

A Possible-Selves Intervention for Sport Career Transition

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Abstract

Exceptional demands of high-performance sport can limit athletes' engagement in an array of developmental tasks such as identity exploration and the acquisition of competencies outside of the sport setting. Such tasks are needed to develop an integrated and cohesive sense of self (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), pursuits which primarily occur in emerging adulthood. The extant literature has consistently suggested that sport career termination is one of the most significant and potentially traumatic experiences for a wide-range of competitive athletes including interuniversity sport participants (Lavallee, 2005); however, minimal sport transition interventions are in place to address its impact on athletes' adaptation to life after sport, particularly the effects on athletes' identities. This study utilizes a pre-test and post-test research design to study the effectiveness of a novel group psychotherapy intervention titled *Identity Matters*, which seeks to influence athletes' sense of future possibilities in a variety of life domains including vocational, interpersonal, and intra-personal components, in comparison to an active control condition titled *Planning Ahead*, a didactic and traditional group career intervention method. Re-

sults are expected to inform career professionals' further theorizing about athletes' identity tasks during young adulthood, as well as the extensibility and development of future possible-selves, or one's sense of possibility for the self in the future, which can contribute to more robust career transition outcomes. While a large number of retiring athletes who have experienced serious psychosocial and health conditions has been documented in the literature, it remains imperative to investigate ways of better supporting them throughout this complex and challenging life transition.

Developing a sense of identity is an integral psychosocial task for emerging adults (Schwartz et al., 2013), influencing the consolidation of goals, vocational aspirations, and self-regulatory strategies (e.g., coping; Brown & Gilligan, 1993; Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011). Developmental processes such as identity formation are profoundly influenced by high-performance sports participation as athletes tend to develop strong and exclusive athletic identities associated with their rigorous involvement in sports (Brewer, Vaan Ralte, & Linder, 1993; Houle & Kluck, 2015), limiting the emergence of a more comprehensive sense of self

outside the sport setting which restricts their perspective of future career possibilities. Indeed, constricted identities are associated with deleterious responses to life challenges, including high rates of anxiety, substance abuse, interpersonal violence, depression, and suicide, which have been documented among athletes following their retirement from elite sport (Beamon, 2012; Giannone, 2016; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996; Whipple, 2009; Weigand, Cohen, & Merestein, 2015). Unfortunately, there are limited psychological and career interventions in place to promote adaptive transitions from Canadian high-performance sport (Canadian Sport Institute, 2014), particularly targeting issues related to identity development and future possible-selves, or one's sense of possibility for the self in the future. Although few programs do exist utilizing traditional career intervention methods (e.g., Canadian Olympic Committee's Game Plan; NCAA's Life Skills), most are not empirically driven nor do they offer evidence supporting their effectiveness with athlete populations due to a paucity of research in the area (Lavallee, 2005). While one's sense of self and perception of future career possibilities is related to sport transition adaptation (Carbrita, Rosado, Leite, Serpa, & Sou-



sa, 2014; Lally & Kerr, 2005), advancements in intervention research are warranted to better optimize athletes' adjustment to sport retirement.

A Possible-Selves Intervention

A sense of possibility for the self for athletes can encompass an array of life domains including opportunities for future vocational pursuits and interpersonal relationships, constituting the present-moment identity (Cross & Markus, 1991) by guiding future actions, motivations, and coping abilities, thereby protecting against negative psychosocial and health outcomes (Aloise-Young, Hennigan, Leong, 2001; Dunkel, 2000; Frazier & Hooker, 2006; Oyserman & Markus, 1990) common among retiring athletes. To this end, a group psychotherapy intervention titled, *Identity Matters*, was developed (Kealy, 2016) to explicitly focus on the elaboration of young adults' possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986), drawing upon the wider applied positive psychology literature (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) to enhance athletes' identity development, growth initiative, and future outlook. Specifically, a group-based intervention was created due to the centrality of social relationships and group cohesion in sport participation and identity development. *Identity Matters* method consists of a group-based experience where athletes participate in (a) learning about identity development, (b) supporting group members'

exploration of possible-selves, (c) identifying potential barriers hindering growth, and (d) developing initiative regarding their sense of future possibilities. The *Identity Matters* method will be compared with the *Planning Ahead* method, an active control condition involving a didactic, psycho-educational experience focusing on career planning, life skills development, and goal-setting. The foundational difference between the two conditions regards *Identity Matters'* emphasis on group member interaction and support, in addition to active promotion of identity awareness (in comparison to career intervention only). The objective of this study is to investigate the effectiveness of a novel possible-selves intervention, determining the extent to which athletes' sense of future possibilities changes as a consequence of participating in the group. It is hypothesized that participants in the *Identity Matters* groups will demonstrate statistically significant changes in possible-selves (a facet of identity), personal growth initiative, and future outlook, in comparison to participants in the *Planning Ahead* method groups.

Methodology

Participants

The targeted sample size for this study is 50 program completers, with approximately 60 participants who are expected to be recruited to account for an expected attrition rate of 20%. Participants must meet the

following inclusion criteria: (a) proficiency in English, (b) 18-25 years of age (age range selected due to focus on emerging adult population), and (c) self-identify as an inter-collegiate/university athlete participating in varsity sport. Recruitment of the study participants will involve contacting athletic directors, coaches, and athletes through online and in-person correspondence within the province of British Columbia.

Measures

Possible-Selves Questionnaire (PSQ). A modified version of the PSQ will be used to measure athletes' sense of future possible selves (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004). The PSQ is an eight item, qualitative self-report measure to which respondents indicate possible-selves and strategies for attaining and avoiding them. Instrument scoring involves coding the responses for plausibility and redundancy. No validity or reliability evidence is available for the PSQ at the present time.

Personal Growth Initiative Scale – II (PGIS-II). The PGIS-II will be used to measure individuals' motivation for pursuing personal development goals (Robitschek, et al., 2012). The PGIS-II is a 16 item, self-report measure on which respondents rate items using a scale of 0 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) and this instrument evaluates four dimensions including planfulness, readiness for change, intentional behaviour,



and using resources. Scores for each subscale are totalled and averaged, with higher scores indicating greater levels of personal growth initiative. Robitschek et al. (2012) reported internal consistency estimates of $\alpha = .90$ to $.94$ (total scores), $\alpha = .82$ to $.91$ (planfulness), $\alpha = .76$ to $.88$ (readiness for change), $\alpha = .83$ to $.91$ (intentional behaviour), and $\alpha = .73$ to $.88$ (using resources).

Herth Hope Index (HHI). The HHI will be used to measure future outlook and hope (Herth, 1992). This measure contains three domains: temporarily and future, positive readiness and expectancy, and interconnectedness. The HHI is a 12-item, self-report measure that uses a rating scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 4 (*strongly agree*). Summed scores can range from 12 to 48, with higher scores indicating greater levels of hope and future outlook. Herth (1992) reported that the HHI has an α coefficient of 0.97, indicating strong internal consistency, and test-retest reliability at two weeks (i.e., test was taken again following a two week period) of 0.91 which is indicative of stability over time.

Procedures

A pre-test and post-test research design will be utilized, in addition to non-probability sampling. Eligible participants will be randomized into either the experimental (*Identity Matters*) or active control (*Planning Ahead*) conditions. Assessment

packages will be administered at pre-intervention, post-intervention, and three months following the completion of the intervention to evaluate whether the results were maintained over this time period. To monitor effects of the group process, specific instruments will also be administered to the participants following each session and at the conclusion of the program. Important to note that the assessments will be the same for each intervention condition. Six groups of approximately 10 members will complete a 1.5-hour group-based intervention facilitated by two group leaders which will take place over a four-week period. A repeated measures between-groups ANOVA will be conducted to evaluate differences between the *Identity Matters* group psychotherapy condition and the *Planning Ahead* didactic active control condition from pre-intervention to post-intervention, and at follow-up will take place (three-months' post-intervention). Data collection has begun and will be completed by the spring of 2018.

Expected Results and Implications

Research focused on providing psychological services to athletes undergoing sport career transition is limited (Lavalley, 2005), particularly with regards to supporting the role of identity on sport retirement adjustment and career changes. This study seeks to make a novel contribution in that it investigates the

effectiveness of a possible-selves intervention, *Identity Matters*, which strives to foster changes in athletes' sense of future possibilities, career transition, and initiative for personal and professional growth. Diverging from traditional career transition interventions, *Identity Matters* aims to address not only the loss of the athlete role inherent in sport retirement but also the process of forming new possible-selves, and promoting healthier and more adaptive athlete outcomes. With a renewed sense of who one can become, athletes can better tackle future goals which are consistent with internal representations of one's possible-selves, leading to more robust intra-personal and inter-personal functioning. In addition to adding to the literature on applied positive psychology interventions, findings from this study will inform career professionals' further theorizing about individuals' identity tasks and the extensibility of possible-selves (Kealy, 2016). Given that a significant proportion of athletes experience distress associated with sport career termination and career transition (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007), it remains imperative to investigate ways of better supporting them throughout this complex and challenging life transition.

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