

Exploring the relationship between athletic and religious identities

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Abstract

Introduction. The identity theory supports the existence of multiple identities and the fact that they are interrelated. **Aim of Study.** The present study is an effort to examine this existence in relation to athletic and religious identities as well as whether religious identity plays an important role in predicting the dimensions of athletic identity. **Material and Method.** The study included 258 athletes (180 males, and 78 females). Their age ranged from 18 to 27 years. Participants filled out the instruments of Athletic Identity Measurement Scale and Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire. **Results.** Results revealed the existence of a relation between the two identities as well as the ability of religious identity to predict the dimensions of athletic and social identities. Finally results showed the non-existence of relation to gender in both identities. **Conclusions.** In conclusion, the religious beliefs may have an impact on the athletic identity of religious people within the frame of sports. It is also concluded that the two identities (athletic and religious) include meanings with common characteristics (social).

KEYWORDS: sport, athletic identity, religious identity, relationship.

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Introduction

An identity is a set of meaning attached to the self that serves as a standard or reference that guides behavior [22]. Meanings are individuals' responses when they reflect upon themselves in a role, social, or person identity [2]. Identity is a concept that has drawn the attention of social psychology researchers (see [23]). This interest comes from the fact that the identity helps the understanding of individuals who are found within a constant social interaction within a specific social environment. Identities help organize an individual's "place" in an interaction, guide behavior, facilitate the development of stable social relationships, and make interaction possible. People have many identities of different kinds [2]. An investigation revealed relations between personality and religiosity dimensions [6].

The importance of identities on human behavior leads to the investigation of relationships between meanings of specific identities that are possibly developed within a specific social environment. More specifically, and within the frame of identity theory, the present study is an effort to examine the interrelations of meanings expressing social identities (sport and religious). Stets and Serpe [23] claim that multiple identities conceptually are interrelated. Findings of other studies supported a relationship between sport and religious identities [3]. The knowledge of these identities provides an evaluative and interpretive context for an individual's current self. In addition, these potential roles serve as a reference

point for future identities, behaviors, and role choices to be accepted or avoided. This examination will be done within a specific frame such as sports since this is a social group where among people there is a constant interrelation and the issue of behavior is considered as important.

Athletic identity

Individuals have been found to develop many different identities throughout their lives. Such roles may include being a friend, a student, or an athlete with situational influences making one role more salient than another [26]. Regarding athletic identity this can be defined as a level to which one identifies with the role of an athlete [28]. Athletic identity is part of self-identity that enables value and meaning of taking a part in exercise and competing [27].

Brewer and his colleagues [1] indicate that the construct of athletic identity consists of social identity, exclusivity, and negative affective factors. However, their model may not be complete due to the lack of detail regarding external (i.e., structural identity theory) and internal (i.e., cognitive identity theory) components that influence identity formation. This can be seen by assessing and explaining athletic identity within the self that occur and affect social behavior. According to Saroglou and Mathijsen [20] religion in relation to the building of identities, both as an institution and in terms of personal attitudes and involvement, probably plays a role that should not be neglected. This is partly because the construction of personal identity, especially among adolescents and young adults, is to a certain extent influenced by religion.

Religious identity

Religiosity is a construct for which a wide range of definitions has been created without though these being operationally clear. Fetzer Institute [8] claim that religiosity is a term difficult to define. The concept of religion, as with culture, cannot adequately be described as simple, static and unchanging, but rather multifaceted, contradictory and in a constant state of flux. This shows that religious identity is complex not only because of the multifaceted nature of religion but also because the concept of identity is itself a nuanced one. Religious identities, as social identities, hold a key role in shaping and interacting with our personal identities and making us the people that we are [10].

Koenig, McCullough and Larson [13, 18], determined religion substantively and functionally as: "... an organized system of beliefs, practices, rituals and symbols that

serve (a) to facilitate individuals' closeness to the sacred or transcendent other (i.e., God, higher power, ultimate truth) and (b) to bring about an understanding of an individual's relationship and responsibility to others living together in community". This definition is sufficient for the present study. It should be noted that the belief system has an adaptive function in helping individuals define and understand the world and themselves.

Plante and Boccaccini [17] considered that religiosity is a matter of strength of the religious faith. For this reason, they developed the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSRFQ). The SCSRFQ is a brief 10 items self-report measurement that assesses the strength of religious faith and engagement and is suitable for use by multiple religious traditions, denominations and perspectives.

Even though there is plenty of work on social identities in the areas of ethnicity and gender, little work has been done on the role of religion and especially on adolescent identity development [12]. Even more intense is the absence of works on the role of religion in the formation of identities such as the athletic one, which is basically ignored. The examination of religiosity as a form of social identity supported on a system of guiding beliefs and religious affiliation [16] and on the fact that religion is considered to be the most important and stable social force in shaping an individual's life, may contribute to the shaping of psychological and social processes.

The importance of the study of behavior reveals the importance of the present study that should focus on investigating the development of an identity (athletic) within a specific environment such as sports. The athletic identity can be characterized as a good indicator since it shows the way in which one's athletic involvement and experience can psychologically and cognitively affect the individual. It can help determine one's changes and acceptance of certain beliefs throughout his or her entire athletic career. Moreover, athletic identity as a self-concept can define the way in which an individual evaluates his or her competence and worth. The amount of worth and competence an individual place on self-concept may influence their self-esteem, affect and motivation.

The basic goal of the present study is the investigation of the existence of a relationship between two identities (athletic and religious), as well as the investigation of the predictive ability of the religious identity (power of the religious faith) on the dimensions of the athletic identity. The present study will also investigate how gender affects the formation of the two identities. It was initially hypothesized that a relationship exists between

the two identities and that religious identity will have an influence on athletic identity. A third hypothesis was that the two identities will be formed differently in relation to gender.

Material and Methods

Participants

In the present study, participants were 258 athletes ($n = 180$ males representing the 69.8% of the sample, and $n = 78$ females representing the remaining 30.2%). Their age ranged from 18 to 27 years ($M = 19.78$, $SD = 1.87$). All participants were involved in the total 15 sports.

Measures

Athletic identity. A validated Greek version [18] of the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) was used. AIMS consist of seven statements concerning the athletes' perception of their identity in relation to sport. For each item, subjects responded to a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). This scale contained three subscales: social identity (three items; e.g., Most of my friends are athletes), exclusivity (two items; e.g., Sport is the most important part of my life), and negative affectivity (two items; e.g., I feel bad about myself when I do poorly in sport" for negative affectivity). *Social identity* is the degree to which an individual view himself or herself as assuming the role of an athlete. *Exclusivity* is the degree to which an individual's self-worth is established through participating in the athletic role. Finally, *negative affectivity* is the degree to which an individual experiences negative emotions due to unwanted sporting outcomes.

One of the three subscales, namely *exclusivity* ($\alpha = 0.82$) demonstrated acceptable internal consistencies. The *social identity* and *negative affectivity* subscales were demonstrated low ($\alpha = 0.68$ and 0.65 , respectively) internal consistency. The aforementioned value (0.69 and 0.65) can be considered as satisfactory, as this factor comprises of fewer than 10 items (*viz.*, five items).

Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire: A validated Greek version [6] of the Santa Clara Strength of Religious Faith Questionnaire (SCSRFQ; [17]) was used in order to assess religiosity. SCSRFQ is a 10-item self-report measure. The SCSRFQ uses a 4-point Likert response format, ranging from (1) *Strongly disagree* to (4) *Strongly agree*. The SCSRFQ was found to have high internal reliability, with Cronbach's alphas ranging between 0.94 and 0.97 and split-half reliability correlations between 0.90 and 0.96. In the present study, the alpha coefficient was ($\alpha = 0.94$).

Procedures

Prior to the beginning of the research, ethical approval and relevant permissions were asked from the participants. For individuals that participated in competitive sport activities in public sports organizations, special requests for permission were made for their participation to relevant authorities. Following, the researchers informed the participants of the content of the questions featured in the questionnaires, as well as of the purpose of the present study.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were obtained and preliminary data analyses were conducted to estimate the responses of athletes on identities. Simple correlations were calculated to test the relationships between variables. Inferential statistics (ANOVA and MANOVA) were used to analyze the extent to which the perception of the athlete's athletic identity and religious faith varied with gender. Finally, standard regression analyses were conducted in order to investigate the influence of religious faith (predictors), within a criterion (athletic identity dimensions). All analyses were completed using SPSS for windows version 15.0.

Results

Descriptive statistics and correlations

Table 1 provides means and standard deviations for all the investigated variables. Regarding athletic identity, on average, participants exhibited higher scores in the dimension of negative affectivity and lower in exclusivity identity. The analysis also revealed that males presented higher scores in all three dimensions of athletic identity than females. In regard to the strength of religious faith participants presented moderate scores, with females presenting relatively higher scores than males.

Correlations amongst measures are shown in Table 1. Results indicated that the dimensions of athletic identity were positively correlated to the strength religious faith.

Differences between Gender and Athletic Identity, Religious Faith

Separate analyses of variance used the hypothesis that athletic and religious identity varies with gender. To determine gender-related changes on athletic identity, a one-way MANOVA was conducted with athletic identity as the dependent variable and gender as the independent variable, and a one-way ANOVA was conducted with religious faith as the dependent variable and gender as

Table 1. Descriptive statistics, Cronbach α , correlations

Variables	Male		Female		Total		α	1	2	3
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
1. Social identity	4.89	1.01	4.69	1.05	4.93	0.71	0.68	–	–	–
2. Exclusivity identity	4.76	1.27	4.61	1.37	4.76	1.31	0.82	0.71	–	–
3. Negative affectivity	6.11	1.01	5.94	0.99	6.06	1.02	0.65	0.46	0.51	–
4. Religious faith	2.32	0.71	2.34	0.67	2.29	0.71	0.94	0.28	0.21	0.13

Note: $p < 0.01$

the independent variable. Results indicated that there is no significant effect of gender on athletic identity and strength of religious faith (Wilks' lambda = 0.992, $F(3,254) = 0.72$, $p = 0.54$, and $F(1,256) = 0.026$, $p = 0.87$, respectively).

Relationship between Athletic Identity and Religious Faith

It was hypothesized that the religious faith effects the formation of athletic identity, and that this could predict the dimensions of the athletic identity. Standard regression analyses were conducted to examine the possible moderating role of religious faith in predicting athletic identity, as well as its relation to each dimension separately. In the regression analyses as predictor (independent) variable Strength of Religious Faith was used for each of the three dimensions of Athletic Identity (dependent variables). Results indicated a significant relationship between strength religious faith and dimension social identity ($R = 0.275$, $R^2 = 0.076$, $F(1,256) = 20.92$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 7.6% of the variance, dimension exclusivity identity ($R = 0.205$, $R^2 = 0.042$, $F(1,256) = 11.22$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 4.2% of the variance, and dimension negative affectivity ($R = 0.133$, $R^2 = 0.018$, $F(1,256) = 4.58$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Standard regression analyses of religious faith predicting dimensions athletic identity

Variable	R^2	$F(1,256)$	B	SE	β	T
Social identity	0.076	20.92**	0.390	0.085	0.275	4.57**
Exclusivity identity	0.042	11.22**	0.377	0.112	0.205	3.35**
Negative affectively	0.018	4.58**	0.191	0.089	0.133	2.14*

Note: * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.001$

The standardized beta coefficient (Table 2), revealed a positive effect for strength religious faith on the three dimensions, social identity ($\beta = 0.275$), exclusivity identity ($\beta = 0.205$), and negative affectivity ($\beta = 0.133$).

Discussion

Human behavior is an issue of investigation that is always interesting for researchers. A helpful element for the understanding of human behavior is their identity. As already mentioned, people are characterized by many identities. The basic aim of the present study was to investigate the relation between the two identities, the athletic and the religious ones, and to investigate the predicting ability of religious faith on the dimensions of the athletic identity.

Initially, the present study revealed that among athlete's negative affectivity out balances as an aspect of athletic identity. Based on this result it may be considered that athletic identity of athletes in the present study is much more affected by experiences that transfer negative emotions than emotions coming from unwanted sporting outcomes. This possibly could be explained by the fact that participants in this study were amateur athletes whom athletic role is not expressed neither from the views of others nor from the level of their self-worthiness. Another possible cause for such a result is the fact that teenagers in sports are found at a crossroad where they have to deal with difficulties in sport athletic career transitions, like being 'cut' from the team, dealing and coping with an injury and athletic career termination.

The results of the present study also revealed that among athletes there is medium level of strength of religious faith. This finding is enhanced by the finding of another study that showed that after the age of 17, religiosity seems to decrease [5]. Wind and Dillon [29] suggested that there is a significant increase in spirituality from late middle (mid-50 s/late-60 s) to older adulthood (late 60 s/mid-70 s).

Another finding was the fact that scores differed in the dimensions of the athletic identity and religious faith, without though being statistically significant when related to gender, therefore not confirming the hypothesis. Regarding athletic identity, this finding supports findings of other studies that support that gender does not affect athletic identity (e.g. [19]). The same applies for religious faith where the present finding appears to be in agree with some commentators in psychology of religion who state that differences among males and females on religious beliefs are important [4] as well as that the stereotype of females being more religious is misleading [7]. Streib, Hood and Klein [25] examined the religious development through the using of Religious Schema Scale and found that gender does not affect the formation of the religious faith.

The present study hypothesized that there is a possible relationship between identities of a person considering that one can develop multiple social identities along a variety of dimensions [14]. Results confirmed this hypothesis revealing a relation between the athletic and religious identities. This finding enhances the existence of multiple identities and their interrelation within the self [23], as well as the fact that religious faith as an internal component on the individual may affect the formation of athletic identity. This reveals that the meanings included in the two examined identities carry similar characteristics. Based on the present finding it is obvious that thereligious identity is not in a vacuum, but rather takes shape with and across arrange of social spaces and contexts [10] such is sports and that the creation of both identities is possibly a result of their interaction.

According to Park [16] religiosity offers a system of guiding beliefs through which one interprets his/her experiences and gives them meaning. These belief systems of ten function as social identities. The specific claim is enhanced by the finding of the present study that revealed a positive relation of religious faith with social identity on a dimension of the athletic identity. The athletic identity on a broader sense is considered as a social role. Regarding religiosity this could be considered as a social identity [30], while highly religious individuals seem to conform to social norms [21].

The finding of the present study regarding the relation of religious faith mainly with social identity as well as with the other two dimensions (exclusivity and negative affectivity) confirms the hypothesis that religious faith affects the formation of athletic identity. This is enhanced by the finding of another study that supported that religious orientation may affect how one approaches

and interprets their involvement in sport situations [11]. The present study has some limitations. Religiosity in the present study was considered as a system of beliefs which operates as a social identity. Nevertheless, it should be noted that religion differs substantially from the constructs of self-concepts in that it may also invoke epistemological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) be known as ontological beliefs regarding what can (or cannot) exist [15] shared among group members. Moreover, historical and cultural continuity grounds these core beliefs founded in rites, symbols, and physical spaces created over millennia but adapted to fit with shifting social norms and ways of living in a given era [9].

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the present study it can be concluded that religious beliefs may have an impact on the athletic identity of religious people within the frame of sports. It is also concluded that the two identities (athletic and religious) include meanings with common characteristics (social). Considering the fact that belief shared is positions to action and major determinants of behavior and based on the present findings we may consider that the strength of religious faith in athletes reveals the perception of their athletic role, which identifies with that of social identity.

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