

# Athletes' Attitudes toward Career Counselling: Examining the Role of Athletic Identity

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## Abstract

Little is known about what prevents elite athletes, or those participating in high-performance international, national, and/or professional sport competition, from seeking career counselling services. Athletic identity, which refers to the strength and exclusivity of one's sport identity, may be implicated in athletes' reluctance to pursue career counselling. Due to a culture which perpetuates the perception of the "mentally tough athlete", sport participants may be dissuaded from seeking assistance with career concerns as the very act of help-seeking may threaten their sense of strength and competence – aspects which are central to one's athletic identity. Given the importance of career counselling for the coordination of life activities outside of sport participation and on athletes' preparation for sport retirement, research uncovering athletes' attitudes about career counselling is needed to better understand their disinclination, allowing career professionals to shape their services in ways which are more enticing to athletes. This study uses a cross-sectional survey design with a national sample of elite athletes to explore the impact of athletic identity on athletes' attitudes toward career counselling. Results are expected to advance career

professionals' understanding of the perceptions held by athletes, enabling them to develop career interventions, programs, and services that better serve and address the needs of elite athletes, thereby promoting increased personal and career wellness.

There is a foundation of evidence that supports the effectiveness of career counselling with young adults (Brown & Krane, 2000; Dagley & Salter, 2004; Shapka, Domene, & Keating, 2006; Whiston & Rahardja, 2008). Elite athletes, the majority of whom are young adults, have a unique set of circumstances that makes them especially relevant candidates for career counselling including the inevitable shift from an athletic career to a non-athletic career at some point in early adulthood. High-performance sport participation necessitates a specific set of demands on athletes related to practice, competitions, interpersonal relationships, and lifestyle tasks which athletes must be able to cope with to successfully continue in sport or adjust to sport career termination (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Career counselling is essential for helping athletes coordinate their sport participation with other life activities and assisting them to prepare for sport career transitions, particularly athletic retire-

ment (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). Despite the potential usefulness and the value and benefits of career counselling for athletes, especially upon retirement from an athletic career, research has demonstrated that many athletes do not participate in or use career counselling programmes even if they had opportunities to receive such services (Albion, 2007; Fraser, Fogarty, & Albion, 2010; Fogarty & McGregor-Bayne, 2008; Lavallee, 2005).

Unfortunately, little is known about what prevents some athletes from seeking or taking advantage of career counselling services. It has been argued that an identity associated with the "mentally tough athlete" may foster an under-utilization of professional career services (Bernard, 2016; Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012; Kaier, DeMarni Cormer, Johnson, Strunk, & Davis, 2015; Lopez & Levy, 2010; Uphill, Sly, & Swain, 2016), hindering opportunities for personal and vocational exploration and growth. Holding the belief that athletes are supposed to be controlled, competitive, self-reliant, and successful may make it difficult for many athletes to seek career counselling because it suggests weakness or incompetence. Some individuals may feel they should be able to



make career decisions on their own without professional help and therefore these individuals might feel particularly bad about themselves if they are having trouble doing so; seeking career counselling would be, in their minds, seen as admitting failure. The idea that athletic identity can have an impact on seeking career counselling is also related to the problem of the exclusivity of sport identity. Athletes who focus their interests in this area may develop a narrow identity, compromising growth in other areas of interest (Brewer, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Grove, Lavalley, Gordon, 1997). This may hinder career maturity, goal-setting, and the possibility of athletes being ready to make informed, responsible, and reasonable career decisions outside of sport.

The current study was developed to explore the impact of athletic identity on athletes' attitudes toward career counselling. It is hypothesized that individuals whose identities are more strongly centred on being an athlete will have more negative attitudes about career counselling.

### Methodology

#### Participants

The targeted sample size for this project is 100 participants. To participate in the study, the following inclusion criteria are required: (a) proficiency in English, (b) 18-25 years of age (age range selected due to focus on an emerging adult population),

and (c) active participation on a Canadian National Team (multi-sport). An official partnership with AthletesCAN, the Association of Canada's National Team Athletes, has been established to facilitate the recruitment of a national sample of elite athletes. AthletesCAN will assist with the recruitment of participants by disseminating research advertisements online and in-person to athletes, coaches, sport administrators, and partner organizations.

#### Measures

**Attitude Towards Career Counseling Scale (ATCCS).** The ATCCS will be used to measure two factors including the value of career counselling and the stigma associated with career counselling (Rochlen, Mohr, & Hargrove, 1999). The ATCCS is a 16 item, self-report measure on which respondents rate items on a scale of 1 (absolutely disagree) to 5 (absolutely agree). The ATCCS is sub-divided into two subscales (value and stigma) of eight items each. A sample item for the value subscale includes, "Career counselling is a valuable resource in making a career choice". A sample item for the stigma subscale includes, "If I should consult a career counselor, I wouldn't want anyone to know about it". Scores on the two subscales range from 8 to 40. The ATCCS has acceptable concurrent validity (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2008) and satisfactory internal consistency of .89 (Lud

wikowski, Vogel, & Armstrong, 2009).

#### Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS).

The AIMS will be used to measure the strength and exclusivity of athletic identity including its cognitive, affective, and social domains (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). It is a seven item, self-report measure that uses a rating scale of 1 (strongly agree with the statement) to 7 (strongly disagree with the statement). A sample item is, "I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else". Scores range from 7 to 49. Brewer et al. (1993) provided evidence of construct validity, demonstrating that scores on the AIMS were highly correlated with the Importance of Sports Competence sub-scale ( $r = 0.83$ ) of the Perceived Importance Profile, as well as evidence of high internal consistency ( $\alpha = 0.93$ ) and test-retest reliability of 0.83 over a two-week period.

#### Procedures

A cross-sectional survey research design will be utilized in this study, with non-probability sampling. Athletes who are interested in participating will be administered a brief, anonymous survey including the ATCCS and AIMS questionnaires. Surveys will be distributed by e-mail by various Canadian National Sport Organizations as well as in-person at non-competition events including the AthletesCAN Forum (the largest and most inclusive non-competition gath-



ering of Canada's National Team Athletes). The estimated survey completion time is 10 minutes. Correlation analyses will be conducted to investigate the relationship between athletic identity and athletes' attitudes towards career counselling. Data collection will be completed by the end of 2017.

### Expected Results and Implications

This study examines the relationship between athletic identity and athletes' attitudes towards career counselling, advancing our knowledge in a number of important ways. This investigation builds upon past research on athletes' career assistance to include an examination of the impact of athletic identity on athletes' help-seeking attitudes, increasing understanding of the links between how one sees oneself and their views towards obtaining career services. Stronger athletic identity is thought to be associated with more negative attitudes towards career counselling, contributing to athletes' under-utilization of career services. Such findings have important implications for the design and delivery of career services. For example, outreach efforts may be needed for athletes who have strong and exclusive athletic identities and who negatively value career counselling, or for those who are dissuaded from seeking career services due to their experience or perception of stigma associated with seeking career counselling (Di Fabio & Bernaud, 2007). An enhanced

understanding will enable career counsellors to better tailor, promote, and market their services in ways that are non-threatening and appealing to athletes, facilitating greater utilization of career services for athletes and improved vocational and personal outcomes.

Given the importance of career-related decision-making in competitive sport and the negative consequences for those who do not successfully navigate the career transition process, it remains crucial to articulate what types of professional services are most appealing and helpful to athletes. Future research may include studying athletes' intentions to pursue career counselling, examining if positive attitudes prompt the actual use of services, and finally, to differentiate the utility and effectiveness of career counselling from other professional services such as personal counselling or psychotherapy, in addressing career transitions and career-related difficulties. With the findings expected from this study, along with future research in this area, career professionals may be better positioned to develop and implement interventions that could positively impact athletes, thereby promoting increased personal and career wellness for athletes.

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