Career Identity Formation in the Transition to Life after College Sport: An Assessment of Career Identity Status and Psychosocial Functioning

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Upon the end of the athletic career, elite athletes must go through processes of self-redefinition during which career identity configuration must be reshaped (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). However, athletes’ identity shift into a career upon leaving college sport can be challenging due to the necessity to replace a salient athletic identity and their limited identity development beyond sport throughout childhood, adolescence and college life (Carless & Douglas, 2009; Willard & Lavallee, 2016). Limited career exploration and insufficient knowledge of who they are outside of sport can make them feel directionless as they embark on a search for a new identity in life after sport (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Paule-Koba & Farr, 2013).

The developmental and psychosocial challenges of forming a career identity upon leaving college sport and transitioning into adulthood warrant the investigation of theoretical underpinnings around identity development. The purpose of this study was to assess the career identity statuses, using Marcia’s (1966) identity status paradigm, of recently graduated NCAA college athletes, and investigate how their status influenced psychosocial and career functioning post-college sport life.

We collected data from former athletes registered on the NCAA Alumni Research Panel using a 90-item questionnaire that was comprised of a newly validated instrument, the Career Identity Development Inventory (CIDI), and functioning measures including satisfaction with life and career, self-esteem, flourishing, and core self-evaluations. A total of 507 former student-athletes completed the questionnaire, from which, 62% were female and 84% were White. A majority of the participants were from Division I institutions (53.2%).

Once the psychometric properties of CIDI were established, we observed via correlational analyses that forming career commitments was important for identity development and optimal psychosocial functioning. More advanced stages in the exploration process contributed to better functioning while career identity confusion was negatively associated with these variables. We also performed a hierarchical cluster analysis on the standardized scores of the seven career identity dimensions of CIDI. The iterative k-means clustering generated eight career identity statuses. Results of MANOVAs demonstrated that individuals placed in the variants of the “achievement” status exhibited the highest flourishing levels. Former athletes who had not established a career identity and were in the initial steps of identity search reported some of the poorest functioning.

Important theoretical contributions were advanced in that we provided empirical evidence of the viability of this vocational identity paradigm to the sport organization context, but we also extended it by providing new variants of career identity status. We also improved our understanding of the transition to life after sport through the establishment of a “moratorium” status, which indicated that participants were still working on developing a career identity and transitioning out of their sport career. These athletes should be encouraged to persevere in their search for a meaningful career identity despite experiencing feelings of confusion. Practical implications for administrators are provided for each identity status to better anticipate and address transition difficulties, and the application of this revised paradigm to the study of career identity among sport organization employees are also advanced.