Identity Foreclosure, Athletic Identity, and Career Maturity in Intercollegiate Athletes

Geraldine M. Murphy, Albert J. Petitpas, and Britton W. Brewer
Springfield College

A study was conducted with 124 intercollegiate student-athletes at an NCAA Division I institution to examine the relationship between self-identity variables (i.e., identity foreclosure and athletic identity) and career maturity. Results indicated that both identity foreclosure and athletic identity were inversely related to career maturity. Significant effects of gender, playing status (varsity vs. nonvarsity), and sport (revenue producing vs. nonrevenue producing) on career maturity were observed. The findings suggest that failure to explore alternative roles and identifying strongly and exclusively with the athlete role are associated with delayed career development in intercollegiate student-athletes, and that male varsity student-athletes in revenue-producing sports may be especially at risk for impaired acquisition of career decision-making skills. The results underscore the importance of understanding athletic identity issues and exercising caution in challenging sport-related occupational aspirations in presenting career development interventions to student-athletes.

Because only a small percentage of college student-athletes advance to the ranks of professional sport (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986), it is important for student-athletes to prepare for other careers. Nevertheless, college student-athletes, particularly those in revenue-producing sports, have been found to lag behind their nonathlete college student peers in terms of career planning (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

A potential explanation for the reduced level of career maturity in student-athletes may be found by examining developmental theory. As individuals reach late adolescence, they are faced with the task of establishing their personal identity (Chickering, 1969; Erikson, 1959). As explained by Marcia, Waterman, Matteson, Archer, and Orlofsky (1993), identity development necessitates an active exploration...
of possible roles and behaviors, followed by a commitment to the occupational and ideological options that are most consistent with an individual’s values, needs, interests, and skills. It has been proposed that the commitment and exclusive dedication necessary to excel in sport may restrict student-athletes’ opportunities to engage in exploratory behavior (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990), which is critical for subsequent personal and career identity development (Jordaan, 1963; Super, 1957).

Individuals who make commitments to roles without engaging in exploratory behavior are said to be in a state of identity foreclosure (Marcia et al., 1993). Foreclosure may be brought on by the demands and expectations of the environment or may be a result of individual choice (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). Reviews of research on foreclosed men have shown them to be authoritarian, to be immature in moral and ego development, to have a low level of autonomy, and to have an external locus of control (Marcia et al., 1993; Petitpas, 1978). In college undergraduates (Blustein & Phillips, 1990), identity foreclosure also has been associated with a dependent decision-making style, in which responsibility for important decisions (e.g., career choices) is deferred to others.

Several authors have suggested that the physical and psychological demands of intercollegiate athletics, coupled with the restrictiveness of the athletic system, may isolate athletes from mainstream college activities, restrict their opportunities for exploratory behavior, and promote identity foreclosure (Chartrand & Lent, 1987; Nelson, 1983; Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). This notion has received empirical support in two studies that found upper-class student-athletes to be significantly more foreclosed than their nonathlete counterparts (Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993; Petitpas, 1981). Consistent with these findings and the theoretical propositions of Jordaan (1963) and Super (1957), research has shown that many student-athletes have restricted career and educational plans (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

In addition to identity foreclosure, another aspect of self-identity, athletic identity, may also be relevant to the career decision-making process in college student-athletes. Part of multidimensional self-concept, athletic identity consists of the cognitive, affective, behavioral, and social concomitants of identifying with the athlete role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). It has been suggested that many student-athletes either lack the time or interest to do career planning or view it as a threat to their athletic identity and their dream of being a professional athlete (Good et al., 1993; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). Accordingly, it has been hypothesized that individuals with a strong and exclusive commitment to the athlete role are less prepared for postsport careers than individuals less invested in the athlete role (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). In support of this argument, athletic identity has been inversely related to postsport career planning before retirement from elite amateur sport (Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1995) and ease of adjustment following sport career termination (Hinitz, 1989; Lavallee et al., 1995). Athletic identity also has been shown to be positively associated with identity foreclosure (Good et al., 1993).

Given the theoretical (Jordaan, 1963; Super, 1957) and empirical (Blustein & Phillips, 1990) links that have been established between identity development and career development, the primary purpose of this investigation was to assess the extent to which student-athletes’ levels of identity foreclosure and athletic identity were related to their level of career maturity. It was predicted that identity
foreclosure and athletic identity would be negatively correlated with career maturity. A secondary purpose of the study was to examine differences in identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity as a function of gender, playing status (varsity vs. nonvarsity), and sport in which they participated (revenue vs. nonrevenue). Although women have been found to have lower athletic identity than men (Brewer et al., 1993), no differences have been found between male and female athletes in identity foreclosure (Good et al., 1993) and career maturity (Blann, 1985; Sowa & Gressard, 1983). Based on previous research (Blann, 1985; Curry, 1993; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Petitpas, 1981), it was expected that identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity would be higher for varsity athletes and athletes in revenue-producing sports than for nonvarsity athletes and athletes in nonrevenue-producing sports.

Method

Participants

Participants were 124 intercollegiate student-athletes, 99 men and 25 women, who were enrolled full-time in an NCAA Division I university. Participants ranged from 18 to 24 years of age and represented football (n = 47, 37.9%), men's and women's basketball (n = 8, 6.5%), men's ice hockey (n = 6, 4.8%), field hockey (n = 1, 0.8%), wrestling (n = 1, 0.8%), men's and women's crew (n = 60, 48.4%), and men's swimming (n = 1, 0.8%). There were participants from each of the four classes: freshman (n = 61, 49.2%), sophomore (n = 36, 29.0%), junior (n = 12, 9.7%), and senior (n = 15, 12.1%).

Measures

Identity foreclosure was assessed with the Foreclosure subscale of the Objective Measure of Ego-Identity Status (OM-EIS; Adams, Shea, & Fitch, 1979). The OM-EIS is composed of 24 items, with responses made on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The Foreclosure subscale consists of 6 items (e.g., “I guess I’m pretty much like my folks when it comes to politics. I follow what they do in terms of voting and such.” and “I’ve never really questioned my religion. If it’s right for my parents it must be right for me.”). Adams et al. (1979) provided evidence of the internal consistency (Cronbach’s alpha = .76) and convergent validity of the Foreclosure subscale.

Athletic identity was assessed with the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). The AIMS is a 10-item instrument with possible responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree on a 7-point Likert-type scale. This instrument, which measures strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role, includes items such as “I have many goals related to sport” and “Sport is the only important thing in my life.” Support for the internal consistency (Cronbach’s alphas ranging from .80 to .93), test–retest reliability (r = .89 over a 2-week period), and construct validity of the AIMS has been reported (Brewer et al., 1993).

Career maturity was measured with the Attitude scale of the Career Maturity Inventory (CMI; Crites, 1978). The CMI Attitude scale assesses various aspects of the career decision-making process (e.g., decisiveness, involvement, independence,
compromise) and consists of 50 items in a true/false response format (Crites, 1978). Adequate stability \((r = .71\) over a 1-year period) and internal consistency (K-R 20 coefficient = .74) have been demonstrated for the CMI Attitude scale. Support for the content, criterion-related, and construct validity of the CMI Attitude scale has been reported (Crites, 1973).

Procedure
During a late spring semester academic support meeting for student-athletes, individuals who agreed to participate in this investigation completed an informed consent document, a brief demographic form, the OM-EIS, the AIMS, and the CMI. The questionnaires were administered by an academic athletic counselor at the university. Participants were instructed to follow the written directions provided for each questionnaire.

Results
Means and standard deviations were calculated for identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity. The scores, which are reported in Table 1, are similar to those reported for intercollegiate athletes in previous research with the Foreclosure scale (Good et al., 1993), the AIMS (Brewer et al., 1993), and the CMI Attitude scale (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987). When compared to norms for 12th-grade students on the CMI Attitude scale (Crites, 1978), the participants’ mean score of 32.21 placed them in the 27th percentile. The majority of participants \((n = 80, 65\%)\) scored below the 25th percentile for 12th-grade students, demonstrating that they were “possibly delayed or impaired in their career development” (Crites, 1978, p. 32). Cronbach’s alpha coefficients of .76 and .86 were obtained for the Foreclosure scale and the AIMS, respectively. Because of the template method used to score the CMI Attitude scale, in which total scale scores rather than individual item scores are tallied, it was not possible to compute an internal consistency coefficient for the CMI Attitude scale.

Pearson product moment correlations were calculated to assess the relationships among identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity. As hypothesized, identity foreclosure \((r = -.36, p < .005)\) and athletic identity \((r = -.31, p < .005)\) were both inversely related to career maturity. The correlation between identity foreclosure and athletic identity \((r = .11, p > .05)\), however, was not statistically significant.

Three separate exploratory MANOVAs were performed to assess the effects of gender, playing status (varsity \([n = 49]\) vs. nonvarsity \([n = 75]\)), and sport (revenue producing \([n = 58]\) vs. nonrevenue producing \([n = 41]\), with only men included in

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>(M)</th>
<th>(SD)</th>
<th>Range</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identity foreclosure</td>
<td>14.79</td>
<td>5.25</td>
<td>6–29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Athletic identity</td>
<td>49.56</td>
<td>10.18</td>
<td>20–70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career maturity</td>
<td>32.21</td>
<td>7.38</td>
<td>3–45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2  Descriptive Statistics for Gender, Playing Status, and Sport Comparisons on Identity Foreclosure, Athletic Identity, and Career Maturity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparison</th>
<th>Identity foreclosure</th>
<th>Athletic identity</th>
<th>Career maturity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>15.00</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>50.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>13.92</td>
<td>6.03</td>
<td>46.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Playing status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Varsity</td>
<td>16.30</td>
<td>5.24</td>
<td>53.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonvarsity</td>
<td>13.80</td>
<td>5.04</td>
<td>46.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revenue producing</td>
<td>16.37</td>
<td>5.13</td>
<td>51.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonrevenue producing</td>
<td>13.07</td>
<td>4.26</td>
<td>48.51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

this analysis) on identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity scores. Descriptive statistics for these analyses are presented in Table 2. Significant multivariate effects were obtained for gender, Wilks's lambda = 0.92, $F(3, 120) = 3.41, p < .05$; playing status, Wilks's lambda = 0.85, $F(3, 120) = 6.93, p < .001$; and sport, Wilks's lambda = 0.88, $F(3, 95) = 4.46, p < .01$. Univariate analyses showed that women ($M = 31.24, SD = 7.61$), $F(1, 122) = 8.98, p < .005$. Men and women did not differ significantly on identity foreclosure and athletic identity. Varsity athletes had significantly higher identity foreclosure scores, $F(1, 122) = 7.04, p < .01$, and athletic identity scores, $F(1, 122) = 13.39, p < .001$, than nonvarsity athletes. Nonvarsity athletes, however, had significantly higher career maturity scores than varsity athletes, $F(1, 122) = 8.43, p < .005$. Athletes in revenue-producing sports (basketball, football, and ice hockey) had significantly higher foreclosure scores, $F(1, 97) = 11.37, p < .005$, and significantly lower career maturity scores, $F(1, 97) = 4.54, p < .05$, than athletes in nonrevenue-producing sports. There was no significant effect of sport on athletic identity scores.

Discussion

Support was obtained for the hypothesis that identity foreclosure and athletic identity would be inversely related to career maturity in intercollegiate student-athletes. As indicated by the nonsignificant correlation between identity foreclosure and athletic identity, these two self-identity variables were independently associated with career maturity. This suggests that although they are both associated with inhibited career decision making, failing to explore alternative roles and behaviors and identifying strongly and exclusively with the athlete role are separate processes.

The negative correlation between identity foreclosure and career maturity is consistent with findings of previous research (Blustein & Phillips, 1990) and illustrates the importance of exploratory behavior for career development (Jordaan,
The belief that a narrow focus on sport is necessary for competitive success may be held by student-athletes and strongly reinforced by coaches whose job security is based on winning. As a result, sport administrators and coaches may be less likely to support external activities that would erode student-athletes' free time or distract them from a primary focus on sport. With significant time restraints and a belief that it is necessary to give maximum effort to sport, student-athletes may be less inclined to explore various occupational and ideological options (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988). Due to the significant effects of gender, playing status, and sport on identity foreclosure and career maturity, male varsity student-athletes in revenue-producing sports may be at particular risk for restricted career development. The higher level of career maturity displayed by women student-athletes relative to men student-athletes may support Josselson's (1987) belief that foreclosure is a more adaptive status for women than for men and may reflect the fact that there are fewer professional sport opportunities for women (Meyer, 1990).

The inverse relationship between athletic identity and career maturity replicates the finding of Lavallee et al. (1995) with a student-athlete sample and a more general measure of career planning. Thus, identifying strongly and exclusively with the athlete role may reduce examination of nonsport career possibilities. As hypothesized based on the results of Curry (1993), varsity student-athletes had higher levels of athletic identity than nonvarsity student-athletes. Differences in athletic identity as a function of gender and sport, however, did not emerge, suggesting that men and women student-athletes identify similarly with the athlete role (Good et al., 1993) independent of their sport's revenue status.

The descriptive statistics for career maturity are particularly alarming, as a substantial portion of the sample (65%) obtained values indicating possible delay or impairment in career development. By comparison, in Kennedy and Dimick's (1987) investigation of male football and basketball players at an NCAA Division I institution, only 33% of the participants had CMI Attitude scale (Crites, 1978) scores at or below the 25th percentile for 12th-grade students. The results of the current study further support the contention that, as a group, student-athletes tend to have restricted career plans (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Sowa & Gressard, 1983).

There are important limitations to this investigation that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, due to the cross-sectional design used, causal inferences cannot be made regarding the relationships among identity foreclosure, athletic identity, and career maturity. Second, the unequal distributions of participants across genders, classes, and sports may limit the generalizability of the results. Future research using longitudinal designs and more representative samples would help to clarify the developmental process by which student-athletes become delayed in acquiring career decision-making skills and to identify demographic and sport-related factors that moderate career development in student-athletes.

The results of this study have several implications for sport psychologists working in collegiate settings. Failure to formulate mature career plans may account for some of the difficulties athletes encounter when faced with disengagement from sport roles. In addition, evidence suggests that student-athletes who engage in career planning are likely to select more appropriate majors and do better academically than athletes who do not engage in career planning (Nelson, 1982). Unfortunately, at some institutions, student-athletes may receive little career-related support (Brooks, Etzel, & Ostrow, 1987; Remer, Tongate, & Watson, 1978).
Foreclosed individuals tend to avoid people who might challenge their career or ideological commitments (Marcia et al., 1993). Some men in revenue-producing sports may expect to extend their athletic careers into professional sports and therefore may be cautious about engaging in career planning, because doing so might call into question their dream of a professional sports career. Sport psychologists who are aware of the centrality of sport in the identity of student-athletes are less likely to challenge the professional sports dream directly. Career development programs for athletes that approach career planning as a contingency for postsport career retirement rather than as an alternative to the professional sport dream have been effective and well received (Nelson, 1982; Petitpas, Danish, McKelvain, & Murphy, 1992).

Sport psychologists with knowledge of developmental theory and an understanding of issues related to athlete identity are in a good position to help college athletic administrators develop and implement career- and life-planning programs for student-athletes. College students are faced with differing psychological tasks and challenges as they move from freshman to senior year (e.g., becoming autonomous, developing mature interpersonal relationships, managing emotions), and support programs should take these differences into account (Chickering, 1969). Suggested developmental programming options for college student-athletes are available elsewhere (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988).

References


**Acknowledgments**

This study is based on a master’s thesis completed by the first author under the supervision of the second author. We thank John Cox, Judy Van Raalte, and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of the manuscript.

*Manuscript submitted: June 1995  Revision received: March 1996*