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Identity foreclosure in sport

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From a psychosocial perspective, the primary task of late adolescence is to establish a sense of personal identity. Individuals who explore a variety of activities and interact with people from different backgrounds are in the best position to learn about themselves and to make informed decisions about various life options. Exploratory behavior not only provides the experiences and information that people need to solidify their values, interests, and skills, but also enables them to develop coping strategies and confidence in their abilities to be successful in adult life. Unfortunately, athletes may be prone to putting too much of their time and energy into sport participation and may not engage in the exploratory behavior that is critical to establishing a sense of self-identity (Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000). Athletes who do not engage in exploratory behaviors, but make firm commitments to sport as their primary source of identity, have been described as being in a state of identity foreclosure. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the construct of identity foreclosure in athletes and explore related implications for practitioners.

Understanding identity foreclosure

Identity foreclosure is listed as a core knowledge area in the sport psychology proficiencies of the American Psychological Association (2010); however, little has been written about the theoretical development of the construct. The groundwork for the concept of identity foreclosure can be found in the work of ego psychology theorists. Moving beyond the Freudian construct of instinctual id drives, White (1963) proposed that all individuals are motivated by an innate need to master their environments and to move freely in the world. He called this need “effectance” and argued that personal development demanded that individuals not only maintain themselves by satisfying basic instinctual needs, but also grow and gain feelings of efficacy by engaging in activities that influence their environments.

White (1963) believed that infants begin the process of cognitive and motor learning by engaging in simple behaviors such as holding crib toys. By the time infants start to crawl they have had numerous interactions with their environments that begin to shape their beliefs about what they can and cannot do. These beliefs form the basis for self-efficacy.
As children continue to grow, they construct views of their worlds based on what they have learned about their abilities and begin to develop primitive estimates of their levels of personal competence. Without some level of self-efficacy, it is doubtful that young children would have the desire or readiness necessary to imitate the complex behaviors exhibited by older role models.

At school age, children have increased opportunities to interact with their peers and to engage in social comparisons, particularly around physical abilities. Through these interactions, they gain concrete feedback about their competencies and begin to make judgments about the types of activities that are most likely to fulfill their need for effectance (White, 1963). According to Erikson (1959), children who experience success and achieve adequate levels of self-efficacy during latency develop a sense of industry. Children who are not able to meet their effectance needs develop feelings of inferiority and are less likely to take risks or explore new opportunities.

As individuals move into late adolescence, their developmental tasks shift to establishing a sense of personal identity (Erikson, 1959). In traditional psychodynamic views of human development, both separation/individuation and the internalization of self-regulatory functions are critical tasks for optimal identity formation in late adolescence (Kohut, 1971). The process of separation/individuation in adolescence enables individuals to shed family dependencies and loosen infantile object attachments at two levels (Blos, 1967). First, at the object-relations level, adolescents transfer their primary emotional attachments away from parents and on to peer group members. The capacity to attain sufficient freedom from primitive parental identifications allows individuals to benefit from exposure to new role models and experiences without the influence of an overly critical superego (Bourne, 1978). Without this freedom, adolescents would experience significant internal conflict in situations where their needs and goals deviate from the dictates of early parental identifications.

At the second level, the intrapsychic, individuals free themselves of primitive parental identifications internalized during childhood and develop an increasingly stabilized and internalized capacity for self-regulation (Kohut, 1971). As individuals gain separation from parental influences, they often develop new coping resources to manage the demands that come with new experiences and challenges. The internalization of new regulatory functions moves individuals from reliance on external supports to reliance upon themselves as a source of evaluation and self-esteem (Blos, 1967).

Erikson (1959) moved beyond the traditional psychoanalytic views of self and identity to the currently accepted construct of ego identity development. He believed that individuals progress beyond a simple reintegration of early parental identifications to develop consistent and unique personal identities. This process focuses on relationships, knowledge gained from managing the demands presented by new experiences, and the notion of psychosocial reciprocity. Erikson suggested that ego-identity development necessitates that the experiences of childhood and adolescence be formulated into core beliefs about oneself. Individuals look at alternatives and make freely chosen commitments to those choices that seem most consistent with personal values, needs, interests, and skills. Exposure to new people, ideas, and experiences enables individuals to move beyond parental identifications to a position of personal choice and self-identification. Not exploring alternatives or not becoming independent of parental imperatives results in identity foreclosure.

Marcia (1966) extended and operationalized Erikson's concept of identity and presented evidence that identity development was not simply a matter of identity resolution or identity confusion, but rather a factor of exploratory behavior and commitment to personally relevant options across life domains such as career, ideology, and religion. Marcia believed
that individuals need to experience crisis in the form of being forced to choose among a series of meaningful alternatives to achieve their unique identities. He postulated that a person's identity status could be determined by examining for the presence or absence of crises. The four original categories were:

1. **Identity achievement**: Individuals have gone through a period of actively exploring meaningful career and ideological alternatives (crisis) and have made firm commitments to those options that provide feelings of continuity within themselves.

2. **Identity moratorium**: Individuals are actively engaged in exploratory behavior, but have not made any firm career or ideological commitments.

3. **Identity foreclosure**: Individuals have not engaged in exploratory behavior, but have made firm career and ideological commitments, typically in directions that would gain parental and societal approval.

4. **Identity diffusion**: Individuals have not engaged in exploratory behavior and have not made any firm career or ideological commitments.

In general, individuals in a state of identity foreclosure have been found to exhibit high levels of authoritarian and stereotyped thinking, an external locus of control, and low levels of autonomy, self-directedness, and moral development (Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, & Orlofsky, 1993).

**Sport participation and identity development**

If one accepts the premise that individuals are born with an innate need for effectance (White, 1963), it follows that sport provides a setting where many young people can satisfy this need and develop initial feelings of self-efficacy (Petitpas & Champagne, 2000). Sport participation is highly valued in many cultures and being a successful athlete is usually the most coveted status among junior and senior high school students in the United States (Weiss, 1995). When children participate in sports, they receive concrete feedback about how they compare to their peers. Whether through the informal team selection process that occurs in choosing sides in pick-up games or performance during school or community organized competitions, the feedback children receive about their sport competencies becomes magnified as they move through their school years. Individuals’ performances are reported in the media and the intrinsic rewards inherent in mastering one’s environment can become superseded by numerous external rewards and recognitions.

As adolescents advance through the various levels of competition, participation in organized sports becomes a process of survival of the fittest, with winning increasing in importance and playing time and opportunities to prove oneself becoming reserved for the more skillful performers. To remain successful, young athletes need to devote more time and energy to sport in efforts to maintain their levels of achievement, and they receive increased pressure from coaches to specialize in one sport (Côté, 2009). During high school, the external rewards associated with athletic success often take on increased importance and skilled performers become identified by their sports accomplishments. Although the literature suggests that there are many benefits to sports participation including better academic performance, increased self-esteem, and better interpersonal skills, there is the danger that too much emphasis on sport may be detrimental, particularly for athletes entering early adulthood (Petitpas & Champagne, 2000).
Elite athletes are frequently engulfed in sport systems that provide them with notoriety, financial support, and other privileges, but also demand large amounts of time, and enormous physical and psychological energy. High-level athletes typically devote at least 20 to 30 hours per week throughout the entire year preparing for and participating in their sports (Brown et al., 2000), making it is easy to imagine that many of them have little desire or time to engage in exploratory behavior.

Developmental theorists contend that exploratory behavior helps individuals acquire and internalize coping skills that enable them to become self-sufficient and prepared to manage various life challenges (Jordaan, 1963). Unfortunately, the structure of most high school and university sport systems promotes conformity and compliance rather than autonomy and independent thinking (Finch, 2009). Many athletes in pursuit of Olympic medals or professional sports careers often comply with team rules and coaches’ expectations, rather than engage in exploratory behavior (LeUnes & Nation, 1983).

Studies investigating the link between participation in intercollegiate athletics and identity foreclosure have yielded mixed results. For example, male intercollegiate athletes in revenue-producing sports have been shown to display lower levels of career maturity (Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996), career decision-making self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2000), and career planning (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987) than students in the general university population. Identity foreclosure, however, was not related to lower levels of career maturity in samples of community college (Kornspan & Etzel, 2001) or general intercollegiate athletes (Perna, Zaichkowsky, & Bochnec, 1996). The inconsistencies across studies may be a result of the variety of instruments and constructs that have been used to measure identity foreclosure.

Terms such as athletic identity, (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993), role experimentation (Miller & Kerr, 2003), and selective optimization (Danish, 1983) have all been used to describe athletes who have overidentified with the athlete role and have not balanced or invested energy in other academic or career pursuits. Although these terms are related to identity foreclosure, they are each separate constructs. For example, the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, 1993) assesses the strength and exclusivity of individuals’ identification with sport roles. Although the AIMS is positively correlated with identity foreclosure (Murphy et al., 1996), it does not measure the level of exploration and commitment that individuals report across the domains of career, religion, and politics that are the focus of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (OM-EIS; Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979). Studies using the OM-EIS have found that athletes display high levels of foreclosure when compared to nonathletes (Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993). Intercollegiate athletes were not higher in foreclosure in studies where other instruments (i.e., Modified Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory, Commitment to Career Choices Scale) were employed (Perna et al., 1996).

Another feasible explanation for the inconsistent findings on the relationship between identity foreclosure and sport participation can be found in studies of role conflict in student-athletes. Students participating in intercollegiate sports in North America may overidentify with the role of athlete during their first years at university and then begin to place more emphasis on academic and career concerns during their third and fourth years (Miller & Kerr, 2003). The notion that many student-athletes defer role experimentation until they reach the latter stages of their university careers has led some writers to believe that the link between foreclosure and sport participation may have been overgeneralized (Perna et al., 1996), and only those intercollegiate athletes who have a legitimate chance to play professionally would continue to focus exclusively on the athlete role.
Another consideration is the belief that there may be two types of foreclosure. Henry and Renaud (1972) suggested that some individuals who were unable to complete separation/individuation and internalize self-regulatory functions during adolescence could be classified as psychologically foreclosed. These individuals make unwavering commitments to parental- or societal-approved careers and ideological options to avoid identity crises, and this idealized sense of self becomes the central component of their intrapsychic defensive systems. Athletes who are psychologically foreclosed view their sport successes as the only means of maintaining parental acceptance and defend against threats to their ego-identities by avoiding people or situations that might challenge the salience of those identities. In contrast, some individuals make exclusive commitments to the athletic role because sport participation is providing a sense of identity and takes up the majority of their time and energy. These individuals satisfy their needs to establish an identity and sense of belonging through participation in sports resulting in no urgency to explore various life options. Henry and Renaud labeled the identity status of this latter group as situational foreclosure. Student-athletes in situational foreclosure would be more likely to transfer their emphasis away from sport if there were considerable evidence that they would no longer be able to maintain their athletic identities by competing or coaching.

**Obstacles in working with an athlete who is foreclosed**

Individuals who make premature commitments to sport roles may not initially experience any negative consequences from these decisions. Many of the most sought after careers require an early and exclusive commitment of time and energy. Problems arise for foreclosed individuals only when there are threats to their role identities. For example, a surgeon who has failed to engage in exploratory behavior may be highly confident in the operating room, but may lack the self-awareness and coping skills required to manage family issues at home. The surgeon’s confidence and competence is bracketed to the work role and the surgeon can avoid any feelings of self-doubt by simply doing more surgery. Athletes, however, almost always have briefer careers than people in most other occupations (golf being a possible exception), and they are also under constant threat of career-ending injuries or deselection. When most individuals are just establishing themselves in their careers, athletes are faced with the issue of sport career termination.

Coaches and the media reinforce athletes for their work ethic and commitments to improving their sports skills. Success in sports is often predicated on the belief that more is better, and slogans such as “no pain, no gain” adorn locker rooms and are programmed into the mindsets of many elite athletes. Therefore, athletes are not likely to self-refer for personal or career counseling, and many coaches are hesitant to encourage their athletes to engage in any outside activities that could take their focus away from sport.

Issues facing practitioners who work with foreclosed student–athletes include assisting them in managing role conflict and eligibility regulations. Student–athletes who do not engage in exploratory behavior frequently select career tracks that are not compatible with their interests, needs, or skills (Hansen & Sackett, 1993). They often seek out majors and courses that will not conflict with their athletic practice and game schedules, particularly during their first years in university when athletic concerns often supersede academic priorities. Boredom and a lack of interest are just two of the problems associated with the selection of non-personally relevant academic paths (Petitpas & O’Brien, 2008).
Assisting the foreclosed athlete

Many foreclosed athletes have little need or desire to seek out support services. Their strong and exclusive sport identities provide them with the work ethic and focus that enable them to excel in sports and avoid much of the anxiety and uncertainty that accompany establishing a personal identity. Consequently, programs or interventions to assist athletes who have foreclosed on their identities typically result from crises or are built into mandated programs.

A crisis can occur in foreclosed athletes when a severe injury or forced retirement poses a threat to the individual’s sport identity. When planning intervention strategies for athletes in crisis, it is helpful to assess their levels of commitment to sport roles and the meanings that they place on their current situations. Typically, this information can be gathered during the rapport-building phase of the counseling relationship and be used to determine if the person is in psychological or situational foreclosure (Petitpas, 2002). In cases where psychological foreclosure is evident, practitioners need to exercise caution and not challenge the efficacy of the strong and exclusive sport identity directly. The therapeutic relationship provides the emotional support that is frequently needed as the person goes through the ups and downs associated with disengagement from sport and establishing a new identity. The process of counseling can take on many of the same characteristics found when working through personality disorders and involves a long process of self-discovery, awareness, and feedback.

Coach-, athletic department-, or club-mandated workshops on career development and life skills provide another avenue to working with foreclosed athletes, who otherwise would have little motivation to participate in any type of self-awareness or life-planning activity. Programs such as the Athlete Career and Education program in Australia offer workshops to elite athletes on a variety of life skills including time management, job hunting strategies, résumé construction, and interviewing skills (Anderson & Morris, 2000). All of these experiences have merit, but the emphasis is often placed on decontextualized skills that have little immediate relevance for the athletes. Even though career development workshops can have positive effects on athletes’ career decision-making self-efficacy (Shiina, Brewer, Petitpas, & Cornelius, 2003), it is questionable whether these efforts will result in any concrete actions on the part of unmotivated attendees, particularly, if the underlying issues of motivation, identity, and transferability of skills are not the primary focus.

Kelman’s (1958) framework for examining how motivation influences the acquisition of skills can be a helpful tool for planning strategies to reach athletes. In this framework, athletes who participate in mandatory career development workshops to avoid sanctions or to gain coaches’ approval would be displaying a compliance level of motivation. Those individuals who attend to gain peer approval or social acceptance would be exhibiting an identification level of motivation. Both compliance and identification are external motives that rarely lead to lasting change. If athletes are to master skills or form new habits, they must have opportunities to explore and experience the benefits of new behaviors in meaningful contexts. Through these experiences, individuals begin to internalize the new behaviors and the motivation shifts from extrinsic to intrinsic.

When planning career development programs for athletes it is important to remain focused on what motivates them. Practitioners may use compliance- or identification-based strategies to gain athletes’ initial participation, but should structure the learning environment to facilitate a progression that allows athletes to create personal relevance through follow-up
over an extended period of time. For example, a mandated workshop on identifying transferable skills may initially focus on how specific skills are developed and used in sport contexts. Thus, the career development skills and knowledge to be learned by the athletes are situated in a meaningful context for the participants, sport. Because the context has personal relevance for the participants, they are likely to be interested and to reflect on and internalize potentially beneficial changes.

Athletes can also be motivated to participate in the career development process through identification strategies. Evaluation data from the United States Olympic Committee’s Career Assistance Program for Athletes revealed that using well-known former Olympians as part of the training corps brought credibility to the program content and attracted participants (Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992). Similarly, having recently graduated student-athletes participate in career workshops for intercollegiate athletes is likely to have a greater effect in comparison to career nights where local professionals recount their job achievements. Current student-athletes are more likely to identify with former athletic alumni, who have shared similar concerns, struggles, and transition experiences. Information-sharing networks of former athletes and ongoing support groups are two other methods for keeping the athletes thinking about their career development.

The main challenge for practitioners is to create opportunities that foster learning processes that help foreclosed athletes move from extrinsic motivation to the intrinsic motivation necessary to engage in exploratory behavior. The key to reaching this goal is the quality of the relationship that is established between the practitioner and the foreclosed athlete. Once a relationship has been established, the practitioner can begin to create and provide opportunities that are personally meaningful to the individual athlete. For example, the process of examining skills such as planning and goal setting in sport are transferable to the career development and decision-making process. The practitioner, in this instance, may capitalize on the strong relationship that has been established and work with the athlete to examine the transferability of these skills to other contexts.

Volunteering or taking service learning courses can provide new experiences that challenge athletes to examine career development. Athletes, however, have highly structured lives, and these experiences can be difficult to arrange. So what is the answer? It may simply come down to the quality of the practitioner/athlete relationship. Effective mentoring relationships (i.e., those that are based on empathy, high and positive expectations, and advocacy) can be instrumental in promoting self-awareness and future planning (Cornelius, 2006). Practitioners who are able to create solid mentoring relationships are most likely to facilitate the personal and career development of the student-athletes under their charge.

***Conclusions***

Although the term *identity foreclosure* was first connected to athletic participation in the 1970s (Petitpas, 1978) and is listed as one of 23 practice areas in the current proficiencies in sport psychology (American Psychological Association, 2010), little has been written about its development or assessment, particularly as it relates to athletes. The purposes of this chapter were: (a) to provide information about identity foreclosure in athletes, (b) to differentiate it from other similar constructs, and (c) to offer suggestions for planning and implementing intervention strategies with athletes who exhibit foreclosure. In general, the ability to differentiate between psychological and situational foreclosure will allow
practitioners to plan and deliver interventions that are most appropriate for each group. The defensive structure of the psychologically foreclosed individual presents numerous challenges for practitioners and typically requires them to devote considerable time, to display a lot of patience, and to be able to build strong working relationships before they are likely to see any progress on the part of the athlete. Situationally foreclosed athletes tend to be less defensive and rigid, and are likely to be open to exploring new options, if the information is presented in a personally relevant manner. See Box 30.1 for practical suggestions related to working with athletes in identity foreclosure.

**Box 30.1**

*Suggestions for practitioners working with athletes in identity foreclosure*

- Understand the role that sports participation plays in the identity of the athlete.
- Do not directly challenge the efficacy of an exclusive commitment to sport roles.
- Assess for situational versus psychological foreclosure.
- Understand the challenges that can be present when working with athletes who are foreclosed (e.g., bracketed self-confidence, external locus of control).
- Work with coaches and administrators to understand and plan appropriate educational strategies for athletes who display situational foreclosure.
- Establish strong counseling relationships with athletes in psychological foreclosure and assist them through a process of self-discovery, feedback, and awareness.

**References**


