Influence of Sport Peers on Female Adolescent Athletes

**Social self:**
Personal characteristics that become apparent through interactions with peers

**Psychological self:**
Personal characteristics that exist within athletes' own frame of mind

**Physical Self:**
Development of personal body image

**Influence of Sport Peers on Female Adolescent Athletes**
The Influence of Peer Groups in Organized Sport on Female Adolescents’ Identity Development

Ellen MacPherson, M.Sc.*, Gretchen Kerr, Ph.D., & Ashley Stirling, Ph.D.

Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education

University of Toronto

Corresponding Author:
Ellen MacPherson
416-559-7794
e.macpherson@utoronto.ca
55 Harbord St.
Toronto, Canada
M5S 2W6
The Influence of Peer Groups in Organized Sport on Female Adolescents’ Identity Development
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Introduction

Personal identity is referred to as “a well-organized conception of the self, consisting of values and beliefs to which the individual is solidly committed” (Berk, 2010, p.314). A personal identity can be considered a collection of distinctive characteristics, such as intelligence or confidence, which makes each person unique in relation to others (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). While some researchers have explored domain-specific identities (e.g., athletic, gender, ethnic, social identities), which are valued in their own right, this study focused on global self-identity, which can be considered the integration of these domain-specific identities to create a broader personal identity (Goossens, 2001). Although identity is thought to change throughout the lifespan, adolescence is widely accepted as a critical stage for identity development (Erikson, 1968; Josselson, 1987; McCabe, Roberts, & Morris, 1991).

The process of personal identity development in adolescence involves various changes, including cognitive, emotional, social, and physical modifications of the self (McCabe et al., 1991). Adolescents who navigate identity challenges well tend to have higher self-esteem, achieve a higher level of moral reasoning, discover unique talents, create meaning in their life, and recognize future possibilities (Deaux & Burke, 2010; Kroger, 2007). Adolescents who do not resolve identity challenges or resolve them negatively, may experience academic challenges, organizational concerns (e.g., time management), negative feelings (e.g., hopelessness), and/or issues with substance abuse (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2005).

Adolescence is also marked by a significant shift in loyalty and closeness from family to peers (Josselson, 1987). Membership in a peer group fulfills the desire to feel
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

connected to others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), provides an environment for sharing personal experiences and receiving encouragement and feedback about oneself (McCabe et al., 1991), and serves as a “reference for testing new identity related skills” (Kroger, 2007, p.54). Membership in a peer group is conceptualized across three levels of social complexity, including, interactions (i.e., behaviours of two people engaged in conversation for a period of time), relationships (i.e., a sequence of interactions engaged in by two or more people who are familiar with one another), and groups (i.e., multiple individuals who interact and tend to influence one another; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006).

Despite the significance of personal identity development in adolescence and the role of peer groups in this process, this area has not been explored in the extant sport literature. However, peer groups have been recognized as an influential social agent in the sport and physical activity experiences of youth. Peer groups have been studied in relation to peer acceptance (e.g., status and popularity), and friendship (e.g., dyadic relationships; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), and have been associated with various sport-related outcomes, including, intrinsic motivation, increased commitment and potential talent development, and perceived physical competence, as well as, conflict resolution skills, companionship, and teamwork (e.g., Bruner, Eys, & Turnnidge, 2013; Chan, Lonsdale, & Fung, 2012; Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo, 2008; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006). Further, scholars have also explored links between group norms, team cohesion, and performance (e.g., Bruner, Carreaux, Wilson, & Penney, 2014; Carron, Brawley, & Widmeyer, 1998), as well as, social identities of youth athletes, which have been associated with an increased likelihood of prosocial behaviour (Bruner, Boardley, &
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Côté, 2014; Nezlek & Smith, 2005). In spite of recommendations to study the relationship between personal and social identities of youth athletes (Bruner, Dunlop, & Beauchamp, 2014), and the potential role of peers in sport on the development of global self-identities (Smith, 2003), research on personal identity is lacking.

Considering the importance of personal identity development in adolescence, the significance of peers in this development for females, and the paucity of research surrounding this developmental process in sport, this study sought to investigate the influence of peers in sport on the personal identity development of female adolescents.

Consistent with this research purpose, narrative inquiry was chosen as the methodological approach for this study. Narrative inquiry has emerged in the social sciences as a qualitative methodology that centers on the personal and cultural realities constructed by individuals through the telling of stories (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). This approach directs attention to what each story depicts, such as, the plot, context, or characters, and/or how these stories are told (Chase, 2011; Sparkes & Smith, 2014, p.131). This methodology is relevant for identity development research as the construction of the self and formation of identity through personal stories is considered a core aspect of narrative inquiry (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Narrative stories are also often created through relational networks, which suggest that one individual does not typically construct narratives by him/herself (Smith & Sparkes, 2012). Instead, narratives are perceived to be shaped by those involved in the experiences described in the stories (Bach, 2007). This relational significance supports the use of narrative to explore the influence of peers on identity development in female adolescents.

Methods
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Paradigmatic approach

This study was conducted from a social constructivist paradigm, which emphasizes meaning-making on a personal level (Daly, 2007). From this standpoint, knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and the participant, and is viewed as subjective, conditional, and located within a particular context (Daly, 2007). This paradigmatic approach aligns well with narrative inquiry, which emphasizes the individuality of research participants, acknowledges each story is co-constructed and subject to change, and recognizes the context in which each story is shared (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). These criteria are consistent with a social constructivist ontology, which considers realities as multiple and informed by the lived experiences of participants (Creswell, 2013). A social constructivist paradigm is relevant for the study of identity development as identities tend to be modified and developed across time relative to individual context and personal perspective (Hewitt, 1997).

Theoretical Perspective

Erikson’s (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development was chosen as the guiding framework as it incorporates the development of physical, emotional, social and cognitive facets of the self throughout stages of the lifespan, from infancy to late adulthood. For each stage, a set of developmental tasks/skills are considered important for one’s mastery of the environment and navigating through the challenges of the stage. The major challenge confronted by adolescents is identity development, which can be supported or facilitated through five developmental tasks, including, physical maturation, emotional development, peer group membership, formal operations, and initiation of romantic/sexual relationships (Erikson, 1968). In addition to outlining the developmental
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

1. tasks of adolescence, Erikson’s (1968) theory addresses the focal aspects of identity formation, including, expected behaviours and dynamic relationships (Newman & Newman, 1995).

2. Some researchers have criticized Erikson’s theory for being out-of-date and established on universal positivist inferences (Gergen, 1994; Kvale, 1992; Martin & Sugarman, 2000), however, Hoare (2013) refutes these claims by indicating that Erikson has recognized that each individual has unique group and personal identities that are influenced by various social aspects, opportunities (or lack thereof), and diverse cultural practices. From this perspective, Erikson’s theory incorporates the importance of interaction between the person and his/her environmental influences across time (Kurtines, 1998). This theory broadly influenced the conceptualization of the study, development of the interview guide, and interpretations of the stories.

Participants

The personal identity development stories of eight female athletes between the ages of 13 and 17 years (M = 14.8) were included in this study. Athletes were recruited until data saturation was reached (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For this study, data saturation was considered to be the point at which broad themes with diverse examples were emerging from participant interviews. Female athletes were chosen as the focus for this study because they tend to derive a substantial part of their identity through the relationships they have with their peers (Josselson, 1987). Further, athletes were included based on their active engagement in competitive organized sport, outside of the school environment. This sport participation inclusion criterion was chosen because extra-curricular competitive sport requires a more substantial commitment to training,
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

competing, and travelling together as a team, thus providing an appropriate environment in which to study peer relations. The participants represented both individual and team sports, including, rock climbing, gymnastics, lacrosse, martial arts, equestrian, rowing, soccer, and hockey, and the level of competition within their sports ranged from recreational to international level. All participants competed in their sport for a minimum of one year. It is important to note that the athletes’ stories focused solely on the influence of female sport peers. Due to the age of the participants and the personal nature of this study, consideration was given to the potential vulnerabilities of the participants, such as, sensitivities related to sense of self, body-image, or interpersonal challenges. To ensure participants felt comfortable at all times, interactions were approached in a sensitive manner and communicated in a way that was best suited for the emotional state of the participants. Further, participants were provided with opportunities for breaks from the interview if necessary, and could end the interview at any time.

Recruitment

This study was approved by the institution’s Research Ethics Board. To recruit participants, sport program administrators were contacted and asked for e-mail referrals or meetings with athletes. In response to these requests, information sessions were held with groups of female athletes to discuss their potential participation. Each athlete who agreed to participate was required to read and sign a Letter of Assent, as well as, provide the Letter of Consent signed by her parent or guardian.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study included two components: photo-elicitation and individual semi-structured interviews. While presented separately, it is important to
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

emphasize that these aspects of data collection were not mutually exclusive – rather, one informed the other.

**Phase One: Photo-elicitation**

Photo-elicitation was chosen as the first phase of data collection as it is participant-led and contributes to the shared construction of knowledge. Photo-elicitation has been recognized as a valuable research method, particularly for use with youth participants (Strachan & Davies, 2015) as it serves as an opportunity for meaningful engagement in the research process (Azzarito, 2013). This method helps to stimulate conversation between a researcher and participant (Lapenta, 2011), assists in building rapport, developing trust, and augmenting participant engagement in the interview (Collier & Collier, 1986; Cook & Hess, 2007; Lapenta, 2011). Specific to narrative research, photographs are perceived to contribute an additional layer of meaning in stories (Bach, 2007). Phoenix (2010) ascertains that existing sport research has generally overlooked the use of visual methods, despite the well-documented potential for these methods to enhance researchers’ knowledge of social contexts.

The first step for this phase of data collection began with individual meetings with participants. During each meeting, the lead researcher shared the purpose of the project and encouraged each participant to capture photographs in her sport environment that represent her personal identity and/or interactions with her peer groups. Participants were asked to refrain from including teammates in the photographs, as they did not consent to involvement in the research study. If participants wished to represent peer groups in photographs, we encouraged them to be symbolic with their photographs, such as, taking photographs of places in the sport environment that were significant for peer interactions.
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

The recommended time frame for photo collection was two to three weeks. Participants were then asked to select three or more of their favourite photographs to discuss during the interview.

**Phase Two: Semi-structured Interviews**

Following the photo-collecting phase, one-on-one semi-structured interviews – a common method of data collection in narrative research (Chase, 2005) – were employed to allow the participant an opportunity to share stories of identity development and discuss her photographs.

The interviews with the athletes were conducted in person. Each interview began by discussing the photographs that participants brought to the interview. For each photograph, broad questions were posed to invite participant narratives, including, “What is the significance of this photograph?” and, “Where was this photograph taken?” By discussing photo-elicitation first, participants were able to share their perspectives on identity development and influence the direction of the interview. It is important to note that initiating the interview with discussions of the photographs served the purpose of building rapport between the researcher and participants, as most participants seemed more at ease when they were able to use the photographs as a cue for particular aspects of their stories or as a form of visual evidence. Following broad questions, participants were asked to share stories surrounding more specific questions drawn from an interview guide, such as, “Could you share a story about a time that you learned about yourself through interactions with peers in sport?” and, “Can you recall a time when your peers described you differently than you would describe yourself?” During this part of the
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Interview, the lead researcher often referenced the photographs previously discussed to encourage rapport and facilitate the athletes’ reflections.

Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality of the participants was protected by deleting any identifying information from the transcription and using pseudonyms for each participant.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic narrative analysis, which emphasizes the content of the stories shared by the participants (i.e., what the participant said) as opposed to the structure of the stories (i.e., how the participant told the story; Riessman, 2008).

The thematic narrative analysis began with immersion in the data through reading and listening of the transcripts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Next, first impressions of the stories were recorded, including prominent phrases, characters, or plot points (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Then, key themes discussed within each participant story were identified. To assist in the identification of themes, questions were asked of the data, including, “What aspects within the peer group or sport environment have facilitated this theme? And, “what is the overarching story that each theme reveals about identity development in adolescent females?” (Adapted from Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This step of thematic narrative analysis required identification of common aspects across participant stories, such as, specific identity traits referenced frequently by participants (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). The final step of analysis, involving the research team, was to compare and contrast concepts and to advance from specific phrases or themes, such as identity traits, to broader concepts, such as, social or emotional development through peers (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Results

Three aspects of “the self”, the psychological self, the social self, and the physical self, emerged from the participants’ stories. Photographs are embedded within the text where possible to support and enhance the stories shared by participants.

Development of the Psychological Self

The psychological self, including personal characteristics that existed within the athletes’ own frame of mind that were influenced by peers, emerged as a major theme.

For Brooke, a seventeen year-old internationally competitive rower, her story of identity development included learning personal characteristics such as commitment through interactions with her peers in sport. The way in which Brooke discussed the photograph in Figure 1 symbolized her psychological development:

On December 26th, [my teammate and I] went out on the water and it was freezing cold. The photograph is a rowing boat and a rigger. That’s ice on it. It was so cold that as we were rowing the water would freeze before it would go off the rigger. We got off the water and our oars were coated in a layer of ice. We had to wear pogies, which cover your hands and oars, or they wouldn’t even let us out on the water. I have never been out in weather that cold before.

When asked if her teammate played a role in Brooke’s willingness to train, she said:

Yeah, totally. She texted me the night before and said, ‘we’re going out tomorrow, you better be there.’ She really likes going out on the water, so she motivates me to go out and train on the water when it’s cold. It is dedication.

The teammate who influenced Brooke to partake in outdoor training was her doubles partner of over a year. She knew that her partner would not be able to train as
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

effectively without her there, and not wanting to disappoint her partner, she committed
herself to attend all training sessions, regardless of the weather conditions.

[Insert Figure 1 here]

For other athletes, stories of the psychological self emphasized affective
experiences with peers. Allison, a thirteen year-old provincial-level gymnast, described
the influence her peer had on feelings of self-esteem during an instance of self-doubt
when performing a sport-specific skill:

When I was having an off-day, even though I’d done the skill [on beam] before, I
got really scared all of a sudden. When everyone else went to do floor skills, my
teammate stayed with me and told me I could do it. She stood there for me. At the
end, when I did it, it made me feel better. It made me feel better because it makes
me feel like she cared that I could get [the skill].

When asked if the situation would be different if it was a coach instead of a teammate,
Allison replied:

If a coach was standing there, it’s because it’s their job… The coach would’ve
been saying ‘okay, you can do it.’ The coach is supposed to do that; they can’t
really leave you. But, if a teammate stays there, they chose to do it for you. I
wasn’t scared anymore.

This story illustrates Allison’s emotional development through the recognition of
the emotions she was feeling (e.g., fear) and her ability to identify the ways in which
these emotions were positively altered by her peer’s actions.

In contrast, Brooke, a rower, attributed emotional growth to the negative actions
of a teammate. She described a time when a teammate, who also attended her school,
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

spread false rumours about her to teammates and classmates. Brooke speculated that her
teammate envied her for earning a position on a highly ranked team. This story illustrates
Brooke’s emotional development through the recognition of her own emotions (e.g.,
sadness), the perceived emotions of others (e.g., envy), and her awareness of coping
methods:

When I made the team, she was really bitter about it. She was the slowest one in
our boat by far. She quit after that season… She had never really liked me. She
said bad things about me to people at school; about how I was bad at our sport and
no one at school has any idea about our sport because they don’t come to watch.
They don’t really see the work that goes into it …all my classmates got really
wrong impressions of me. That was really hard.

When asked how these interpersonal challenges made her feel, Brooke replied:

I was like, what the hell man! I didn’t want to row that season anymore. I felt
really crappy about it… I got really down for a while. For about a month, I would
like, I wouldn’t go anywhere. I’d just come home from school and just sleep for
like 15 hours because I didn’t want to do anything. Once I got through it though,
I’d say I’m a stronger person for it because it made me switch my friend group
and made me find other sources for positivity.

Alexandra’s stories of the psychological self also emphasized intellectual
development through interactions with peers in sport: “Um, I’ve learned that I’m really
intelligent. It’s really important to me. I like being smart. It’s who I am!” Alexandra was
then asked how peers in sport made her feel intelligent, to which she replied:
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

It’s really just one of them… We like to share small facts that we know with each other. They have no meaning; they are just facts we know… I mostly share these facts with her because other people get annoyed by my facts. I like having her [as a friend] because she’ll say, ‘Whoa! That’s so cool! I didn’t know that!’ And then she’ll say something, and I’m like, ‘Wow!’ And I find other people will judge me about that, or they’ll just be like, ‘why do you know that?’

In conjunction with this story, Alexandra shared the photograph featured in Figure 2. When asked to describe the significance of the photograph, Alexandra said:

This photograph shows my intelligence. This is where we do leg lifts. We’re always talking in the line. Usually this is where [the friend described above] and I like to make up math problems and solve them... We get pretty heated about it because we always think we’re right or wrong. At break we’ll get our phone with our calculators on it to see if we’re right.

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Development of the Social Self

The social self emerged as a theme in the stories participants shared about the personal characteristics that become apparent throughout interactions with peers. For Grace, a thirteen year-old club-level rock climber, development of the social self was emphasized in her stories of being a supportive teammate and examples of demonstrating this characteristic in her relations with peers, as shown in Figure 3. When asked of the significance of the photograph, Grace stated, “I guess I took this photograph because it showed teamwork. There’s a lot of teamwork [with peers in sport] because they support you… They help you all of the time.” Following this narrative, Grace was asked about
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

the significance of her holding the other individual’s hand in the photograph, to which she replied, “It represents one of the good friends I have at climbing. We laugh at climbing; we have so much fun. It just makes it so much more fun that you know you have someone there to help you out.” When asked about the specific ways in which she supports her teammates, Grace stated: “I always hype [my teammate] up! If we’re doing a climbing task, I’ll say, ‘C’mon! Hike yourself up! You can do this!’ And then she’ll try. Maybe she’ll get it, maybe she won’t, but I’m always there for her.”

For other athletes, social development was revealed through the expression of particular traits that the athletes did not view as inherently part of their personal identity. Peyton’s description of the photograph in Figure 4, which depicts a hockey puck labeled “first goal,” seemed to symbolize her social development. When asked about the significance of the photograph, Peyton stated:

This was my “first goal” puck. I was happy when I got this goal, but I just wasn’t outgoing. I was more shy because I was with people I didn’t really know. Now, if we get a goal we get really excited and everyone is really happy.

Peyton was asked to elaborate on the ways in which peers influenced her to be more outgoing during social interactions, to which she replied:

I’ve become less shy around my hockey friends because they are so loud. Everyone is really loud with each other. Throughout the years, we’ve gotten to know each other and it becomes almost hard for me to be quiet… Now, I’m just louder and not as shy. They make me not as shy with everybody... It’s easier for me to get along with people better now.
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Similarly, Alexandra did not consider herself naturally humorous, however, interactions with a friend on her gymnastics team brought forth this characteristic in her:

This year I started to get really close with a teammate. We call her [nickname] because she’s funny; she’s quite different. Once you get to know her, she’s really funny and silly. She’s pretty much the only person I’m silly with.

When Alexandra was probed about why she felt that she could be silly with this friend, but not others, she stated, “I don’t even know. It’s a really hard relationship to describe because I don’t have another one like it… We’ll just start making each other laugh over some stupid thing. We always try to make up these elaborate handshakes.”

When asked about how this friendship might influence her sense of self, she replied:

[The influence] is really good. This friendship is one of the best friendships I’ve ever had because even though we are silly, it’s like, I can just talk to her about anything. I find I’m so limited in that… It’s really nice to have one person who I can just talk about anything with… I know she’s not judging me or anything.

Development of the Physical Self

The final aspect of identity development influenced by peers in sport and reflected in the participants’ stories, is the physical self, and more specifically, personal body image. The athletes shared stories about peers associating unique physical characteristics with sport-specific tasks, which influenced the athletes to view their physical selves favourably and as advantageous to their sport.

For Grace, the thirteen year-old club-level rock climber, peers at her gym helped alleviate her feelings of self-consciousness about her short stature:
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Some of my peers will make fun of me, you know, that I’m small and stuff, which can affect me in a bad way… People will be like, “Oh, you’re so small! When are you going to grow?”… It definitely hurt me because I can’t do anything about it. It affects me.

When reflecting on perceptions of her personal body image influenced by peers in sport, Grace said:

I think it’s because we’re doing something at climbing. We’re working on something and we all have that in common… We’re figuring out a problem together… When you’re at climbing, there are a lot of different sizes you can be. You’re an athlete; you can be really big, or really small, it always changes… Nobody at climbing has ever been mean to me about being small. If I’m on a wall and I do something really fast because I’m so small, my friends will say, ‘wow, you’re lucky that you’re so small because you can do [the climbing task] so fast!’ Or, ‘you can do so many push-ups because you’re so light!’… It makes me feel good because it makes me feel like, since I am small, there are a couple good assets of being small. It’s not always negative.

Similarly, for Jenny, a sixteen year-old club-level soccer player, peers in sport helped her view being tall, a physical attribute Jenny previously disliked, as positive:

When I was younger, I was always the tall person and that always kind of bugged me. People on other teams would make fun of me. But, as I got older, my teammates helped me to use it as an advantage. I was put on defense because I was tall and I could stop the girls better with my long legs. I could run faster, like a gazelle... My teammates always complimented me for that.
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

Stories of the physical self also revealed that other factors of the athletic experience were more important than physical appearance. When asked if her peers in rowing influenced her feelings about her appearance, Brooke stated:

About how I look? Um, oh God, I’ve always had low self-esteem about how I looked. I’ve always been bigger than everyone else. I was always taller than everyone in elementary school, so, you feel chubby and stuff. But with rowing, you want to be bigger. I’m almost six feet tall, and now I wish I was six foot five… [Some girls] get their hair dyed and they take an hour every morning to put on makeup. But, we don’t have time for that. So, it’s almost like my rowing friends influence me the most because they literally don’t care [about my personal appearance]… It must sound negative, but it’s positive, totally. Once you see someone at a 4:30am workout on a Wednesday, you’ve seen her at her worst! I don’t care what I look like in front of them anymore at all.

When probed further about her teammates’ influences on body image, Brooke responded:

It’s not a serious topic… It can be kind of a hard for new rowers because they put on uni-suits for the first time and it’s like oh, God, you can see everything… for us, we just care about how strong you are. I don’t care about what you look like in your uni-suit. I don’t care about what colour your hair is. I just want you to be good. You’re fast, you’re nice, and you’re good in the boat. That’s all I care about. We have that atmosphere. I think it’s far more important… It’s not about what you look like; it’s about how strong you are and what you can do.

Discussion
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

The purpose of this study was to explore the potential influence of peer groups in organized sport on female adolescent identity development. Participant stories suggest that there is indeed a relationship between peers in sport and the identity development of the female athletes in this study. From a broad perspective, interactions with peers in sport contributed to the development of female athletes’ psychological, social, and physical selves. These aspects of the self included development of personal characteristics within the athletes’ own frame of mind, characteristics apparent throughout interactions with others, and the development of positive body image.

Developmental Factors Influenced by Peers

Stories shared by participants demonstrated that peers influence multiple tasks associated with adolescent identity development as identified in Erikson’s (1968) theory. First, teammates in sport provide an opportunity for the developmental task of membership within a peer group (Holt et al., 2008; Newman & Newman, 1995). Peer groups at this developmental stage are increasingly intimate, based on selective criteria, and fulfill adolescents’ desire for social relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Eccles et al., 2003; Erikson, 1968). Previous research regarding positive youth development has recognized the developmental significance of sport peer groups (Holt et al., 2008) and the potential for positive and/or negative psychosocial experiences throughout sport involvement (Eccles et al., 2003; Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009) that can impact an individual’s choice to remain involved in sport (Fraser-Thomas, Côté, & Deakin, 2008).

The findings of this study enhance previous research in this area by linking the influence of sport peers specifically to psychosocial development of youth athletes. Given the importance of peers for female athletes and the significance of identity development at
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

1. In this stage, it is suggested that facilitating a positive connection between these two aspects
may assist in retaining female adolescent participation in organized sport environments.

Second, peers in sport influenced the emotional development of the athletes,
which is defined as the experiencing of a greater range of emotions (e.g., shame, guilt), a
 tendency to direct new negative emotions inward (Stapley & Haviland, 1989), and an
increased awareness of the complex emotions of others (Erikson, 1968). Allison referred
to this development when she described being able to recognize and overcome feelings of
fear through the support and encouragement of her teammate. It is speculated that her
teammate observed these emotions in Allison and intervened with supportive behaviours.

Third, athletes described the influence of peers in sport on their physical
development. Physical maturation is characterized by an adolescent’s changing body,
which can alter both peers’ and personal perceptions of the physical self (Newman &
Newman, 1995). While the adolescent stage is typically marked with a significant
increase in body image dissatisfaction for females (e.g., Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble,
2000), which has been associated with negative outcomes such as anxiety, depression,
and eating disorders (Durkin & Paxton, 2002; Helfert & Warschburger, 2001; Thompson
& Chad, 2002), the participants in this study identified peers in sport as facilitators of
positive body image. Specifically, the athletes described peers in sport who assisted them
– primarily through positive verbal comments – in recognizing personal physical
characteristics as being advantageous to their sport. Interestingly, the physical
characteristics recognized as being beneficial by their peers in sport were often the same
characteristics they felt most vulnerable about in life outside of sport. Further, the
participants viewed attributes such as cooperation, effort, and a positive attitude in a
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

A teammate, as more important than physical appearance. These stories contrast previous research in sport, which has suggested that sport is an environment that may facilitate negative perceptions of body image, particularly for aesthetic sports that require thinness (Patel, Greydanus, Pratt, & Phillips, 2003; Smolak, Murnen, & Ruble, 2000).

Given the emergence of peer influence on multiple tasks of identity development, future research warrants examination of the influence of sport peers on the final two tasks of adolescence as outlined by Erikson’s (1968) theory: formal operations and sexual/romantic relationships. Formal operations are considered the developmental capacity of adolescents to think in an abstract or hypothetical way (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Malcolmson, & Leung, 2011). Formal operational thought allows adolescents to contemplate ideal personal characteristics, which they recognize in others, or aspire to emulate themselves (Santrock et al., 2011). Although participants did not reference this developmental task explicitly, some of the stories could be interpreted through a formal operations perspective (e.g., work ethic), thus, specific attention to this developmental task should be examined in future research.

In addition, research regarding romantic/sexual relationships within sport is warranted, as these relationships are perceived to enhance status in a peer group and establish a sense of belonging (Connolly, Craig, Goldberg, & Pepler, 1999), thereby potentially influencing identity development. The participants in this study did not initiate discussions related to romantic/sexual relationships, perhaps due to their young age.

Overall, the stories shared by participants demonstrate that peers in sport contribute to the development of the psychological, social, and physical selves of athletes and influence multiple developmental tasks of adolescence previously identified by
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

1 Erikson’s (1968) theory. This suggests that researchers’ understanding of peer relations and identity development in sport may be informed and advanced by inclusion of existing theories of psychosocial development.

4 Features of Peer Relationships that Influence Development

Participant stories also shed light on some of the features of relationships with peers that influenced identity development, including close dyadic friendships, negative peer relations, and/or group/team contexts. First, stories told by the athletes in this study reflected the influence of close dyadic friendships on identity development. Close dyadic friendships in adolescence involve mutually revealing personal thoughts and feelings in a reciprocal manner, companionship, nurturance, and developing an understanding of each other’s personality traits (Berndt, 1982; Hartup, 1996; Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998). Guidance, intimacy, and loyalty are also features of sport friendships (Weiss, Smith, & Theeboom, 1996). The influence of close friendships on identity development can be explained through the lens of Festinger’s (1954) Theory of Social Comparison, which suggests that when an adolescent finds a group that meets her needs, she will behave in a way that reduces the potential discrepancies that exist between her and the members of the group.

Second, some athletes shared stories about the influence of negative peer relations on identity development. Negative peer relations can be challenging for the developing adolescent, as youth in this developmental stage tend to thrive on the input of “generalized others” (Harter, 2006). Generalized others are referred to as an individual or group of individuals with whom the adolescent interacts with in the public domain, such as peers (Harter, 2006). Negative evaluations from the generalized other can influence
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

adolescents to internalize these opinions, as they tend to recognize these individuals as objective assessors of their competencies and overall value as a person (Harter, 2006).

Finally, the athletes’ stories revealed the influences of the team context on identity development. Previous research has suggested that peer pressure in groups serves as a central process by which identity development occurs, as adolescents often adopt the behaviours, values, and beliefs common to the group in which they have chosen to belong (Newman & Newman, 1995). Typically, peer pressure is viewed in the existing literature as a negative influence on the developing adolescent, leading to unhealthy behaviours, such as, smoking, disordered eating, and substance abuse (e.g., Andrews, Tildesley, Hops & Li, 2002; Kiesner, Poulin, & Dishion, 2010). However, peer pressure should also be viewed as a potentially positive influence on development in adolescence (Erikson, 1968). Identity development through peer pressure in sport can be demonstrated through the positive values and beliefs of the teams to which the athletes belong (e.g., stories of team beliefs regarding the physical self), as well as, adolescents’ perceived expectations of peers as pressure to be greater than they believe themselves to be (Erikson, 1968).

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research demonstrates the relationship between peer influence and identity development in female adolescents, including the particular aspects of identity developed through peer relations, as well as, the features of the relationships that influence this development, there are many opportunities for future research. It would be valuable for researchers engaged in feminist scholarship to explore identity development in female adolescent athletes through a sociocultural lens. In addition, given the focus of this study on female-to-female peer relationships in sport, it would be valuable to
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

investigate whether the influence of peers in sport on identity development changes in mixed gender sport environments. Researchers might also explore the potential nuances related to peer groups and identity development in team-sport vs. individual-sport environments and at particular levels of competition.

While the peer relationships described by participants were predominantly positive, the negative peer relations experienced by one athlete in this study should not be overlooked; therefore, it is important to explore the nature and extent of poor peer relationships in sport and their influence on identity development.

It would also be valuable to examine the potential connections between peer relationships, identity development, and drop-out from youth sport given the high attrition rates for female athletes in adolescence (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008). Researchers might consider investigating whether the influence of peers in sport continues or endures following attrition from sport, and the ways in which sport dropout may affect identity development.

In conclusion, guided by Erikson’s (1968) Theory of Psychosocial Development, a narrative approach was employed to explore the influence of peers on eight female adolescent athletes’ personal identity development. Participant stories revealed that peers in sport assist in facilitating the development of psychological, social, and physical selves of female athletes in primarily positive ways. Peer influence in this respect was experienced through close dyadic relationships, negative peer interactions, and relations as a team. Given the importance of positive identity development in adolescence, this study provides critical attention to sport as a potential avenue for healthy identity development of female adolescents.
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

References


10 Bruner, M. W., Dunlop, W., & Beauchamp, M. (2014). A social identity perspective on group processes in sport and exercise. In M. Beauchamp, & M. Eys (Eds.), *Group*
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS

1 9(5), 645-662.
6 Gubrium, J. F., & Holstein, J. A. (2002). From the individual interview to the interview
7 society. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), Handbook of interview
10 17(1), 13-26.
15 Helfert S., & Warschburger, P. (2011). A prospective study on the impact of peer and
16 parental pressure on body dissatisfaction in adolescent girls and boys. Body
19 Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
20 Hoare, C. (2013). Three missing dimensions in contemporary studies of identity: The
21 unconscious, negative attributes, and society. Journal of theoretical and
22 philosophical psychology, 33(1), 51-67.
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SPORT PEERS


Appendices

Figure 1: Alexandra's photograph of the impromptu math class.

Figure 2: Brooke's photograph of icicles on the boat rigger.

Figure 3: Grace's photograph of support for her teammates.

Figure 4: Peyton's photograph of extroversion.
Highlights

- This study employed photo-elicitation and interviews with female athletes
- Findings reveal a relationship between sport peers and identity development
- Peers in sport contributed to athletes’ psychological, social, and physical selves
- Development was facilitated through friendship, negative relations, and team context