The Career Transitions of High-Profile Student-Athletes: Identity, Role Engulfment, and Psychological Well-Being

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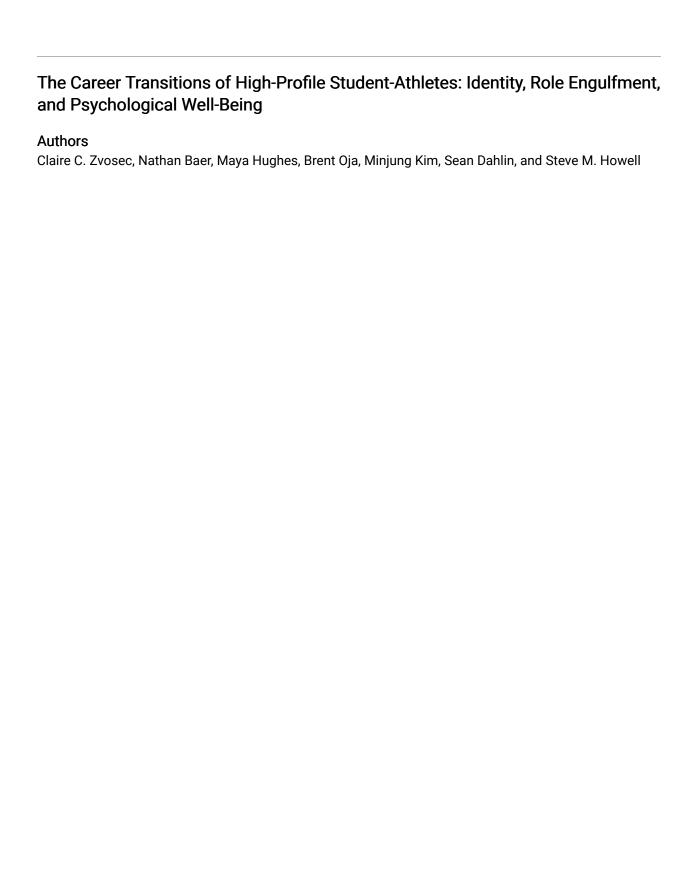
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A B S T R A C T

The purpose of this study is to build upon previous literature on the stages of career preparation of college student-athletes by examining identity, role engulfment, and psychological well-being as it relates to preparation for 'post-playing days' life. More specifically, the authors endeavored to examine the relationship between role engulfment and psychological well-being and how it affects post-athletic career transitions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 16 former Division I college football student-athletes who were previously student-athletes at 14 different Division I institutions. Utilizing identity, role engulfment, and psychological well-being as conceptual frameworks, this study discusses the how and why behind the experiences of high-profile student-athletes as they transition from athlete to their post-playing careers.

Keywords: psychological well-being, role engulfment, role identity, student-athlete

As the coverage of premier intercollegiate athletes has increased over time, a common misconception is that a high ratio of college student-athletes have the ability to 'go pro.' However, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), of the more than 480,000 student-athletes who compete in college athletics, less than 2% become professional athletes (NCAA, 2020). More specifically, of their estimated 73,712 college football participants, only 1.6% move on to play in the National Football League (NFL). Even then, the average NFL career is only 3.3 years, illustrating the challenge placed at the feet of high-profile college football players in their efforts to succeed professionally (Keim, 2016). While universities offer career preparation programs and opportunities, they often are "…sacrificed as student-athletes succumb to pressures from coaches and media to produce winning records and maintain eligibility" (Navarro & McCormick, 2017, p. 136). In turn, it can be difficult for them to explore their other interests and majors, as Petitpas and O'Brien (2008) explained, "…they also make it difficult for these individuals to change majors or enroll in programs that require afternoon labs or internships…many student-athletes will find themselves locked into a major that is incompatible with their interests or skills" (pp. 134-135).

Menke and Germany (2019) explained that "Retirement and transition pose a challenge for those who have constructed strong athletic identities, as this may invalidate the individual's self-concept and world assumptions, with lasting implications" (p. 19). However, in order to understand athlete identity, it is fundamental to grasp identity theory, which is premised upon an individual understanding of one's environment and oneself through a process of gathering information and interacting with others (Jenkins, 2008; Jones, 2006). Identity leads to social identity theory that stresses group dynamics and belonging based on social identity standards and feedback from people, thus informing one's identity within the group (e.g., an athlete on their sport team). Athlete identity, by extension, represents the level by which an athlete classifies

oneself as such (Brewer et al., 1993). Researchers have found that athlete identity declines or fades for competitive sport athletes for those who end their playing careers (Houle et al., 2010; Stokowski et al., 2019). The original transition away from competing in sport, however, can pose its challenges, including a former athlete's distress in search of a new identity (Park et al., 2012).

Individuals' role identity is engrained in preconceived notions about themselves. These notions are molded by a person's own interests and time periods in life, such as life-changing moments that affect short- and long-term career goals and objectives (Menke & Germany, 2019). Relatedly, role engulfment is when an individual embraces one's strengths in terms of identity, often abandoning other traits (Zvosec et al., 2019). Athletes and former athletes find it challenging to separate their athlete identities from who they are outside of their sport. The dangers of role engulfment have been studied within college athletics, displaying the damaging effects on basketball and football student-athletes' competing interests and energies (Adler & Adler, 1991; Richards & Templin, 2012). Often, the role conflict faced by student-athletes interferes with their primary role as students first, which can negatively impact their well-being.

Psychological well-being of student-athletes has been studied in the college athletics context from the disciplines of sport psychology (Roxas & Ridinger, 2016) and sport management (Kim et al., 2020). We relate psychological well-being as one's development of experiences leading to effective psychological functioning (Wright et al., 2007). For this study, the theoretical lens utilized is based on Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of psychological well-being, consisting of six sub-dimensions (i.e., self-acceptance, positive relationships with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, personal growth). With the more recent emphasis on mental health and well-being for athletes, a positive approach in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive organizations (Cameron et al., 2003; Luthans, 2002) has emerged. Additionally, we also examine the importance of college student-athletes' psychological positive well-being (Golby & Wood, 2016; Kim et al., 2020). Thus, the purpose of this study is to build upon previous literature on the stages of career preparation of college student-athletes by examining identity, role engulfment, and psychological well-being as it relates to preparation for 'post-playing days' life. More specifically, the authors endeavored to examine the relationship between role engulfment and psychological well-being and how it affects post-athletic career transitions.

Literature Review

In order to position the research questions underlying this study, an examination of literature related to identity theory, athlete identity, role identity and role engulfment, and psychological well-being will be detailed.

Identity Theory

Identity theory is a popular topic within sport management literature given its ability to help explain group formations (e.g., teams) and roles (e.g., athletes). Identity theory allows one to make sense of oneself or one's surroundings. Jenkins (2006) described the construct as "the human capacity – rooted in language – to know who's who (and hence 'what's what')" (p. 5). Moreover, one's held identity is not a thing or tangible property but is rather a process that is experienced. This process involves gathering information from others, including similarities *and* differences, to inform oneself who they are by interacting with others and subsequently using those interactions to form an understanding of who the individual is (Jenkins, 2008). Restated, our interactions with others, and having an understanding of who they *think* we are, helps us to better understand ourselves or as "selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed" (Jenkins, 2008, p. 40). This is an important consideration given the prominence of *social* identity theory, which emphasizes the belonging to groups of people, in that all identity standards (i.e., individual and group) require social feedback in order to inform one's identity. Thus, for one to realize an identity as an athlete, there would need to be social cues from the environment to inform the identity. For example, the presence of a coach or other athletes would reinforce that the individual is an athlete by a coach encouraging them to keep competing despite setbacks.

One's individual identity as an athlete likely develops through the realization of a role in athletic competition. An individual identity is viewed as internalized role expectations within the context of social settings or networks in that each person has a role within a specific social setting (Burke & Stets, 2009). Importantly, individuals are likely to have multiple individual identities (e.g., mother, athlete, educator), but these identities, or roles, are positioned along a hierarchy that is determined by an individual and one's social settings. In other words, some identities are more salient than others depending on social context (Burke & Stets, 2009). The aforementioned athlete role is a meaningful concept within the sport management discipline as it enables a deeper understanding of how athletes experience sport and the resulting influence on their willingness to continue to engage in sport and recreation.

Athlete Identity

One's athlete identity has been defined as "the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role" (Brewer et al., 1993, p. 237), which positions it as a role identity that is based on the specific duties and tasks of the role (Webb et al., 1998). The concept of athlete identity has evolved from a unidimensional (Brewer et al., 1993) to a multidimensional construct that contains public and private identities. The public dimension emphasizes external views of the individual as an athlete, and the private dimension is focused on the internalization of the athlete role, which then influences the self-definition (Webb et al., 1998). Scholars have noted how one's athlete identity declines with time, which is in alignment with available opportunities to participate in competitive sport. That is, once individuals stop playing sports, their athlete identity fades (Houle et al., 2010), and the same is true for individuals who were cut or removed from a team (Grove et al., 2004). Former athletes who went on to coach have been found to have higher levels of athlete identity than those who did not coach (Shachar et al., 2004), and managerial sport employees who were former athletes also may retain or reinforce some degree of their athlete identity (Oja et al., 2020). However, this transition away from competing in sport can be difficult. Many former athletes have struggled and experienced distress from the transition (Menke & Germany, 2019; Park et al. 2012). Although interventions such as coping mechanisms may ease this transition (Menke & Germany, 2019), there is a need to better understand the experiences of athletes and how their athlete identities are formed and reinforced.

Role Identity and Role Engulfment

Menke and Germany (2019) explained role identity by denoting that individuals have preconceived beliefs in themselves based on their interests and the paths they take in life. These role identities for each individual may change over time dependent upon life-altering events, which ultimately will affect their short-term and long-term career goals. These short-term and long-term career goals will act as guides for how individuals will act in preparing for their determined path to success. A comprehensive understanding of one's role identity will allow them to be self-aware and confident in decision-making aimed for the betterment of their future. Lally and Kerr (2005) found that "to develop mature career plans older adolescents must evaluate their needs, values, interests, and abilities through identity development" (p. 276). Role identities differ from role engulfment in a very particular way, in that role identities encompass numerous characteristics about an individual, whereas role engulfment is when an individual embraces one of their stronger identity traits often neglecting others (Zvosec et al., 2019). We see examples of the dangers of role engulfment in the study by Adler and Adler (1991) as they "observed that male basketball players invested so heavily in athletics and their athletic selves that they failed to seriously invest in other immediately available roles, notably the student role" (Lally & Kerr, 2005, p. 276). According to Menke and Germany (2019), "strong athletic identity and a high identity foreclose was negatively associated with the quality of career transition" (p. 18). As athletes further their careers, their identity as athletes continues to grow with their local and national exposure, which can act as a social construct that ultimately will lead to a difficult transition from their athletic life to their life outside sports.

Role-engulfed college student-athletes develop a narrow focus on skill development for their engulfed role (i.e., as an athlete; Adler & Adler, 1991). When role-engulfed individuals experience

role overload from multiple responsibilities competing for time and energy (e.g., the roles of student and athlete), it can be difficult to fully dedicate to competing interests (Richards & Templin, 2012). This is where role conflict may enter into effect when the responsibilities of college football athletes interfere with their responsibility as college students.

Psychological Well-Being

As one of the missions for the NCAA, student-athletes' well-being is closely linked to their physical, psychological, and social health. Regarding student-athletes' presence of wellness, psychological well-being has been widely studied across different disciplines such as sport psychology (e.g., Roxas & Ridinger, 2016) and sport management (e.g., Kim et al., 2020). Specifically, student-athletes' psychological well-being has been a recent area of exploration, as it is related to student-athlete pro-social behavior and flourishing (e.g., Kim et al., 2020). Psychological well-being refers to the overall effectiveness of an individual's psychological functioning developed by subjective experiences (Wright et al., 2007). Because psychological well-being is considered a global judgment, individual lives in the aggregate need to be understood as a whole rather than being influenced by certain situations (Cropanzano & Wright, 2001). A multidimensional model of psychological well-being was proposed by Ryff (1989) that includes six sub-dimensions: self-acceptance, positive relationship with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth.

First, as the most prominent feature of psychological functioning, self-acceptance is defined as "a central feature of mental health as well as characteristic of self-actualization, optimal functioning, and maturity" (Ryff, 1996, p. 15). Because self-acceptance is crucial for a positive evaluation of oneself and life, people with high self-acceptance recognize and accept their qualities well (Van Horn et al., 2004). Second, a positive relationship with others indicates the ability to not only have warm and satisfying relationships, but also shows a trustworthy nature that builds toward deeper friendships. In other words, a fully functioning person considers the welfare of others and seeks trusting interpersonal relationships by having strong empathy and intimacy (Ryff, 1996). Third, one's autonomy has been understood in connection with self-determination, independence, and regulatory behavior (Ryff, 1989). Based on such a sense of freedom, autonomous individuals are able to have an internal locus of evaluation and overcome social pressures (Rogers, 2012). Fourth, environmental mastery refers to one's ability to select and build suitable environments to personal needs and values (Ryff, 1989). Through active participation in and a sense of mastery of the environment, it is expected to promote positive psychological functioning. Fifth, purpose in life plays a crucial role in achieving the set goals and making individuals believe their lives are meaningful. Thus, a fully functioning person is able to have a clear direction among the different viable directions for maturity. Lastly, the concept of personal growth is a necessary aspect in today's changing world in that it requires individuals to adapt their attitudes and behaviors toward social contexts. By being open to new experiences and realizing one's potential to grow, a fully functioning person tends to value personal development and reflect more self-knowledge (Ryff, 1989).

In recent years, psychological well-being has been a topic of exploration amongst sport management scholars. Critically, this line of research aims to understand the effects of the monetized intercollegiate athletic experience on student-athletes' psychological well-being (Harris et al., 2021). Given the time commitment that often is associated with college athletics and the increasing incentive for institutions to prioritize the athletic success of their student-athletes, it should come as no surprise that role engulfment is a common trend found in the literature. For example, student-athletes often develop a strong connection—almost familial in nature—with their teammates, but often at the expense of their relationships with others (Anderson & Dixon, 2019; Dean & Reynolds II, 2017). In turn, this can affect their career transitions following their playing careers as they struggle to identify (1) areas of interest and (2) avenues of social support (Dean & Reynolds II, 2017; Kidd et al., 2018). With the addition of Name, Image, and Likeness policies further increasing the focus that student-athletes must place on their athletic craft (Harris et al., 2021), scholars have suggested that it may be necessary for intercollegiate athletic institutions to install narrative career counseling practices as a proactive measure to ensure that student-athletes are adequately prepared for their lives post playing career (Human & Human,

2016). In doing so, they may be able to mitigate the typical psychological well-being outcomes that are found in the literature when they experience role engulfment.

In the sport management discipline, the importance of psychological well-being has been increasingly emphasized since the 2010s. Through positive approaches to address mental health issues such as positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and positive organizational behavior (Luthans, 2002), organizational psychology scholars started considering the human development of life through actualizing human potential. For student-athletes, there have been various attempts to understand the process of augmenting their psychological well-being (Golby & Wood, 2016, Kim et al., 2020; Nwankwo et al., 2015). For example, Kim et al. (2020) empirically examined and confirmed that academic psychological capital played an important role in augmenting student-athletes' psychological well-being through education engagement. This study endeavors to build upon previous research on psychological well-being and their role as students and as athletes, and explores what may impact preparedness for their post-athlete careers.

RQ1: In what ways do identity and role engulfment impact the college athlete as they transition to "life after sport?"

RQ2: In what ways does role engulfment impact psychological well-being as it relates to post-athletic career transitions?

Method

After gaining IRB approval, semi-structured audio interviews were conducted via phone or Zoom with 16 former college football student-athletes from 14 different Division I institutions. Potential interviewees were contacted from a volunteer contact list internship database. Data was collected with interviewees who had been football student-athletes at Division I institutions in the following 12 states: California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, Texas, and Washington.

Procedures

Each interview lasted between 15 and 30 minutes and was audio-recorded. An interview guide was developed based on prior literature on career transitions for college student-athletes (Menke & Germany, 2019; Navarro & McCormick, 2017; Petitpas & O'Brien, 2008; Stokowski et al., 2019). These interviews encompassed questions related to personal background, dreams, and aspirations related to football, preparation process for leaving college, relationship with coaches, advisors, tutors, etc., and confidence going into the professional world. This study represents a diverse collection of age ($M = 37.0$ years), college institution, current job title, years in the National Football League (NFL) [six participants with no NFL experience, one current NFL athlete, and ten former NFL athletes who played an average of 7.1 NFL seasons], and college awards/accolades. Of the 16 former college football student-athletes, 11 played or currently are playing in the NFL, eight were drafted into the NFL, three went undrafted, 10 received college accolades of all-conference team or higher (e.g., conference player of the year, All-American, etc.), and two were awarded the Heisman Trophy. Of the 16 interviewees, six were between the ages of 20-30, five were between the ages of 31-40, three were between the ages of 41-50, and two were between the ages of 60-70. In addition, various job titles were represented including surgeon, NFL athlete, business owner, software developer, high school coach, and real estate investor/agent.

Analysis

In this study, thematic analysis was utilized to discover the career transitions of high-profile athletes. Braun & Clarke (2006) list the phases of thematic analysis as: "familiarizing yourself with your data," "generating initial codes," "searching for themes," "reviewing themes," "defining and naming themes," and "producing the report" (p. 87). In this study, four authors independently read and coded the data to develop preliminary themes before meeting to discuss, review, and name themes utilizing Braun and Clarke's (2006) six non-recursive steps for thematic data

analysis. Importantly, "through its theoretical freedom, thematic analysis provides a flexibility and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of the data" (p. 78). Thematic analysis can be identified in two ways: inductive and deductive. While questions asked during the interviews were prepared specifically to discover the career transitions of high-profile athletes, the authors utilized primarily an inductive approach since "Inductive analysis is therefore a process of coding without trying to fit into a preexisting coding frame" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 83).

Trustworthiness

Shenton's (2004) four recommendations for trustworthiness in qualitative research (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) were utilized. Specifically for credibility, Shenton (2004) recommended the adoption of well-established research methods (e.g., semi-structured interviews), debriefing sessions for data analysis, and triangulation. In interviewing participants from an array of NCAA Division I institutions, varied age ranges, and various professional football experience, the authors worked to engage in Shenton's recommendations for triangulation. Shenton articulated that triangulation may involve the use of a wide range of informants. This is one way of triangulating via data sources. Here, individual viewpoints and experiences can be verified against others and, ultimately, a rich picture of the attitudes, needs, or behavior of those under scrutiny may be constructed based on the contributions of a range of people … Where appropriate, site triangulation may be achieved by the participation of informants within several organizations so as to reduce the effect on the study of particular local factor peculiar to one institution. Where similar results at different sites, findings may have greater credibility in the eyes of the reader (p. 64).

In collecting data across multiple sites and across collegiate football programs, the authors worked to gain a rich understanding of the transition from playing days to post-playing days of Division I college football student-athletes by engaging in data triangulation. For Shenton's (2004) recommendation of transferability, findings need "to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it (the data), thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those they have seen emerge in their situations" (p. 69). The authors have worked to provide readers with a comprehensive understanding of the mindset college football student-athletes have on their aspirations regarding football and how that mindset affects their transition out of football. Shenton (2004) communicated that dependability and confirmability be accounted for by providing details on the data collection and analysis processes to give future researchers sufficient information to show that the findings were a result of the data collection processes.

Results

Upon analysis of the data, the following themes were established: over-salience of athlete role, wherein there was a focus on sport over other academic and career planning pursuits; and the engulfment and structure of sport led to structure in life and enhanced leadership skills. This section will explore these findings with examples from participants' own words, establishing a foundation for later discussion.

Over-Salience of Athlete Role: A Focus on Sport Over Other Academic and Career Pursuits

Interviewees explained their drive and ambition to continue playing football in the NFL because, for them, that is how they would reach their ultimate goals and achieve success. They admitted to their tunnel-visioned focus on football while also having an awareness that football would not last forever. Many detailed that this hyper-focus on football was the key to having a successful college career and establishing potential opportunities in the NFL. Based on their responses, they would not change their behavior or focus on football while in college if it meant they earned a chance to play in the NFL. As Interviewee 1 stated: "I lost sight of everything else, which I think you have to do to achieve that level of success in football."

Many of our participants, as exemplified by Interviewee 3 below, discussed a desire to have greater life exploration while they were in school:

I wish that we were able to have more conversations about the real world and about what to expect and how to handle these sorts of things beyond the game. Because I just feel like coaches and all these different people that you deal with so regularly are so fixated on it and on the game and on the strategy and what you have to do for the week, that we sometimes miss the bigger picture.

Building off of this notion, some participants suggested that there was little care afforded to them as anything other than student-athletes: "You're just cattle, you really are. It's just 'we want to get the most out of you'" (Interviewee 8). When asked if they were encouraged by their coaches and members of the football staff to pursue interests outside of football, numerous participants mentioned that their coaches were just as hyper-focused on football as they were, if not more. However, in that same vein, participants did not blame their coaches nor feel a negative connotation toward them. Instead, they understood the tunnel-vision and implemented it on themselves. Interviewee 3 explained his experience with the tunnel vision of his coaches: "I don't think anyone was trying to do any harm by me. You know, I think that all that's on their minds is football, football, football. And they want you to be the best football player you can be."

Based on the participants' answer to this question, it seems like the hyper-focus of the coaches was for a different reason than the hyper-focus of the players. The idea was introduced by Interviewee 8 as he said:

I want to maximize you so that we win games so that I get the bonus, I get promoted…and I care about you graduating but that's because I probably have a bonus tied to it and because it helps for recruiting for the next 5-star athlete.

Interviewees articulated that the time they dedicated to sport directly inhibited their ability to participate in career development and exploration opportunities afforded to their peers:

There were job fairs, but I didn't ever participate in them. I was just a football player, and I didn't even have time to do it, but I know some of my fellow [non-athlete] students, they went to job fairs and things like that (Interviewee 13).

This indicates that while participants believed they benefitted through increases in time management skills, the necessary time management prioritization strategies minimized their capacity to consider their education from a long-term perspective. Instead, it was focused on the moment through the lens of completing the tasks necessary to participate in athletics while also completing their degree.

The interviewees went on to explain their reasonings for not taking advantage of the career planning programs their institution offered. Some justified their decisions by saying they did not have enough time in the day due to their class and football schedule. However, several explained this "can't take the foot off the gas" mindset. Interviewee 3 went into detail of this mindset by saying:

The moment you stop thinking about football, the moment you take your eyes off of football and stop focusing on football, kind of seems to be the moment you slip up. And maybe that's the day your career starts to take a downward spiral…The moment you take your eyes off of it, you know, it crushes you.

Though this mindset may be good for them as far as preparing them for the next level of football, it hinders them dramatically at developing pursuits outside football. Interviewee 8 agreed as he said: "It [career planning activities] wasn't mandatory, but I thought it should have been required. What you do is you end up graduating and you get caught with your pants down." Many of the interviewees lamented that they wished they would have taken advantage of the career planning programs or internships that were offered because they felt 'stuck' once football ended. For example: "So, yes there were other options, opportunities, and I just didn't really pay attention that much. I don't think a lot of college players do because most of them think that they're going to the next level" (Interviewee 1).

These findings suggest participants felt as if their institutions only valued them for their ability to contribute on the field, resulting in a minimized focus on their academics and post-career readiness. Some even indicated their intercollegiate experience was wholly inadequate at preparing them for life outside sport competition:

> You're really insulated I would say. I feel like college life is the intro to adult life but not the real thing. Once you get out and you're truly on your own and you don't have an academic advisor or coach or somebody that you can call that can help you with situations, you've got to kind of figure that out on your own (Interviewee 10).

As such, participants sometimes felt that even with the applicable life skills sport participation established, they were underprepared for life outside athletics because of the hyper focus on the athletic competition portion of their intercollegiate experience. Thus, intercollegiate sport participation was not inherently beneficial, but rather beneficial as a byproduct of the student-athletes' ability to derive value from skills they deemed applicable outside the sport context.

The Engulfment and Structure of Sport Led to Structure in Life and Enhanced Leadership Skills

Throughout their interviews, many participants discussed the value of sport in the development of their persistence, time management, and leadership skills:

> [I gained] the fortitude that comes from just repeated adversity and things like that. Being able to lean back and be ok with dealing with setbacks and losses…If you deal with setbacks at a high level, you won't spend as much time [on tasks] (Interviewee 11).

In this sense, the mental fortitude—and enhanced psychological well-being—that developed from participation in sport carried over to this participant's work in the real world, allowing him to be more productive and responsive to necessary changes. Similarly, Interviewee 1, who was in the midst of a career in real estate, highlighted the relationship between persistence and maintaining focus on long-term goals:

> Some days you are not going to want to wake up and go look at a bunch of properties, but that mental toughness will get you through those days that you don't want to do that part of the job, and those are the days that you're going to grow the most.

Interviewee 12 echoed this sentiment in discussing the value of hard work in general: "The harder you work, the better you train; the more focused you are, the better results you're going to get." Thus, participants utilized the toughness taught to them through sport participation to maintain their focus and work level regardless of the challenge of a respective task. In turn, they felt a greater sense of self-acceptance, purpose in life, and personal growth that they carried with them in their post-athletic careers.

When discussing their preparation for the workforce, participants often cited that sport provided them with the skills to work in a team: "[Hiring managers] want former athletes who display a work ethic and understand how to work within a team environment" (Interviewee 10). This participant went on to say that this ability to work in team environments—and the ability to develop positive relationships with others—is just one of the many reasons why former athletes are desirable candidates on the job market. Building further off this point, Interviewee 3 highlighted his experience as a former student-athlete, who was part of a diverse team:

> I think one of the great things about being a collegiate football player was learning not only just about people of different backgrounds and different race and just people from all different places beyond that, but working with and alongside them. Because like I mentioned, being from such a small town and having a pretty basic All-American experience, if you will, it was very different from that of many of my teammates and it's not something that I think I would have had the opportunity to experience had I not been a football player at the collegiate or professional levels.

In this way, being engulfed as a student-athlete impacted psychological well-being more specifically in relation to the ability to develop positive relationships with others, self-acceptance, and personal growth. This, in turn, helped them as they transitioned to their post-athletic careers.

In a similar sense, participants not only felt their sport experience enhanced their teamwork skills, but also their ability to lead those teams effectively: "I think the leadership skills are something that's just really important. Getting a team to work together and be on the same page, that's where I mean like football and like business connect" (Interviewee 5). This suggests that the leadership skills attained through sport participation are applicable to those leadership traits that define successful business leaders. Further, some participants indicated that leadership was their most well-developed skill that sport provided: "Leadership and the ability to lead in the position is

definitely the top skill that I learned" (Interviewee 7). This indicates leadership is a skill that also is heavily practiced in sport environments, and therefore translates more seamlessly into other organizations.

Many of our participants discussed how navigating the conflicts between their roles as students and athletes strengthened their time management skills post-career. In particular, they discussed how this dynamic forced them to place significant value on their own time:

> I got a clock on everything. If it's not paper, on the schedule, it's in my brain. My whole life is regimented. So now in the business world, I feel like I'm not productive if I don't have a schedule, so I kind of implement that mentality of just from years and years of doing this time scheduling (Interviewee 13) .

In this way, participating in athletics forced interviewees to engulf their lives around sport, in turn causing them to build strict schedules for themselves from a young age. Further, some participants learned to recognize that the most important things in their lives were those that required the greatest time commitment: "If something was important to me, I would definitely take the time to prepare for it and make sure I knew the ins and outs, ups and downs of things that could have a negative and positive" (Interviewee 2). Participants thus learned to both manage their time, to do so with efficiency, and to focus on their most important responsibilities.

Generally speaking, participants believed this scheduling practice during their sport participation was easily transferred into their post-career ventures. Interviewee 10 illustrated this in saying:

> It really showed me that you can do multiple things, and it's really translated into my after-football life now trying to juggle all these different things at once, because you can really now set your mind to being successful you don't have to limit yourself to just whatever it is that you're thinking about that moment.

In this way, participants recognized the experience of being pulled between the needs of two different roles in student and athlete helped them learn to manage roles effectively.

Discussion

This study was designed to examine the relationship between role engulfment and psychological well-being and how it affects post-athletic career transitions. Role identity is how one sees oneself based on their individual characteristics and traits (Menke & Germany, 2019). In the context of this study, role engulfment expresses the idea that college football student-athletes identify more with their role as an athlete than they do as a student. The psychological well-being of college football student-athletes is based on six components of human actualization: autonomy, personal growth, self-acceptance, life purpose, environmental mastery, and positive relatedness (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). Based on findings from this study, role engulfment was an important aspect in the lives of the interviewees during their collegiate football careers. The hopes of moving on to the professional level often took precedence over their time commitment to academics, in many ways echoing the role engulfment of coaches found in Zvosec et al. (2019). In particular, we found this notion as our interviewees began to reveal that there were career-planning programs available to them; however, they decided not to take advantage of these opportunities due to engulfment in their football role.

Furthermore, Jenkins (2008) highlighted how interactions with others can help define and perpetuate one's identity. Findings demonstrated the ways in which interviewees, through their interactions with others, helped establish and further develop their identity as a football athlete taking precedent. Social cues from the environment helped perpetuate their identities, as interviewees indicated they could not "take the foot off the gas" because that is when they would lose focus and fall behind in their football pursuits. Many interviewees discussed they had other interests outside football, but they did not feel like that could remove focus from football without it hindering their football career.

Based on the findings of this study, most college football student-athletes indicated high levels in the area of environmental mastery as it related to their athletic development and identity. This resulted in a mastery of their role engulfment as an athlete. They were "able to choose or create contexts suitable to personal needs and values" (Ryff & Keyes, 1995, p. 727) as it relates to pursing their goals on the football field. Because of their mastery of football, they became

"unaware of surrounding opportunities" (p. 727) outside football. Moreover, role expectations (in this study, roles emphasized by coaches and the football environment as a whole) have a dramatic impact on identity development (Burke & Stets, 2009).

Once athletes reach competitive levels of football to the extent of Division I and the NFL, they may fixate on their identity as an athlete. By doing so, this enables the athletes to become engulfed in the idea that being an athlete and focusing on their craft always should be their top priority. This is where the term "tunnel vision" tends to be common nomenclature for athletes competing at the highest level. By using this "tunnel vision," the interviewees were able to obtain high levels of environmental mastery on the football field. Bringing confidence, demanding excellence, and striving to become the greatest are the stepping stones to environmental mastery relevant to football. However, for most of the interviewees, there was an opportunity cost. In exchange for athletic rewards were opportunities to expand their knowledge outside football, for example, not being able to attend career fairs their institutions held due to their rigorous student-athlete schedules. The area of self-acceptance varies for college football student-athletes as they transition from the role of athlete to post-athlete. Personal growth is an area college football student-athletes seem to continue to get better at once they leave college. While in college, they see potential growth and development as far as their role as an athlete. Once they reach the transition point of athlete to post-athlete, they also seem to see areas of growth outside their identity as an athlete, whether this point comes directly after college or after their professional days.

Conclusion

Authors endeavored to examine the relationship between role engulfment and psychological well-being and how it affects post-athletic career transitions. Self-acceptance of the salient athlete identity seemingly had a dichotomous impact on psychological well-being in that it was good for a focus on environment mastery and transferable skills like persistence and leadership, while this salience also seemingly hindered interest in career planning for "life after football." Interviewees indicated their purpose in college (focus on football) helped with identification and meaningfulness. Some skills borne of this salient focus (i.e., persistence, leadership, and time management) were transferable skills post-playing career but did not help with a blunted focus on specific non-football exploration while in college. The chance for personal growth and reflection upon athlete identity as a collegiate student-athlete particularly was interesting, as all interviewees were out of college and seemed quite reflective, self-aware, and self-knowledgeable about the impact of their student-athlete experiences. In the words of Jenkins (2008), "selfhood is thoroughly socially constructed" (p. 40). Interviewees in this study constructed their selfhood primarily through role expectations from (a) themselves, (b) coaches, and the (c) environment of college football that seemingly perpetuates and enables engulfment in the athlete role. Seeing the arc of personal growth of these high-profile athletes as they transitioned from role-engulfed football athletes to their post-playing days was important, as their purpose in life shifted as they transitioned away from football. Therefore, although certain interviewees from the study felt their 'tunnel vision' led them to successfully perform in competition, it begs the question whether role engulfment, influenced by their coaches and college football context, was best for their overall psychological well-being.

Although the prior discussion of role engulfment for our interviews may appear inherently negative as they seemingly became "tunnel visioned" in their pursuit of athletic success, interviewees indicated they possessed a positive mindset about their role engulfment as college athletes. Through role engulfment for their passion for sport, they honed beneficial skillsets related to developing positive relationships with others, self-acceptance, purpose in life, and personal growth that they carried with them in their post-athletic careers. Practically speaking, a continued nuanced approach that recognizes both the pitfalls (e.g., not taking full advantage of career preparation programs; lack of pursuit of interests outside of sport) and benefits (e.g., time management, self-acceptance, purpose in life; the ability to develop relationships with others) of the interconnectedness between a role-engulfed athlete and their psychological well-being as it relates to post-athletic careers is warranted. Practitioners—whether that be coaching staff, student-athlete support staff, or professional peers/mentors in athletes' post-playing careers—need to

balance the dichotomy of the role-engulfed lives of athletes, wherein athletes seemingly were siloed with lacking career development and professional relationship development outside their athlete "bubbles," but developed relevant, practical, post-career skills like persistence, the ability to develop relationships with diverse groups, environmental mastery, and purpose in life. Most applicably, it would behoove athletic directors to continue to work to create a departmental culture in which personal and career preparation along with professional development are prioritized to their student-athletes, even as they likely will continue as role-engulfed athletes.

As part of role engulfment, being a student-athlete impacted psychological well-being in relation to the ability to develop positive relationships with others, self-acceptance, and personal growth. The aforementioned aspect of the ability to develop positive relationships with others is particularly interesting, as they were engulfed as student-athletes in a manner where they mostly only interacted with other student-athletes, teammates, and coaching staff. However, having interactions and developing relationships with teammates of different backgrounds honed a skillset that was relevant and helpful post-playing career (i.e., the specific sub-dimension of psychological well-being related to developing positive relationships with others) that helped them with their post-athlete career transitions and professional (non-athlete) career pursuits.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

As with other research studies, this study has its limitations. For one, investigators did not talk to interviewees as they were transitioning from their playing days to their post-playing days. As a result, interviewees were required to recall experiences that may have occurred years ago. In addition, only one collegiate sport (football) was investigated. Furthermore, this study's interviewees all were from Division I football programs. Future research should focus on other sports to see if levels of role engulfment, role identity, and psychological well-being could have differed. Additionally, future research should consider looking more into specialized programs that have encouraged more broad-based career transition efforts. Prospective research should encompass a large sample pool by incorporating college football student-athletes from Division II, Division III, NAIA, and junior college. Lastly, the nuanced interconnectedness between role engulfment—and how oftentimes it can be considered negative—and enhancements to psychological well-being should be explored further as a means to better understand how the seemingly inevitable "role engulfed" life of high-level collegiate athletes can be beneficial both to their roles as athletes but also as meaningful skillsets that are relevant when they eventually transition to post-athletic careers.

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