

Changes in Athletic Identity Following Team Selection: Self-Protection versus Self-Enhancement

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Self-protection and self-enhancement were investigated in a field study of female athletes who were vying for selection in state all-star teams. Participants completed the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993) on three occasions, and changes over time were compared for players who made the team and players who did not make the team. Findings revealed similar AIMS scores in the two groups prior to selection, no change over time for selected players, and a significant decrease over time for the players who were not selected. These findings are consistent with predictions derived from self-categorization theory, and they suggest that self-protection processes may be related to short-term changes in domain-specific self-concept measures such as athletic identity.

Lickel et al. (2000) have proposed that social groups can be broadly classified as intimacy groups, task groups, social categories, and loose associations. While membership in intimate groups and small task groups tends to be based on personal ties and face-to-face interaction, membership in large task groups and social categories is more likely to be based on symbolic attachments and feelings of collective identity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). These feelings of collective identity can, in turn, be a source of personal meaning, positive affect, and self-esteem (Krane, Barber, & McClung, 2002; Mael & Ashforth, 2001).

People can simultaneously identify with multiple social categories (Deaux, 1996; Roccas & Brewer, 2002), but one of these categories often becomes more salient than others in response to situational influences (Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). For individuals who are involved in sport, the extent to which they identify with the athlete role and define themselves in terms of similarities with other athletes (i.e., their athletic identity) is a salient and potentially important dimension of the self-concept (Brewer et al., 1993). Empirical links have been established between athletic identity and a number of measures including perceptions of the physical self, emotional reactivity, lifestyle management, use of tobacco products, mood disturbance after injury, self-efficacy for career decision-making, and adjustment/coping during career transitions (Brewer, 1993; Brown, Glastetter-Fender, & Shelton, 2000; Cornelius, 1995; Green & Weinberg, 2001; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Horton & Mack, 2000; Melnick, Miller, Sabo, Farrell, & Barnes, 2001; Sparkes, 1998; Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998).

There is also evidence that athletic identity changes over time in response to changes in circumstance. More specifically, Lavalley, Gordon, and Grove (1997) found substantial decreases in athletic identity among recently-retired athletes when current scores were compared

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to retrospective scores from three years earlier. These decreases in domain-specific social identity were apparently functional because larger changes were associated with perceived success in coping with retirement, while smaller changes were associated with negative affect. In a similar vein, Munroe, Albinson, and Hall (1999) found that being “cut” (i.e., removed from the team) during tryouts decreased perceptions of athletic ability among 1st-year university students, and it also decreased the extent to which they viewed sport as a central part of their lives (cf. Blinde & Stratta, 1992). Such findings are consistent with the view that self-categorization (i.e., labeling oneself as a member of specific social categories) is a dynamic, fluid, and context-dependent process that reflects changing definitions of the self in relation to a constantly-changing social reality (Turner et al., 1994). They also raise the intriguing possibility that changes in self-categorizations might serve needs for positive self-presentation on both an intrapersonal and an interpersonal level.

Self-enhancement and self-protection are two mechanisms by which a positive image of the self is sometimes maintained (Korman, 2001; Miller & Ross, 1975; Sommer, 2001). Self-enhancement involves the use of cognitive and/or behavioral processes to amplify the positive aspects of the self in one’s own eyes or in the eyes of others. Self-protection, on the other hand, involves the use of cognitive and/or behavioral processes to dampen the negative aspects of the self in one’s own eyes or in the eyes of others. Self-enhancement is typically set in motion by positive outcomes that convey desirable information about the self, while self-protection is set in motion by negative outcomes that are potentially threatening to the self (Agostinelli, Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1992). It has been suggested that these processes are related to a number of psychological phenomena including selective processing of information, strategic choice of comparison others, proactive self-handicapping behaviors, and biased attributions for success and failure (Higgins, 1990; Miller & Ross, 1975; Mullen & Riordan, 1988; Wood, Michela, & Giordano, 2000). Given the tendency for self-categorizations to reflect situational influences (Turner et al., 1994), it is possible that self-enhancement and/or self-protection processes may also be related to the way in which people publicly identify with specific social roles. In the case of sport performers, for example, the strength of identification with the athlete role might become stronger when sport-related outcomes are favorable and weaker when sport-related outcomes are unfavorable. Such shifts in identification would allow them to project a positive public image as well as a positive self-image following success or, alternatively, to reduce dissonance and thereby protect their public and private images following failure (cf. Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981; Rhodewalt & Agustsdottir, 1986).

The purpose of this study was therefore to determine whether the strength of athletic identity does indeed change in a manner consistent with self-enhancement and/or self-protection processes following positive and negative outcomes. To achieve this end, we assessed athletic identity scores at three points in time surrounding tryouts for state all-star teams. We then compared temporal variations in athletic identity for players who were selected and for players who were not selected. Self-enhancement processes were expected to produce increases in athletic identity over time for the selected players, while self-protection processes were expected to produce decreases over time in athletic identity for players who were not selected.

METHOD

Participants and Instrumentation

Participants were 47 women who were vying for selection in state all-star teams in the sports of basketball ($n = 17$), field hockey ($n = 18$), and volleyball ($n = 12$). The mean age of the participants was 16.83 years ($SD = 1.82$). They were highly-committed young athletes who played

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for AIMS Scores of Players Who Were Selected or Not Selected

Time of administration	Selected players			Players not selected		
	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>
Before selection	30	46.87	7.36	17	47.88	6.97
Immediately after selection	30	46.30	8.73	17	44.71	7.68
14 days after selection	30	47.25	9.05	17	44.47	7.64

at the highest levels of amateur competition in a major metropolitan area in Western Australia and devoted approximately 10 hours per week to their sport for more than 10 months of the year.

Athletic identity was assessed using the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS; Brewer et al., 1993). The AIMS consists of 10 items that are scored on 7-point bipolar scales anchored by “strongly agree” and “strongly disagree.” The instrument, which evaluates the strength and exclusivity of identification with the athlete role, includes items such as “Sport is the most important part of my life,” and “I spend more time thinking about sport than anything else.” Internal consistency for the scale has been reported as ranging from .81 to .93, with good test/retest reliability over two weeks ($r = .89$; Brewer et al., 1993). Brewer et al. have also provided support for construct validity via theoretically meaningful convergence and divergence with other measures.

Procedure

Following completion of an informed consent document, the AIMS was administered on three separate occasions. The first administration took place at a tryout session 1 week prior to the announcement of final cuts for the state all-star team. Participants provided demographic information at this time (age, sport, experience, etc.) and then completed the AIMS questionnaire. The second administration occurred on the same day that team selections were announced, shortly after players had been told whether they made the team. The final AIMS administration took place 2 weeks after team selection had been announced.¹ Participants who had achieved team selection completed the questionnaire at a training session, while questionnaires were mailed to those individuals not selected for their respective sport. The return rate for the mailed questionnaires was 88%.

RESULTS

Preliminary Analyses

Internal consistency values were calculated for each administration of the AIMS questionnaire. Previous research has shown strong internal consistency for the scale (Brewer et al., 1993), and those findings were replicated in this study. Specifically, alpha coefficients for the three administrations of the AIMS in the present study were .74, .80, and .85 ($M = .80$). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

¹The choice of a two-week time period for the follow-up assessment was arbitrary. We felt that it provided sufficient time for the immediate reaction to the selection decision to abate but, at the same time, was close enough in time to ensure retention of as many participants as possible.

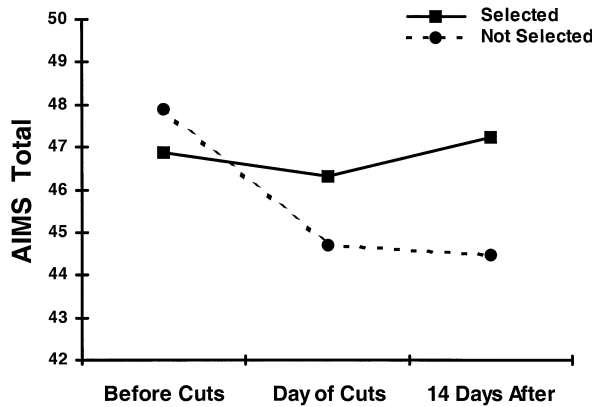


Figure 1. Changes in AIMS scores over time for players who were selected or not selected.

Primary Analysis

A two-way, mixed-model ANOVA was used to analyze the data obtained from the three administrations of the AIMS. Group (selected vs. not selected) was a between-subjects factor in this analysis, and time of administration (before selection, immediately after, 2 weeks after) was a within-subjects factor. This analysis revealed a significant main effect for time of administration, $F(2, 90) = 4.06$, $p = .021$, and a significant Group \times Time interaction, $F(2, 90) = 3.88$, $p = .025$. This interaction effect is shown in Figure 1. Follow-up analyses on the interaction revealed that (a) AIMS scores for the two groups were equal at entry, $t(45) = -0.46$, $p = .65$; (b) AIMS scores did not change over time for athletes who were selected, $F(2, 58) = 0.59$, $p = .56$; and (c) AIMS scores decreased significantly over time for athletes who were not selected, $F(2, 32) = 7.19$, $p = .004$. Additional comparisons within the “not selected” group indicated that changes from the pre-selection point to the day of selection were significant, $t(16) = 3.19$, $p = .006$, Cohen’s $d = .47$, but that changes from the day of selection to the 2-week followup were not significant, $t(16) = 0.22$, $p = .83$.

DISCUSSION

Findings from this study indicated that changes in athletic identity occurred in response to team selection, but that these changes were restricted to players who did not make the team. More specifically, AIMS totals decreased significantly during the 2 weeks immediately following selection announcements for players who were cut, but AIMS totals did not change for players who were chosen to remain on the team. Thus, there was evidence that self-protection processes might be operating in this context, but there was no evidence to support the possible operation of self-enhancement processes. These findings add to a growing body of literature documenting situational influences on athletic identity (Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999; Lavalley et al., 1997; Van Raalte & Cook, 1991). They are also consistent with findings from a number of laboratory studies where evidence has been obtained for self-protection but not self-enhancement (e.g., Agostinelli et al., 1992; Pyszczynski, Greenberg, & LaPrelle, 1985; Suls & Wan, 1987).

Our findings do not necessarily mean, however, that a desire to protect one’s image is a stronger motive for self-categorization than a desire to enhance one’s image. As Agostinelli et al. (1992) have noted, there are a number of reasons why such a conclusion should not be

drawn. First, some researchers believe that there is substantial evidence for the existence of self-enhancement biases (Jones, 1990; Miller & Ross, 1975). In addition, it is very difficult to judge the relative strength of success and failure feedback, particularly in field studies such as this one. Because people generally expect to be successful in what they do, failures tend to be given more weight than successes when processing information. Self-protection processes may therefore be invoked more easily than self-enhancement processes (Agostinelli et al., 1992; Kahneman, Knetsch, & Thaler, 1990). Finally, ceiling effects could have operated in this study to restrict upward movement of the AIMS scores for the selected players. Although published norms are not available for the AIMS, Brewer et al. (1993) found an average score of approximately 28 for female sport participants in general and an average score of approximately 50 for women competing at the regional, intercollegiate, and national levels. Table 1 shows that the average entry-level score for the women in our study was approximately 47, which puts them close to the top end of the expected AIMS distribution for their sex. The potential for upward movement in response to team selection may therefore have been restricted because of the strength of their pre-existing athletic identity.

It is also difficult to determine the extent to which concerns for public vs. private identity protection might have contributed to the observed decrease in AIMS scores for the athletes who were not selected. On the one hand, these changes could have been influenced by a desire to reduce dissonance via downward shifts in perceived commitment to the athlete role. On the other hand, they might have been influenced by a desire to publicly categorize oneself as less committed to the athlete role and thereby discount ability as an explanation for the negative outcome in the eyes of external observers. It is virtually impossible to distinguish between these private and public motives in self-presentation research, because the measurement process itself forces respondents to make their evaluations known to at least one other person (Jones, 1990; Tetlock & Manstead, 1985). Such a distinction may also be unnecessary if one adopts a broad view of self-presentational processes and recognizes self-categorization as one way of “negotiating reality.” According to Snyder and Higgins (1988), successful reality negotiation involves responding to potentially threatening information in a way that not only preserves a self-view of competence and control but also conveys that impression to others. Strategic self-categorization (in this case as less identified with the athlete role) may be one way of achieving both of these goals.

The stability of changes in athletic identity and the influence of developmental stage were not considered in this study, but they might be interesting avenues for future research. Although we expected to see a decrease in athletic identity as a function of being cut, we were somewhat surprised that AIMS scores did not begin to move back toward baseline after 2 weeks. The use of a larger time window in future studies would help to determine how long situationally-induced changes in athletic identity persist and if/when they return to baseline levels. We suspect that opportunities for continued sport involvement may influence this “recovery profile,” but that is an empirical question. Age factors could also be examined as possible correlates of identity change in future studies. The participants in our study were adolescents, and identity issues are very salient in this developmental stage (Erikson, 1963). The impact of situational factors on athletic identity therefore deserves additional scrutiny in both older and younger groups where identity issues may be less important.

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