identity and fails to recognize the development of identity in social contexts such as sport or school (Kroger, 2004; Schwartz, 2007). Marcia (1966) utilized his identity status model in a quantitative study on development and validation of ego identity. Although he used the status model to measure participant's level of identity achievement as a valid measure, his use of the status model to measure and explore the development of ego identity is questionable. The quantitative style of the study also excludes and fails to recognize the influence of

social contexts (such as sport or familial contexts) that have been proven to shape and be shaped by the ego identity formation process (Kroger, 2004).

In contrast to Marcia (1966); Schachter (2004) examined the processes involved in identity formation with a focus on identity configuration. Like Erikson (1950;1971); Schachter (2004;2005) views identity as a developmental process where the ego configures the relationship between childhood identifications to form a final identity. It is the process of 'configuration' that overcomes the argument of multiple identities versus a single identity as the term 'configuration' implies a single relationship between many components (Schachter, 2004). From the findings of his study Schachter (2004) identified and presented four configurations that are of particular interest to the current study as the focus is on how the Australian sporting environment contributes to the ego identity formation process.

The first configuration identified by Schachter (2004) was the configuration based on choice and suppression. Individuals within this configuration are faced with two or more identities. They select a single identity and attempt to restructure their lives to fit the chosen identity. The remaining, unselected identities are rejected and suppressed. The second identity configuration is the assimilated or synthesized configuration where individuals attempt to synthesize conflicting identities into a single identity by creating a framework in which conflicting identities would no longer be conflicting (Schachter, 2004).

The 'confederacy of identifications' configuration is the third configuration identified by Schachter (2004). Within this configuration, individuals chose to live with conflicting identities. They do not attempt to synthesize them. Conflicting identities are not rejected by individuals within this configuration as it is seen as rejecting part of one's self and preventing a sense of wholeness, which is essential to Erikson's structure of identity. Schachter (2004) found, that participants in his study lead a double life by compartmentalizing conflicting aspects of their life into different life areas that did not overlap. For example, compartmentalising gender with sport and social contexts allows a young girl to maintain feminine qualities off the field but be slightly more masculine and aggressive on the field. This identity configuration can be stressful and difficult to maintain at times, as the conflicting identities exist side by side. However individuals with a confederacy of identifications feel that it is the best possible solution to their identity crisis (Schachter, 2004). The fourth configuration, 'the thrill of dissonance' is also characterized by conflicting identities that are not rejected. Instead, the opposing identifications are held together by the pleasure of having conflicting identities and living a double life. This experience is what defines their identity as opposed to the sense of sameness and continuity regarding the content of identity in which the other identity configurations attempt to achieve (Schachter, 2004).

Also in contrast to Marcia (1966); Schachter (2004;2005) places identity in the wider cultural context by acknowledging that socio-cultural issues significantly influence identity formation with individuals. Erikson (1950;1971) was aware of the historical and social characteristics that influence identity formation, although he did not see it as being exclusively social in origin. Erikson believes that historical and social characteristics also play a major role in shaping identity (Schachter, 2004). Although focusing on personal identity, Hitlin (2003) examined the link between values and identity. Hitlin (2003) conceptualised personal identity as composed of value structures and self-conception as more than a group and role membership as Social Identity (Tajfel, 1978) and Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968) would suggest. The study found that values are developed and shaped by the social and cultural context in which one resides and that these values inform patterns of self-perception and actions (Hitlin, 2003). This equally applies to a sporting context.

Despite the dearth of identity studies available, there are few examining the social conditions associated with identity formation (Kroger, 2004) and even fewer on the social milieu of the Australian sporting domain. Cote and Levine (1987, cited in Bosma and Kunnen (2001) acknowledge the emphasis that Erikson (1950;1971) placed on the role of social contexts and factors on identity formation, however they argue that this has not been widely recognized in the literature. The few studies that do examine the social contexts, in which identity formation takes place, focus on the educational or familial environments (Kroger, 2004). As a result there appears to be a need to fill

the gap in the research surrounding the social contexts, including sport (i.e. the Australian sporting domain), and identity formation.

Schachter (2005) states that identity development cannot be understood without considering the contexts in which it takes place, as it is a socially embedded process. Schachter (2005) claims that the cultural context in which one develops influences their identity content, its structure and developmental process, as individuals are dependent upon the interactions they share with their social context. A study by Danielsen *et al.* (2000) that examined the impact of social context of identity formation of Norwegian adolescents supports Schachter (2005) claim. The study revealed that the identity statuses (i.e. Marcia's statuses) varied between the three vocational groupings due to the opportunities for identity exploration provided by the social and educational structures experienced by each group (Danielsen *et al.*, 2000).

Sage (2000, cited in Percy (2007)) and Danish *et al.* (1990) argue that sport is a cultural practice and has the ability to build character, but also to stunt identity development and create 'character disorders'. For example, in Australia, sport plays an increasingly important role in the construction of image, attitudes, values and character. It also serves as a way of promoting positive and negative social learning and imparting social and moral lessons Georgakis and Light (2005). The potential for sport to stunt identity is problematic, especially for a country that is considered to be 'obsessed' with sport. Berzonsky (2005); Cote (2006) and Schwartz (2007) argue that a healthy sense of identity is a prerequisite for functioning well in society, a belief that was also noted by Erikson (Schwartz, 2007) and that it is now more crucial in the 21st century. From an Eriksonian perspective, the unstructured nature of society and the increase in mass media make it difficult for an individual to develop a sense of sameness and continuity across their lifetime and ultimately a healthy ego identity that allows them to function in society (Erikson, 1971).

The majority of studies surrounding identity and sport have focused on athletic identity as opposed to the role of sport and sporting context influencing and forming an individual's overall ego identity. However, a study by Shaw *et al.* (1995) examined the role of various leisure activities (in which sport is one activity) in the identity development process. They hypothesised that the developmental process of identity is context specific and therefore it is influenced by various social and lifestyle factors such as life experiences, the environment, interactions with others and everyday activities (Shaw *et al.*, 1995). Thus, Shaw *et al.* (1995) further hypothesised that sports act as a transitional activity (between child play and adult work) that is beneficial for character building. Sport provides physical and mental challenges and also offers adolescence an identity (e.g. as a soccer player) depending on their sense of competence and categorisation within a social group. Shaw *et al.* (1995) highlighted that sport involvement by young women was beneficial for identity development as it provides opportunities for physical and mental challenges that promote strength and independence, qualities that challenge the concerning and caring characteristics that women are thought to possess due to gender socialisation influences. Unlike females, Shaw *et al.* (1995) revealed that sport tends to reinforce male gender roles for men, thus limiting their opportunities to explore other identities. Therefore, sport was not beneficial for their ego identity development.

The lack of research into sporting contexts and identity formation as well as the potential of the current sporting environment to stunt identity highlights a need for research into this area. The purpose of this study is to explore how the social milieu of sport in Australia contributes to the ego identity formation process. Erikson (1950;1971) 'identity crisis' and Schachter (2004;2005) identity configurations will be utilized to develop an understanding of how an individual resolves the identity crisis and the role that the Australian sporting environment plays in this process and ultimately the ego identity formation process.

3. METHODOLOGY

This section illustrates the approaches taken to investigate the role of sport in Australia on ego identity formation. It identifies the methodological and epistemological framework of the study and the rationale behind the methods selected to explore the research topic. This section also details the data collection and analysis techniques utilised and concludes with a discussion of the ethical considerations for the research project.

Epistemology is the philosophical study of how knowledge of phenomena is acquired (Gratton and Jones, 2004). It is the theory of knowledge that explains how we know what we know (Crotty, 1998). There is a variety of epistemological assumptions that inform research. Three major epistemological assumptions include objectivism, constructionism and subjectivism. Objectivism is the epistemological view that entities have truth, knowledge and meaning residing in them as objects despite conscious awareness or not. Objectivists believe that through careful research this objective truth and meaning can be attained (Crotty, 1998).

This study is underpinned by both constructionism and subjectivism standpoints. Constructionists believe that meaning is constructed and exists only through an individuals interactions and engagements with the world (Crotty, 1998). In this way, the approach allows the researcher to explore how identity is constructed and exists through the individuals' interactions with sport. Subjectivism is underpinned by the assumption that meaning is created through the subject imposing meaning onto the object. Unlike constructionism, meaning is not created through interactions as the object makes no contribution to the development of meaning, rather meaning is generated from anything except the interaction with the object to which it is associated (Crotty, 1998).

Epistemological assumptions are embedded in and underpin the theoretical perspective of a study. The theoretical perspective is a philosophical stance that explains how we view life and our world and it is these assumptions that inform the methodology (Creswell, 2003). Positivism and interpretivism are two broad and contrasting theoretical perspectives. Positivism refers to the belief that the only true and valid form of knowledge is that which is scientific, objective and tangible in nature and void of any personal involvement by the researcher (Willig, 2008). Unlike Positivism, Interpretivism argues that not all things can be explained in terms of causal relationships. Interpretivism seeks to uncover and explore explanations and meanings of particular phenomena as opposed to the positivistic approach of using data and scientific principles to interpret them. In doing so, this allows the researchers to understand the subject by gaining an insiders perspective. This is one of the strengths of the interpretative approach as it allows concepts that may be overlooked from a positivist perspective to be identified and explained (Gratton and Jones, 2004).

The aim of the current study is to explore how the social sporting milieu in Australia contributes to the ego identity formation process and is therefore underpinned by a subjectivist/constructionist epistemological stance informing an interpretative theoretical perspective. This explorative case study used an inductive, qualitative research design, as it is more aligned with the interpretative approach. It enabled the identity formation processes of an individual within a sporting context to be explored and understood by the researcher through capturing non-quantifiable concepts such as feelings, thoughts and experiences (Gratton and Jones, 2004).

3.1. Participants

A non-probability sampling method and key informant technique was used to select a single female participant on the basis of the following criteria: firstly, the female participant fell between the age bracket of 18-25 years and exhibited continuous involvement in sport throughout their developmental life and have selected a career within the sporting domain. The participant was selected from the Bachelor of Education: Human Movement and Health Education (Secondary) course at Sydney University.

Arnett (2000) states that emerging adulthood (i.e. the ages between 18 and 25) provides the most opportunity for identity development, as it is a time of role exploration and experimentation. Erikson (1971) also identified a similar period. As the main aim of the study is to explore the ego identity formation process, it was plausible for the participant to fall within the emerging adulthood development stage identified by Arnett (2000).

3.2. Data Collection

Over a period of one month, three 60-minute semi-structured interviews with a single participant from the University of Sydney were utilised to gather data concerning participant's thoughts and experiences through different life stages. This enabled insight and understanding of the processes surrounding ego identity formation within a sporting context, an advantage of the interviews, which is often desired within inductive studies (Gratton and Jones, 2004).

Seidman (1998) three interview series was employed as the data collection tool. This three interview series allowed the researcher to understand participants' experiences and the meaning they attributed to these experiences by placing it in the context of their lives (Seidman, 1998). The participant partook in three semi-structured face to face interviews with the researcher. Each interview was tape recorded and then transcribed at a later date. Although each interview had a different focus, all three interviews served a purpose both by themselves and within the series (Seidman, 1998).

The first interview established the context of the participant's experience, as Patten (1989, cited in Seidman (1998)) argues that without context, meaningful experiences cannot be explored. During this interview the participant was asked questions about themselves and their experiences in reference to the research question (Seidman, 1998). The focus of this study was on identity and sport, thus the participant was asked to describe their sporting experiences. Interview two focused on the details of the experiences described in interview one. Focus was placed on the details of the participants past and present experiences in relation to the research question. The participant was asked to reconstruct the details of their experiences in an attempt to extract details of that experience (Seidman, 1998). The participant was asked to place their experiences within the social sporting context. Questions included those that ask about the participant's relationship with their teammates, coach or sporting mentors.

The focus of the final interview involved participants reflecting on the meaning given to their described experiences. Intellectual and emotional relationships between the participant's sense of self and the Australian sporting domain were explored. The interview questions required the participant to examine how life factors, in particular sporting factors, have interacted to develop their present sense of self and place in the world (i.e. their role as a future high school PD/H/PE teacher) (Seidman, 1998).

3.3. Procedure

Before the first interview was initiated the participant was provided with an information sheet and consent form regarding the present study to read and sign. Following this all interviews were conducted and recorded at approximately one-week intervals at a neutral and convenient location within the grounds of Sydney University. This allowed time for the participant to ponder over the preceding interview, but not enough time for a connection to be lost between the interviews (Seidman, 1998).

3.4. Data Analysis

Data gathered from all interviews was transcribed and then analyzed and interpreted using Grounded Theory principles of the 'constant comparative' method proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967, cited in Dey (1999)). The first stage in data analysis was the generation of categories and their properties (i.e. coding) via comparing and contrasting concepts with one another, before comparing them with new emergent categories. These generated categories represent conceptual elements and were analytical and sensitizing (i.e. they provided a meaningful picture of the collected data) (Dey, 1999). The data and its subsequent categories then underwent an integrative process so that similarities and differences within and between categories were revealed. Categories were then integrated via constant comparison with one another allowing a theoretical understanding of the relations between categories to be developed (Dey, 1999). Categories that were found to be redundant, via constant comparison, were

rejected. This theoretical understanding was then framed using Erikson’s theories of identity and psychosocial development in an attempt to understand what was going on for the participant and ultimately answer the research question.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section will describe the results from the three interviews. The discussion on the role of sport in forming identity will outline results from this study and any relationship to the wider literature on identity theories.

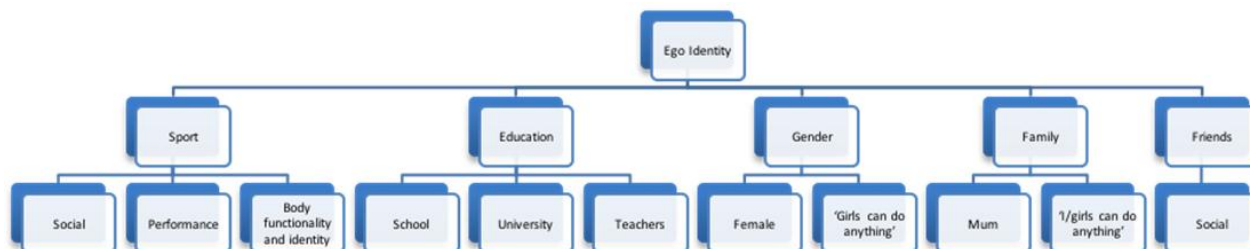


Figure-1. Summary of key findings and the relationship between them and with ego identity

Analysis of the data identified five dimensions (i.e. sport, education, gender, family and friends) that significantly contributed to the formation of the participants’ ego identity. A further three dimensions (i.e. teacher, social and the body) were also identified. However, via the process of constant comparison, these dimensions were deemed redundant as individual categories. Significant links between them and other categories could not be found and they occurred infrequently, therefore they were regrouped under one of the existing five dimensions.

Data analysis revealed that the five dimensions were merged into a single ego identity via crisis resolution. This provides support for Erikson’s developmental process where the ego synthesises and configures childhood identifications into a single, multi dimensional structure (i.e. identity configuration) (Schwartz, 2001). Erikson (1971) believed that it is the resolution of ‘identity crises’ that shape identity formation and development by creating a sense of sameness and continuity of character. The study also supports Schachter (2004) identity configurations as Athyda (pseudonym) was found to engage in two of the proposed identity configurations.

Although five dimensions were recognised, the current study was only concerned with the role of the sport dimension on ego identity development. Therefore, the remaining four identity dimensions (while acknowledged as being important for identity formation) will be discussed only in terms of their interaction with sport and contribution to Athyda’s ego identity.

4.1. Sport

Sport played a prominent role in not only allowing Athyda to form her ego identity, but it also provided her with a way of maintaining her self identity in the eyes of herself and others.

The study highlighted that sport “plays a very important role in my [Athydas] life” and her ego identity formation in two ways. Firstly, it enabled her to develop personality traits such as independence and competitiveness, which is closely linked to Athydas’ need to strive and achieve. This provides support for Danish *et al.* (1990) claim that sport has the ability to build character and identity.

I think...I think because I’ve done dancing a lot more than netball its made me... more of an independent person, like I rely on myself a lot more than just... not expecting other people to help me...dancing has definitely influenced my.... I guess personality, like the independence, the striving to achieve to make yourself better...

“...with being competitive I think sport definitely has contributed to that because playing sports and being involved in sports where there is like a win or lose or a you either achieve something or

you don't achieve something...that's contributed to making me want to get the best and get the best out of myself...

Secondly, sport provided a place in which all the remaining five identity components could be merged together via crisis resolution processes, thus contributing to Athydas' ego identity formation. Sport as an arena for identity development lends support to Erikson (1971) theory on the importance of multiple life arenas in identity formation. Individuals attempt to create a sense of sameness and continuity across each arena by merging various identity components to form a single multidimensional identity structure (Brettschneider and Heim, 2001). For Athyda, the five identified dimensions (i.e. sport, education, gender, family and friends) have been merged together to form a single identity.

This study also exposed the different ways in which Athyda experiences sport in her life. Sport was further divided into the 'social' and 'performance' experiences of sport, depending on its function for Athyda. The most prominent and central to her identity formation was 'performance'.

The 'performance' aspect of sport was manifested in the form of Athyda's strong involvement in and commitment to the sport of dance. Dance was the only sport Athyda had continued for almost all her life. Dance was identified as crucial to Athyda's life and ego identity, to the point where it would influence her emotions. She would "feel bored because I don't have dancing in my life or because I don't have that particular part of my life happening at that moment so...I don't feel...I guess happy". For Athyda, dance and the performance aspect of sport construct the essential life arena required for identity formation and development (Erikson, 1971). This arena is where Athyda, via reinforcement, gains confidence and self-worth. It is where she develops her self-concept and ultimately her innate ego identity (as opposed to the social aspect of sport that serves only to create and maintain friendships in a fun environment). This provides further support for Danish *et al.* (1990) claim of identity benefits of sport.

Kroger (1993, cited in Bosma and Kunnen (2001)) argues that individuals limit their life contexts by choosing highly structured and restrictive melieus that reflect personal values or distancing themselves from unstable and uncontrollable environments. This links further into the concept of 'sport as performance'. For Athyda the act of using sport as a instrument to perform her identity to others in a controllable and stable environment (and not participating at all in environments she has no control over) is a self-protection mechanism (Grove *et al.*, 2004). Stephen and Brewer (2007) argue that sport has a social dimension where an individual's athletic identity is determined by the judgement of others. In the case of Athyda, 'sport as performance' enables her to perform her identity to others by displaying this 'I can do anything' attitude. In doing so she gains a level of control over the judgements of others (via a self protection mechanism of avoidance or selective participation in activities) and ultimately how she identifies as a unique individual (as opposed to an athlete as suggested by Stephen and Brewer (2007).

The self-protection mechanism of avoidance (i.e. avoidance behaviour which was first identified by B.F. Skinner in the 1930's and means that an individual learns to avoid any aversive situations (Weiten, 2007) is clearly demonstrated through Athydas lack of involvement in interfaculty sport at the university and more recently in her interactions with colleagues in the PDHPE staff when on prac.

...if there are people talking about a sport...for example NRL, and if I don't know as much about what they're talking about as they do, like, you know, statistics and recent forms and things like that or the results on the weekend then I wont get involved in talking about it...

The importance to which Athyda ascribes to maintaining the sport dimension of her identity is linked with the recognition and values that she and society places on a sporting identity. Therein lies the reason for her need to preserve this identity and avoid any threats to it by knowing "that I'm good at it before I do it". If she perceives

herself not good at a sport and other people witness this then her identity and the value ascribed to her identity by the Australian society is threatened because she needs to appear as though “I [Athyda] can do anything”.

The concept of sport as a performance has also influenced the people she associates herself with. This lends support to Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) which suggests that identity is formed when an individual categorises themselves with other social groups (Stets and Bourke, 2000). Athyda chose to associate herself with a group of friends that “...were so focused on like doing well and being performers, like they weren’t...happy just being like you know in a fun team sport on the weekend, they were actually quiet high up...they were actually performers”. This association meant that her sporting abilities were acknowledged, praised and given value.

This need to ‘perform’ and preserve the sport dimension of her identity is evident in other areas of Athyda’s life. For example Athyda was never “involved much in interfac...” sport at university as a result of “the expectation that you’re going to be good at the sport that you participate in”. This behavioural response and choice reflects her need to preserve her sporting identity, as she is aware that society and in this case her peers, judge you based on your sporting abilities. It is through having a sporting ability that value is given, as was the case in school when her PE teacher considered Athyda to be “...one of the [her teachers] favourites”.

Athyda also enhances her identity through her fashion sense. She prefers to wear tighter clothing such as leggings and tighter tops, a decision that has “definitely [been] influenced...because of it [dance]”. This combined with her body shape makes it “obvious to other people that I [Athyda] would do sports or some sort of athletic activity”. Grove *et al.* (2004) define this as self-enhancement as it serves to enhance the positive qualities of Athyda’s identity. By imploring this mechanism Athyda gains some control over the judgements of others. Her body shape and dress is not only influenced by her sport but it also “reinforces to me [Athyda] that I am a dancer”, highlighting the prominent position that dancing plays in her identity formation.

4.2. Sport and Family

Although the family contributed very little to the forming of Athyda’s ego identity in terms of quantity, quality wise it (mostly her mother) instilled in her an attitude that is central in Athyda’s life and ego identity development. From a young age Athyda’s mother instilled in her this value of ‘girls can do anything’ and this has guided her behaviour and choices. It determines what she participates in and the degree to which she must achieve, This provides support for Hitlin (2003) study, in which core values are not only shaped by one’s social context but also guide one’s choices and behaviours via an individual’s self-perception of themselves.

Athyda experienced an identity crisis as a result of this ‘girls can do anything’ value. This crisis emerged when, during school sport, Athyda compared herself to her peers. In support of Erikson (1971) and Brett Schneider and Heim (2001) argument, self-comparison to others is essential to identity formation as it enables one to develop a self-concept by gaining self-knowledge that is then integrated into a single identity structure. Schwartz (2001) also states that self-knowledge is essential for healthy identity development (p.9). Athyda’s comparison led her to develop knowledge of herself as being less ‘skilled’ than her friends, creating an identity crisis. Athyda realised that she was not upholding her own “girls can do anything” value.

It was more the fact that I wasn’t good at playing sport. So like, I wasn’t able to kick the ball as good as the other girls or defend as well as the other girls. Things like that that did have more of like a soccer or touch football background. So it was more about my own performance that I was concerned about.

During this crisis Athyda realises that she is not capable of doing everything. She resolves this crisis in two ways. Firstly, she compartmentalises and attributes her poor performance to lack of training (i.e. Schachter (2004)) ‘confederacy of identifications’) and secondly, she chooses not to participate in similar future situations. This crisis, threatens Athyda’s private athletic identity (Stephen and Brewer, 2007) by detracting from the value placed on her athletic identity by others (Stephen and Brewer, 2007). This causes her to engage in self-protection mechanisms

(such as not participating in and avoiding activities she knows she is not good at) in an attempt to maintain that social value. Therefore it is important for Athyda to “be doing something that I’m good at”. This demonstrates that Athyda understands the importance and value that many western countries like Australia place on sport (Brettschneider and Heim, 2001) and therefore needs to act on this understanding by not participating in activities she is not very skilled at, thus eliminating threats to her identity.

4.3. Sport and Gender

Athyda’s female gender and her sport involvement interacted in a number of ways. This interaction provided periods of identity crisis as well as identity exploration. In support of Shaw *et al.* (1995) sport provided Athyda with an opportunity to challenge traditional gender roles and develop independence. Athyda’s sport involvement also allowed her to enact physically and behaviourally, one of the central concepts in her identity formation: ‘girls can do anything’.

As a result of the opportunities provided within the sporting domain, Athyda has appeared to develop a clear and stable ego identity. During the first interview, Athyda spoke of her childhood experiences, of being involved in school camps and different sporting and recreational experiences. When asked if this conflicted with her feminine identity (Athyda revealed that she identified as feminine earlier in the interview) she stated:

not really i guess because...my mums fairly adamant in brining me and my two sisters up in that you know girls can do everything that boys can do and girls are just as smart as boys and things like that. So you know we did a lot of... physically things. Like you know different sports and different activities that boys and girls do when we were young...

This response revealed that Athyda has configured her childhood experiences and identifications into a final, single identity through ‘synthesised configuration’ (Schachter, 2004). Athyda has created a sense of sameness and continuity of character that defines who she is and what she is capable of by synthesising the conflicting identities of being female and feminine and being sporty and masculine into a single identity. Athyda employs the ‘Girls can do anything’ mantra to synthesise both these identities in a way that is no longer conflicting, resolving an identity crisis (Shaw *et al.*, 1995). This crisis resolution was vital for identity development, enabling Athyda to develop a sense of sameness and continuity (Erikson, 1950;1971).

A second crisis arose after Athyda compared her soccer skills to that of her peers at school. This comparison developed a self-knowledge that led to the realisation she was not as skilled as her male and female peers. This realisation distressed her as it created a conflict between her private athletic identity and the ‘i/girls can do anything’ value her mother had instilled in her.

I guess I may be a bit annoyed because being brought up by my mum thinking that you know girls can do whatever boys can do or theoretically girls should be able to play umm soccer just as well as boys. But then at the same time I struggle with myself because I knew that myself, even though you know theoretically I probably could play soccer as good as a boy, realistically I couldn’t because I didn’t have the skills available to me that I just couldn’t physically play as well as the boys.

Athyda resolved this crisis by compartmentalising her gender and soccer performance separately (i.e. Schachter (2004)) ‘confederacy of identifications’), thus justifying her performance due to her lack of soccer training rather than by simply being ‘a girl’.

4.4. Sport and Education

A further crisis was identified within the study in relation to sport and education. Athyda felt she needed to spend her time studying for her HSC and therefore dancing or sport of any kind had to be put aside. It was vital for Athyda that she “wasn’t wasting too much of my time doing other things rather than I should just be studying...”.

However, as she did within other sport and gender crisis, Athyda again compared herself to others, which Erikson (1971); Schwartz (2001) and Brettschneider and Heim (2001) acknowledge as a vital part of ego identity formation.

...a lot of other people in my year, they didn't drop anything. They kept going with their sport or their passion that they had at that time. Where as I dropped mine for that year so I guess I felt that I should have been able to balance everything better.

I could have done it but I chose not to do it. And because they were still doing it, it made me think that 'Oh, well maybe I should have just kept doing it because, you know, it wasn't really hurting them, it wasn't really affecting there HSC or anything.

Blustein and Palladino (1991, cited in Brettschneider and Heim (2001)) state that a coherent ego identity is characterised by a clear sense of who one is and is underpinned by internalised personal standards and a consistency in values and attitudes. The current findings support this as Athyda compares herself to other students in the context of academic performance and friends in the school sporting arena. These social comparisons are all underpinned by an internalised 'I can do anything' attitude and have thus, significantly shaped Athyda's ego identity.

Once Athyda compared herself to her peers and realised that they managed to successfully balance their study for the HSC and sport she realised that she (being driven by this overriding value of 'I can do anything'), should have been able to do so too. This impeded her self-concept and ultimately her ego identity as Brettschneider and Heim (2001) argue that one can only have an identity if they first have a self-concept.

I guess in a way I was a bit jealous of them because they did keep everything whereas I'd chosen to drop it for that year.

In an attempt to resolve this crisis, Athyda again synthesised these two conflicting identities of sport vs. academics. However, unlike previously crisis discussed, this synthesised configuration was a much longer process and was not resolved until Athyda's first year of university where she chose to both study and dance.

4.5. Sport and Friends

The interaction between sport and friends served two roles in Athyda's ego identity formation. Firstly, playing sport with friends served a purely social function. It was fun and a stress outlet. Secondly, it also enabled her to, via comparison to friends, gain self-knowledge about her own performance and thus strive to achieve and improve.

This comparison created an identity crisis as she realised once again that her dancing friend was much more skilled and an "all over better [dancer] than I was", clashing with her overriding belief of 'I can do anything'. It disrupted her sense of sameness and continuity, her self-concept and consequently her ego identity. This comparison and disruption to her sense of identity caused Athyda to strive to be as good a dancer as her friend.

Well I guess like in the comparison, it made me seem lacking. Like I didn't have the skills or the confidence or the opportunities that she had to do those different styles of dancing. So I guess, you know in a way it was sort of sad, because I would have liked to have been as good as her, but at the same time I tried to get a positive out of it. To make, umm...sort of to strive towards being better for myself as well I guess to be as good as her.

the way that I see it is that when you do a sport it presents an opportunity and all those sorts of things, you get better at it. So once you do it for long enough, you know you should be improving all the time and getting better and she umm...she was at a higher level of I guess improvement and all those sorts of things then I was and I sort of assumed that I should be getting better as well like at the same rate I guess.

Unlike, the previous two crisis, Athyda did not attempt to assimilate these two conflicting identities; rather she allowed them to exist simultaneously. For Athyda, dance and her 'I can do anything' value were identified as the two major factors that contributed to her overall sense of identity. Therefore it could be argued that it is impossible

for her achieve as sense of sameness and continuity by selecting one and repressing the other (Schachter, 2004). However, Athyda does not appear to be thrilled by the existence of these two conflicting identities (i.e. the thrill of dissonance as identified by Schachter (2004)) rather it distresses her.

...So I guess, you know in a way it was sort of sad, because I would have liked to have been as good as her...

In an attempt to overcome this identity crisis Athyda processed these conflicting identities by allowing them to exist together as conflicting identities, but compartmentalising them into separate contexts (i.e. me and my friends as different). Schachter (2004) states that during the process of the 'confederacy of identifications' configuration, neither conflicting identity is rejected as it is seen as rejecting part of oneself. This study supports this idea as dance and the 'I can do anything' value were highlighted as the two defining factors of Athydas' ego identity and not only is rejecting one identity like rejecting part of who Athyda is, but is will not allow her to develop a sense of sameness and continuity which is essential to forming her ego identity (Schachter, 2004).

5. CONCLUSION

The aim of this study was to explore the role of sport in informing and configuring the ego identity of an individual, in addition to exploring the contextual factors that may influence this process.

5.1. Key Findings

The key findings from this study highlight the significant role of sport in forming ego identity by providing an arena for both the development and affirmation of one's identity. Consequently, the value placed on an identity with a strong sporting dimension was regarded as significant. Firstly, this study found a clear and strong relationship between five identity components. This finding supports Erikson (1971) Ego Identity Psychology Theory and research by Berzonsky (2005); Yakushko *et al.* (2009) and Schachter (2004) indicating that ego identity is a single multidimensional structure composed of interconnected dimensions.

Secondly, the study found the role of 'sport as performance' is important in identity configuration. Sport provides with the opportunity to display their abilities and values (i.e. Athyda's 'I can do anything' value) that are both informed by and exist within society (such as the value and importance placed on being 'sporty' in Australian society). This provides support for Stets and Bourke (2000) attempt to integrate Identity Theory (Stryker, 1968) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1978) as "a combination of the two theories would recognise that the self both exists within society and is influenced by society, because socially defined shared meanings are incorporated into ones prototype or identity standard" (Stets and Bourke, 2000). In addition to this, a third key finding highlights that via social comparison, individuals gain self-knowledge about their abilities. This self-knowledge informs their self-concept and ultimately their ego identity. This provides support for Erikson (1971); Brettschneider and Heim (2001); Stephen and Brewer (2007) and Schwartz (2001) who state that social comparison is essential to identity development as it creates a self-knowledge that informs identity. The final key finding from the study extends the previous two suggesting that self-knowledge about one's abilities determines behaviour and choices. These choices and behaviour are further influenced by innate individual and societal values (i.e. value and status placed on sport). As a result of this self-knowledge individuals choose to engage in self-enhancing or self-protecting mechanisms in an attempt to protect their identity and the value placed on this identity by others from any threats such as an inability to perform in sport. This supports the research of Grove *et al.* (2004) who identified self-protection and enhancement mechanisms as central to the athletic identity of female athletes.

5.2. Implications

Berzonsky (2005); Cote (2006) and Schwartz (2007) state that a positive identity is critical for an individual to function efficiently within society. In addition, Percy (2007) and Sage (2000, cited in Percy (2007)) argue that sports

ability to promote a healthy sense of competence influences identity formation and character development. Therefore the implications of this study lie with those in the sporting industry (including individuals) and schools. Those involved within the sporting and education industry need to not only encourage participation of young people and support its place within the school curriculum but also emphasise the importance of the quality of such programs. Sporting programs need to allow students to experience self-determination and competence in their own abilities. They need to be positive, enjoyable (Bailey, 2006) and achievable if identity development is to be configured in a way that allows the individual to function within society. Additionally, individuals need to be aware of the influences on their identity development and what makes them who they are.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Contributors/Acknowledgement: All authors contributed equally to the conception and design of the study.

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