

Elite athletes' experiences of psychological distress: A discursive analysis of  
athlete identity in contexts in which athletes are vulnerable to experiencing  
psychopathology

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## Summary

Elite athletes have been reported to experience higher rates of various psychopathology, with the stress of competing at elite levels reported to exacerbate existing pathology (Brewer & Petrie, 1996). In particular, athletes have been noted to be susceptible to experiencing anxiety and depression during the transition out of elite level sport (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; W. M. Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004), as well as being vulnerable to anxiety and stress during other transitions that they may encounter throughout their careers (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). Additionally, elite athletes have been shown to be at risk in relation to their bodies, with athletes reported to have a higher prevalence of eating disorders, sub-clinical disordered eating (Johnson, Powers, & Dick, 1999; Milligan & Pritchard, 2006; Sundgot-Borgen & Klungland Torstveit, 2004), and the Female Athlete Triad – a combination of disordered eating, amenorrhea and osteoporosis or osteopenia (Mendelsohn & Warren, 2010; Schtscherbyna, Soares, & de Oliveira, 2009; Yeager, Agostini, Nattiv, & Drinkwater, 1993), than non-athlete populations, as well as being more susceptible to Social Physique Anxiety (Haase, 2009).

Within the sport psychology literature that examines the incidence of psychopathology in athletes, the theoretical construct of 'athlete identity' has frequently been positively associated with athletes' experiences of distress, including in relation to transition difficulties (e.g., Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004), and the development of disordered eating (Jones, Glimtmeier, & McKenzie, 2005; Papathomas & Lavallee, 2006). Thus, within sport psychology athlete identity is considered to be a theoretically and practically important construct for understanding athletes' experiences (Brewer, 1993; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). However, within the extant sport psychology literature, identity has typically been conceptualised as athletes' level of identification with the athlete role and has traditionally been researched via questionnaire methods or content analyses of interview data. Such methodological approaches have been critiqued for being reductionist and overlooking complexity and detail (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003;

Locke, 2004; Wilkinson, 2000), while role theory approaches have been criticised for treating identity as stable and unchanging, and located within the individual (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998b). Thus, rather than treat identity as an inner identification or essence which then guides subsequent action and behaviour, the present research adopts a discursive psychological approach to exploring identity. From this perspective, identity is instead viewed as located within discursive practices and as produced, ascribed and accomplished within language (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998b; Davies & Harré, 1990; Edley, 2001). The aim of adopting an alternate approach is to build on the existing sport psychology literature exploring athlete identity and to offer new insights into athletes' identities and the regulatory work that such identity constructions might accomplish.

Discursive psychological approaches to research in sport psychology remain novel, with few previous studies having adopted such an approach. Discursive psychology has previously been utilised to reconceptualise and shed new light on other well researched areas within sport and exercise psychology, including attributions (Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2004), emotions (Locke, 2003), performing in 'the zone' (Locke, 2008) and exercise adherence (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010). The present research, likewise, aims to reconceptualise the concept of athlete identity in order to challenge existing theoretical assumptions in sport psychology and offer new insights into athletes' experiences and implications for clinical practice in working with athletes.

Given that identity has been linked with athletes' vulnerability to psychopathology and psychological distress, the concept of identity will be explored in arenas in which athletes are most saliently vulnerable to experiencing distress. Accordingly, in this thesis, identity is explored within the context of transition, particularly the transition out of elite sport, and in the context of body regulation, in which athletes may be vulnerable to experiencing distress about their bodies (Jones, et al., 2005; Malina, 1992; Yeager, et al., 1993).

Two different data types – media and institutional interactions – were explored in order to offer a broad insight into how identities are constructed and ascribed at a societal level and how such versions are reproduced by athletes and sport staff within the local interactional context. Thus, this

exploration also builds on debates about the value of conversation analytic approaches for exploring talk-in-interaction versus the use of eclectic and synthetic approaches to analysis of talk and text in order to explore the social world (see Schegloff, 1997; Wetherell, 1998). Study One of this thesis (reported in this thesis in manuscripts as two analytic chapters) examines media accounts of high profile athletes' retirements and comebacks to sport (subsequent to retirement), in order to explore how athlete identities are constructed and reproduced within accounts of transition. Within the media representations, athletes were constructed as necessarily driven by emotion and passion to compete in sport, yet retiring around sport was constrained by dominant versions of appropriate and inappropriate choices and actions for athletes. Accordingly, the regulatory work that dominant identity constructions accomplish was highlighted. Study Two (also reported in manuscripts as two analytic chapters) explores interactions occurring between athletes and exercise physiologists during routine practices of body regulation that took place within an elite sport setting. Within these interactions, dominant discourses, which constitute athletes' identities, were reproduced, with athletes and physiologists co-producing athletes as necessarily engaging in self-surveillance of their bodies and working to achieve ongoing improvement in body composition.

Thus, insight was gained into the social contexts in which athletes are vulnerable to experiencing distress. With identity constructions, come prescriptions for choices and actions and so identity can constrain and regulate behaviour (Burr, 1995). Thus, the regulatory work that identity constructions accomplish and the implications these then have for athletes' psychological and physical well-being was also examined. This thesis also offers contributions for clinical practice to promote athletes' psychological well-being. Broadly, too, this research contributes to the fields of sport psychology and the sociology of sport in informing research around athlete identity. Theoretical contributions to qualitative research are also offered and discussed.

## Declaration

I, Suzanne Cosh, certify that this submission is my own work and that it contains no material that has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. All work contained in the submission was initiated, undertaken, and prepared within the period of candidature. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying, subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968. I also acknowledge that copyright of published works contained in this thesis (as listed below\*) resides with the copyright holder of this work. I also give permission for the digital version of my thesis to be made available on the web, via the University's digital research repository, the Library catalogue, the Australasian Digital Theses Program (ADTP) and also through web search engines, unless permission has been granted by the University to restrict access for a period of time.

\*Cosh, S., Crabb, S., LeCouteur, A. & Kettler, L. (In Press). Accountability, monitoring and surveillance: Body regulation in elite sport. *Journal of Health Psychology*.

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Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

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