




ATHLETIC IDENTITY AND THE TRANSITION OUT OF SPORT AMONG DIVISION I FOOTBALL PLAYERS

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ABSTRACT

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Athletic identity is a key factor in multiple areas in a student-athlete's career however, athletic identity is both fragile and critical simultaneously, effecting things such as self-confidence, self-identity, and reputation around campus. Through interviews with 10 football players at a Mid-Atlantic American Division 1 University, qualitative data was gathered examining interests outside of the sport, their process of becoming a Division 1 athlete, and preparation for life after football. Primary findings explored common trends among the participants such as shared long-term goals, sport attached identity, and the absences of post athletic-career skills, or even exposure to such skill training at their university. Additional results suggested participant student-athletes have a solid sense of who they are but do not have a stable outlet for who they want to become outside of sport. This study can inform universities that student athletes not only desire innovative methods for career development, but also possess diverse ideas for their future beyond the student-athlete experience.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of the very few studies which examine the current state of post-athletic career resources available to American Division 1 collegiate athletes. From an athlete-identity framework, this quasi-experiental study sheds light on the current state of elite Division1 football through the lense of a student-athlete.

1. INTRODUCTION

A multi-dimensional identity is how an athlete identifies themselves within the numerous Roles in which they exist (López de Subijana *et al.*, 2015). From personal to career to social, one's sense of their specific identity can dictate how one acts, holds themselves, change whom they associate with, and even what goals they pursue in life. Difficult to build yet easy to crush, one's identity is one of the most crucial, yet fragile concepts of life. One specific issue that occurs consistently in today's society is identity foreclosure (specifically athletic-identity foreclosure in this study), which is when people commit prematurely to a specific identity without exploring other opportunities (Brewer and Petitpas, 2017).

Once a person experiences a traumatic life event and their identity is affected, it becomes emotionally distressing to the individual (Thoits, 1995). This change can be caused under extreme circumstances that usually are out of control for people or the person made a decision that affected their loss of identity. Some people may believe in a higher power of faith, some may work in a specific career field to make a positive change in the world,

and all people come different ethnicities and countries. When this crucial component of self-concept and self-identity is taken away with no explanation or because of actions outside one's control, how does one cope? Modern athletes face unique challenges in such situations given their constantly changing roles and situation-specific self-concepts. It was with framework and athletic-identity focused landscape from which this study evolved, specifically focused within collegiate athletes, more specifically Division 1 African – American football players.

2. EXISTING LITERATURE

Most all individuals have an overall basic concept of what their identity is and how it became such a vital component of their life. Although athletic-identity has been exhaustively studied in the field of sport psychology and others, this study aimed at primarily examining athletic identify within an African-American athlete population, and the unique struggles and components of their identity

2.1. Athletic Identity

Beamon (2012) highlights that one's identity is composed of self, view of self, social identity, and other people's view on you. As elite athletes receive praise and recognition from others specifically for their physical abilities and have heavily linked to their identity as an athlete, which is the only way they view themselves as successful (Beamon, 2012) African-American male athletes are often victims when faced with these issues because they overemphasize the role of athletics and nurture only their athletic identity.

Identity foreclosure is the commitment to an identity before exploring a broad range of alternatives (Beamon, 2012). An individual who experiences one identity is limited because they do not join social groups, career advancement, and talent development outside the world in which they excel. When their peers, family, friends, and media to excel in a specific field before exploring all options consistently reinforce athletes, then they believe this is the only way they can be successful and that brings a tremendous amount of stress, pressure, instability into one's life. According to Harper (2018) African-American male student-athletes are often socialized to value sports over academics at a young age. As a result, once their athletic career has concluded (either voluntarily or otherwise) population-specific trends suggest (Harper, 2018) struggles transitioning to their next stage of life and more specific to this study, their next identity.

2.2. Role Conflict

Modern American student-athletes face multiple challenges on a daily basis throughout their time in college including social, financial, psychological, and occupational issues (Heller, 2008). Additionally, the confluence of stresses (academic, life, social, athletic, financial, etc...) that negatively affects the minds and bodies of 18 to 23 year olds can lead to further complications. Specific to athletes in revenue-generating sports, this build-up of stress typically results in a loss of academic motivation, negatively affecting academic pursuits and minimizing their identity as a student (Simmons *et al.*, 1999) This role-conflict can affect collegiate student athletes due to the mandatory yet stressful balance of athletic and academic commitments. Career related distress might inhibit student-athletes to engage in career decision-making process including choosing a specific major, being open to explore career path options, and selecting the right path for them (Heller, 2008). Once an athlete's academic performance is poor around the time to graduate, it is difficult to obtain a college degree on time and pursue job opportunities. According to Heller (2008) athletes that participate in highly competitive sports are less able to formulate mature educational and career plans than were college students in general due to a lack of career maturity, which is an individual's ability to make age appropriate and well-informed decisions regarding viable career options.

2.3. Common Issues among American Football Athletes

Once an athlete is finished their collegiate career and graduation is upon them, a majority face fear of failure in life after sport because they assumed they want to stay within the world of sport. According to Lally and Kerr (2013) career development is defined as the formation of mature, realistic career plans grounded in involving one's career goals, interests, and abilities and awareness of vocational opportunities and requirements. Typical roadblocks that affect career development are that due to an athlete's complex schedule and time commitments, athletes do not have a stable outlet to develop their career interest not involving sports. When athletes are spending a majority of their time at training facilities, stadiums to play, or doing media coverage, they will most likely pursue a career within those fields. There is nothing wrong with that outlet; however numerous amounts of athletes have interests non-sports related. In revenue generating sports, such as basketball and football, players experience clustering which is being forced into specific majors to maintain eligibility (Fountain, 2019). This phenomenon is no stranger to the world of collegiate sports and negatively affects the development of the student-athletes because they are not being academically challenged and enroll in classes they have no interest in. It is unfortunate that some athletes believe just because they participate in the world of athletics for an extended period of time it's their only way to become successful in the world.

3. METHODS

From the review of existing literature, it was clear a study focusing on athletic identity within Division 1 athletes, specifically African-American males, was yet to be undertaken. Given the considerable logistical concerns that are omnipresent when attempting to examine components of revenue-producing team sports in American college football, the researcher opted for a smaller sample size to effectively examine common issues amongst the targeted population.

3.1. Participants

Ten Division-I collegiate male football players at a Mid-Atlantic United States University served as the participants for this study. Convenience sampling was utilized, with recruitment via social media and local connections of the one of the researchers. Participants' ages ranged from 18-23, as did their academic year (Freshman, Sophomore, etc...) and scholarship status (full-scholarship, partial scholarship, walk-on, etc...). Participants could all be classified as elite in their sport given their status as a Division 1 athlete, had been participating in the sport for an average of 11 years, represented a cross-section of football positions, and a varied amount of typical playing time. This participant pool provided the researchers a large range of experiential scope and data from the varied participants, yet it was their status as a Division 1 athlete which bonded them, with the vast majority of the participants sharing African-American culture.

3.2. Procedure

One researcher conducted semi-structured individual interviews with the participants, each lasting between 30-60 minutes. The interview consisted of researcher-designed questions aimed at examining all components of athletic identity, strengths and weakness of the participants' athletic experience, and the participants' feelings on the resources and tools available at their institution for life beyond football. Over twenty questions were created ranging from the reasons why they wanted to pursue sport participation, how their college recruiting process was, and what they intend on pursuing for their career goals. Participants completed informed consent forms and agreed to have each interview to be recorded to ensure transcription accuracy for the researchers. All data was stored in a secure location upon completion of each interview, and participant anonymity was ensured throughout all stages of data collection.

3.3. Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, the interviews were transcribed to ensure accuracy. Qualitative coding analysis revealed a number of common and statically significant trends within the participants. These trends included shared long-term goals, sport attached identity, and the absences of post-sport career skills. For the purposes of this commentary, we will emphasize the discussion and practical implications of the results instead of a further exploration of the statistics.

4. DISCUSSION

An athlete's playing career will end one way or another. Through an understanding of an athlete's transition out of sport, one's identity and career goals should be aligned to maintain a healthy well-being. The analysis of data demonstrated three significant trends shared by participants impacting their athletic identity and influencing their ability to transition out of sport.

4.1. Shared Long-Term Goals

Every participant shared the same aspirations of playing professional football in the National Football League. This goal was a childhood dream for a majority (80%) of the participants, which goes for almost every football player, and they are working day in and day out to turn it into a reality. This collection of athletes each comes from different athletic status, ethnic backgrounds, and lifestyles but all want to become a professional athlete. The chances of making it to the professional ranks are nearly impossible so not every player is fortunate to beat those odds. The participants also share the goals of being financially secure and to make a positive impact in their communities. It is important to support the dreams and aspirations of young people coming up in the world from college, but unfortunately collegiate athletes do not have full access to valuable experience in the career fields they wish to pursue. The participants suggested having access to resources that allow them to be properly educated and prepared for life after sport, such as: included an on-staff financial coach to teach financial literacy, creating supervised internship opportunities in the off-season in specific career fields, and organizing a committee that assist in searching for job opportunities for current student athletes.

4.2. Sport-Attached Identity

Nearly all participants (90%) expressed that their connection to football dominated their overall identity, a common trend in athletic identity literature. This strong sport-attached identity may have some benefits; however it was also expressed as acting as blinders to other important aspects of life, such as academics, social and life opportunities, and social connections. Participants expressed their aspiration to share the sport and cultural attached identity of some prominent African-American athletes such as Colin Kaepernick and LeBron James, who have used their sport and cultural identity to convey social injustice messages. A jersey does not protect people from injustices that the rest of the world experiences, so it is critical that athletes use their name, status, and resources to promote positive social change. It is from a better understanding of sport-attached, in this case African-American focused, identity that athletes can better understand their place in the world, and may better prepare them to take appropriate stances and position in post-athletic life.

4.3. Absence of Post-Sport Career Skills

When athletes are faced with adversity, their support system is repeatedly telling them how a certain event can either make you or break you whether it is training, practice, competition or life. A specific question addressed "if their sport were suddenly taken away from, how would they adapt?" A significant number of participants (80%) responded that athletes would not know what or how to pursue the next step in their lives. Athletes lack the necessary hands-on experience and opportunities to build self-efficacy to effectively succeed in career development

and networking due to their strict time commitments and schedules. Spending over five years increasing physical development helps win games, break records, and beat the odds to go to the professional level, but that time also takes away from creating connections in specific career fields, engaging in supervised internships, and enhancing one's self-efficacy outside of the sport. It is the primary conclusion of the researchers that participants felt most Division 1 athletes lack appropriate life skills to be successful beyond their sport-career. Additionally, it is not only that athletes lack these skills, moreover it is the absence of accessibility and availability to these skills and trainings which puts student-athletes behind the proverbial 8-ball when their collegiate athletic career has finished.

5. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although there were many participant-driven ideas for how to fix the current situation in collegiate athletics, it is not the current state of Division 1 revenue-producing athletics which is at the forefront of this study. Instead, it is what can be done to best address the identity and post athletic life-skill concerns of student-athletes, in this case specifically African-American Division 1 football players. A primary proposal is the expansion and further development of a simulated, interactive program for student-athletes in all sports that prepares them for life after sport. Similar to what is in place at a small number of universities (Oregon State, Wisconsin, and Oregon of note), such a program would allow athletes the opportunity to engage in scenarios to make their own decisions on issues that they face on a daily basis and learn to accept the consequences as well. Training modules could include (directly addressing qualitative data-driven deficiencies) financial literacy, graduate school and advanced academics, athletic careers outside of professional sports, and sexual assault and sexual orientation training, although the list could be seemingly endless.

Although there is no perfect solution for the current situation, something must be done to ensure student-athlete well-being and healthy psychosocial development. Understanding and addressing athletic identity may be one-step in the long process to be able to ensure a healthy transition in and out of one's athletic-career and into a productive adult life.

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