

The Body Project: Anatomy, Relationships, and Representation
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The Performing Body: Physical Self-Concept in Athletes

This paper presentation will present a review of literature on the unique way the body is negotiated in athletics and pivotal role it plays in identity development and global self-esteem. Current findings will be extended to retired athletes as part of dissertation research on the role of physical self-concept in former collegiate athletes.

Self-concept has been viewed as multidimensional and constructed of a variety of roles, characteristics, and competencies, or “sub-selves”. A hierarchical model of self-esteem is generally accepted, wherein global self-esteem is the apex and life domains, including ‘physical self-worth’ are specified and further broken down into increasing specificity (Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). It is necessary to consider salience, as the subjective importance placed on any given dimension will determine the influence it has on the individual (Fox & Corbin, 1989). This is important when considering elite athletes, whose everyday activity and cornerstone of identity is encapsulated in physical activity. The performing body and physical competence are central to self-perceptions and self-worth for athletes. High-level athletes place much importance on involvement in sport and are particularly attuned to physical self-perceptions. Most elite athletes derive much of their self-worth from perceived physical competence (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Individuals who report high physical competence appear to have more enhanced self-concept and self-esteem (Marsh, Hey, Roche, & Perry, 1997; Marsh, Perry, Horsly, & Roche, 1995).

A critical extension of existing literature calls for a focus on what occurs as the performing body deteriorates and former athletes experience discrepancy between previous physical over-involvement and current activity. The former athlete experiences a host of bodily changes, including weight gain, loss of muscle (Koukouris, 1991), degradation of physical competencies (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998), bodily tensions, pain and tiredness (Stephan & Bilard, 2003), mainly due to drastic reduction of training and deregulation of eating habits experienced during the transition out of competitive sport. This bodily transition affects the physical self, central to the athlete’s identity and global self-esteem. As the retired athlete experiences difficulties with their body, there is a marked decrease in global self-esteem, physical self-worth, perceived physical condition, sports competence, and bodily attractiveness (Stephen, Torregrossa, & Sanchez, 2007). As the performing body begins to decline, these difficulties are associated with decreased feelings of pride, satisfaction, happiness, and confidence regarding the physical self. An important consideration is to explore what factors may mitigate the potentially traumatic experience of losing the performing body. Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignières (2003)

found that retired athletes appeared to reassess physical competencies and capacities, creating new, more reasonable physical standards following an adjustment period. Global self-esteem increased in accordance with physical condition, sports competences, physical strength, and physical self-worth for these athletes. Current research intends to expand the sparse body of literature with a focus on retired athletes and extend across the lifecycle. A particular focus will be on the relationship physical self-concept has with self-esteem in retired athletes and what role the maintenance of athletic identity may play within that relationship.