

# **IDENTITY FORECLOSURE, ATHLETIC IDENTITY, AND COLLEGE SPORT PARTICIPATION**

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## **ABSTRACT**

A study was conducted with 502 college students (246 non-athletes, 90 intramural athletes, and 166 intercollegiate athletes) to investigate the relationship between self-identity variables (i.e., identity foreclosure and athletic identity) and college sport participation. Results indicated that identity foreclosure and athletic identity increase with level of sport participation. Identity foreclosure was significantly lower for upperclass students than for underclass students among non-athletes, but not among intramural and intercollegiate student-athletes. These findings suggest that intercollegiate student-athletes may commit to the role of "athlete" without exploring alternative identities. Implications of the results for the academic and career development of student-athletes are discussed.

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the typical college or university, several hundred students participate in intercollegiate athletics. Participation in sport at the college level involves an enormous commitment of time and energy. Despite the prevailing notion that sport builds character, empirical investigations have demonstrated that student-athletes lag behind their non-athletic counterparts in terms of

psychosocial development (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Malismur & Schmitt, 1975; Petitpas, 1981; Schendel, 1965; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

One reason why college student-athletes may show lower levels of psychosocial maturity is that they engage in selective optimization (Danish, 1983), in which they concentrate on a sport to the exclusion of other activities during their involvement in the sport. Consistent with this idea, it has been hypothesized that student-athletes are at increased risk for identity foreclosure (Nelson, 1983; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). Rooted in Erikson's (1959) theory of psychosocial development, identity foreclosure is a construct used to describe people who have committed to an occupation or an ideology without first engaging in exploratory behavior (Marcia, 1966; Petitpas, 1978).

Because of the rewards and demands (both physical and psychological) inherent in competitive sport, student-athletes may lack incentive or opportunity to explore identities other than that of "athlete." Preliminary support for this argument was obtained in a study of college males by Petitpas (1981), who found that senior non-athletes were significantly less foreclosed than senior student-athletes, freshman student-athletes, and freshman non-athletes. No significant differences in identity foreclosure were found among the latter three groups of subjects.

Closely related to identity foreclosure is athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press), a construct tapping the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role. It has been hypothesized that maintaining a strong and exclusive athletic identity can produce problems in adjustment to common sport-related transitions such as terminating competitive sport involvement, dealing with injury, and being cut from a team (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Several investigations have provided empirical support for this hypothesis. Hinitz (1988) found that retired gymnasts who strongly identified with the role of "gymnast" and who considered participation in gymnastics to be a central source of self-definition experienced difficult adjustments to athletic retirement. Hinitz's results suggest that people with strong and exclusive athletic identities may fail to adopt alternative occupational identities following their participation in sport. In the realm of injury, Kleiber and Brock (1992) found that among college student-athletes who had experienced athletic career-ending injuries, only those who were invested in playing professional sports experienced a decrease in self-esteem and life satisfaction. Similarly, Brewer (in press) presented four studies in which a strong and exclusive athletic identity was associated with depressed mood following sport injuries.

Assuming that late adolescence is a critical period for identity development (Erikson, 1968), the purpose of this study was to examine identity foreclosure and athletic identity across three levels of athletic involvement (intercollegiate sport participation, intramural sport participation, no sport participation) in male and female upperclass and underclass college students. Based on previous research (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press; Petitpas,

1981), it was predicted that both identity foreclosure and athletic identity would increase with level of athletic involvement. Although females have been found to be lower in athletic identity than males (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press), no gender comparisons have been made to date for identity foreclosure in the context of sport participation. Consequently, no hypotheses were advanced for females with respect to identity foreclosure. Concerning the influence of academic standing, the body of research showing that identity foreclosure generally declines over the college years (Bourne, 1978; Marcia, 1976) and the negative correlation between age and athletic identity obtained by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (in press) suggests that both athletic identity and identity foreclosure should be lower in the upperclass group than in the underclass category.

## METHOD

### Participants

Participants were 502 students enrolled in introductory psychology, physiology, or research courses at four small colleges and universities in the northeast region of the United States. Of this sample, 166 students (71 females and 95 males) were intercollegiate student-athletes, 90 students (50 females and 40 males) were intramural athletes, and 246 students (180 females and 66 males) were non-athletes. As a group, intercollegiate and intramural student-athletes reported involvement in a wide variety of sport activities (e.g., baseball, basketball, field hockey, football, gymnastics, soccer, softball, swimming, volleyball).

### Measures

Identity foreclosure was assessed with the foreclosure subscale of the Objective Measure of Ego Identity Status (OM-EIS; Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979). The foreclosure subscale consists of six statements on issues such as politics, religion, and occupation. Respondents are asked to indicate their agreement with each statement on a six-point Likert-type scale with anchors of "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." Adequate internal consistency ( $\alpha = .76$ ) has been demonstrated for the foreclosure subscale (Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979).

Athletic identity was assessed with the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press). The AIMS is a ten-item scale that measures the strength and exclusivity of an individual's identification with the athlete role. High internal consistency (alphas ranging from .80 to .93) and high test-retest reliability over a 14-day period ( $r = .89$ ) have been reported for the AIMS (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press).

**Procedure**

Participants completed the questionnaires and a page requesting demographic information during a regularly scheduled class session. In accord with institutional review board policy, participants were informed that return of the questionnaires constituted their consent to participate in the study.

**RESULTS**

Separate 3 (level of athletic involvement) X 2 (gender) X 2 (class) analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were performed on foreclosure and AIMS scores. These analyses were intended to examine differences in identity foreclosure and athletic identity across the three levels of athletic involvement. Gender and class were included in the ANOVAs because these variables have been found to be related to identity variables in previous research (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, in press; Petitpas, 1981).

**Foreclosure**

Means and standard deviations of foreclosure scores are presented in Table 1. In the ANOVA performed on foreclosure scores, the main effects for class [ $F(1,490) = 7.46, p < .01$ ] and level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 8.63, p < .001$ ] were statistically significant. The main effect for gender was not statistically significant [ $F(1,490) = 2.41, p > .05$ ].

Table 1  
Means and Standard Deviations of Foreclosure Scores

Group	Level of Athletic Involvement		
	Non-athlete	Intramural	Intercollegiate
Upperclass			
Males			
<u>M</u>	12.68	15.96	15.96
<u>SD</u>	5.38	3.46	4.67
<u>n</u>	44	26	54
Females			
<u>M</u>	13.49	14.64	16.51
<u>SD</u>	4.80	5.42	5.31
<u>n</u>	130	25	39

Table 1 (continued)

Group	Level of Athletic Involvement		
	Non-athlete	Intramural	Intercollegiate
Underclass			
Males			
<u>M</u>	17.18	15.71	16.54
<u>SD</u>	3.88	5.50	4.28
<u>n</u>	22	14	41
Females			
<u>M</u>	15.10	15.24	16.34
<u>SD</u>	4.44	4.80	4.12
<u>n</u>	50	25	32

The significant main effects of class and level of athletic involvement were superseded by the statistically significant class by level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 3.67, p < .05$ ]. Inspection of the simple effects of class within each level of athletic involvement revealed that although there were no significant class differences for intramural and intercollegiate student-athletes, upperclass non-athletes had significantly lower foreclosure scores than underclass non-athletes [ $F(1,490) = 17.43, p < .001$ ].

The gender by class, gender by level of athletic involvement, and gender by class by level of athletic involvement interactions were not statistically significant, indicating that foreclosure scores tended to decrease with advancing class status for both males and females and that foreclosure scores tended to increase with level of athletic involvement for both males and females.

**Athletic Identity**

Means and standard deviations of AIMS scores are displayed in Table 2. In the ANOVA performed on AIMS scores, the main effects for gender [ $F(1,490) = 26.96, p < .001$ ] and level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 179.19, p < .001$ ] were statistically significant. The main effect for class was not statistically significant [ $F(1,490) = 2.41, p > .05$ ].

Table 2  
Means and Standard Deviations of AIMS Scores

Group	Level of Athletic Involvement		
	Non-athlete	Intramural	Intercollegiate
Upperclass			
Males			
M	31.21	45.42	51.72
SD	12.74	7.85	9.22
n	44	26	54
Females			
M	24.89	41.16	49.59
SD	12.03	9.29	10.03
n	130	25	39
Underclass			
Males			
M	41.41	46.14	49.29
SD	11.19	6.76	10.75
n	22	14	41
Females			
M	26.18	41.36	50.22
SD	11.10	10.44	7.75
n	50	25	32

Superseding the significant main effects of gender and level of athletic involvement were the following statistically significant interactions: gender by level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 7.24, p < .005$ ]; class by level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 3.12, p < .05$ ]; and gender by class by level of athletic involvement [ $F(2,490) = 3.32, p < .05$ ].

Examination of the simple effects of gender within each level of athletic involvement revealed that males had significantly higher AIMS scores than females among non-athletes [ $F(1,490) = 42.42, p < .001$ ]. There were no significant gender effects on the AIMS for intramural and intercollegiate student-athletes. The simple effects of the level of athletic involvement within each gender and within each class showed that AIMS scores increased with level of athletic involvement for both males [ $F(2,490) = 195.82, p < .001$ ] and females [ $F(2,490) = 56.39, p < .001$ ] and for both upperclass student-athletes

[ $F(2,490) = 181.08, p < .001$ ] and underclass student-athletes [ $F(2,490) = 56.76, p < .001$ ].

Inspection of the simple effects of class within each level of athletic involvement indicated that, although there were no significant class differences for intramural and intercollegiate student-athletes, underclass non-athletes had significantly higher AIMS scores than upperclass non-athletes [ $F(1,490) = 12.08, p < .005$ ]. However, the class effect within non-athletes held only for males, since the AIMS scores of upperclass and underclass female non-athletes did not differ significantly.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined identity foreclosure and athletic identity in male and female upperclass and underclass college students across three levels of sport participation. Empirical support was provided for the hypothesis that student-athletes are susceptible to identity foreclosure, as foreclosure scores increased with the level of athletic involvement. Similar to the results of Petitpas (1981), upperclass non-athletes were significantly less foreclosed than underclass non-athletes, but no such developmental decrease was observed for intramural or intercollegiate student-athletes. It is possible that the demands of sport participation and the restrictive, sheltered nature of the competitive sport environment discourage student-athletes from exploring alternative identities (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Nelson, 1983; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; Shifflette & Galanie, 1985).

Bolstering this interpretation are the findings for athletic identity in this study, which, as expected, indicated that strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role increased with level of athletic involvement. It is worth noting that athletic identity and foreclosure scores were significantly correlated for the full sample [ $r(501) = .21, p < .001$ ]. This suggests that athletic identity and identity foreclosure are distinct yet related constructs.

No gender differences were found for identity foreclosure. Thus, it appears that the findings of Petitpas (1981) obtained with male college students apply to female college students as well. A gender difference was found on athletic identity only for non-athletes, with male non-athletes having significantly higher AIMS scores than female non-athletes. This finding suggests that male and female student-athletes identify themselves with the athlete role in a similar fashion.

There are several important limitations of this study. First, the cross-sectional design that was used does not permit causal conclusions regarding the relations among sport participation, academic standing, and self-identity (athletic identity and identity foreclosure) in college students. In the future, it would be prudent to employ longitudinal designs to examine more thoroughly identity development in student-athletes. Second, participants in this study were students at NCAA Division II and Division III institutions. Replication of this investigation with NCAA Division I student-athletes is recommended. However,

it might be anticipated that some of the findings of this study might be even more pronounced among students at Division I institutions, where the expectation of "turning pro" by student-athletes is probably much higher than at NCAA Division II and Division III institutions.

### Implications

The results of this study imply that college student-athletes may identify strongly with the athlete role to the extent that they fail to explore alternative identities. These findings have ramifications for the academic and career development of student-athletes. Because of their intense involvement in sport, student-athletes may not identify, explore, and eventually pursue academic and career options of potential interest. Although an association between identity foreclosure and career maturity has not been demonstrated empirically in student-athletes, research in non-athletic populations has indicated that identity foreclosure is positively related to a dependent decision-making style that is considered maladaptive in the career development process (Blustein & Phillips, 1990).

Athletes sometimes encounter difficulty upon terminating involvement in competitive sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Gorbett, 1985). For example, documented sequelae of athletic "retirement" include low life satisfaction (Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), psychological distress (Blinde & Stratta, 1992), and substance abuse (Mihovilovic, 1968). Failure to formulate adequate post-sport career plans may in part account for the difficulties faced by some retired athletes. The findings of this study are of concern to the extent that an exclusive identification with the athlete role prohibits career planning.

The current study and those of Blann (1985), Kennedy and Dimick (1987), and Sowa and Gressard (1983) provide a rationale for career development interventions for college student-athletes (Jordan & Denson, 1990; Lanning, 1982; Nelson, 1982; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; Riffe & Alexander, 1991; Sanders, 1992; Wilkes, Davis, & Dever, 1989; Wittmer, Bostic, Phillips, & Waters, 1981). Preliminary research suggests that career development programs for student-athletes are effective (Nelson, 1992) and well-received by participants (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992; Wilkes, Davis, & Dever, 1989). It is hoped that, through further empirical research and ongoing program evaluation, effective interventions will be developed to ease the difficulties of student-athletes making the transition out of intercollegiate sport involvement.

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