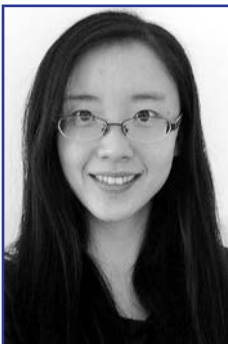


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THE INTERSECTING SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF CANADIAN NATIONAL TEAM FEMALE BOXERS: PROMOTING SOCIAL INCLUSIVENESS IN (AND THROUGH) SPORT

ПЕРЕСЕКАЮЩИЕСЯ СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ ЖЕНСКОЙ КАНАДСКОЙ НАЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ СБОРНОЙ ПО БОКСУ: СОДЕЙСТВИЕ СОЦИАЛЬНОЙ ИНКЛЮЗИВНОСТИ В (И ЧЕРЕЗ) СПОРТЕ



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Keywords: *intersectionality, athlete identity, cultural sport psychology, narrative.*

Abstract. *This manuscript presents an overview of the study **Intersecting Social Identities of Elite Female Boxers on the Women's Canadian National Team**. The research backgrounds, theoretical framework, and the implications of this study are introduced to illuminate how researchers attend to issues of cultural diversity within sport and to expand understandings of how socially constructed identities shape experiences of marginalization and well-being within Olympic level sport.*

Ключевые слова: *интерсекциональность, идентичность спортсмена, культурно-спортивная психология, нарратив.*

Аннотация. *В данной статье представлены результаты исследования пересекающихся социальных идентичностей элитных боксеров женского пола в сборной команде Канады. Научные предпосылки, теоретические основы и последствия этого исследования представлены для того, чтобы показать, как исследователи занимаются вопросами культурного разнообразия в спорте, и расширить понимание того, как социально построенные идентичности формируют опыт маргинализации и благополучия в спорте Олимпийского уровня.*

Introduction. Traditional sport psychology research is rooted in White, Eurocentric ways of knowing, and has long been critiqued for ignoring issues of cultural diversity within sport and physical activity settings [16] and for emphasizing athletes' identities as unidimensional and sport-focused [8]. To date, there remains limited understanding of who athletes "are" as diverse, multifaceted people, and how their identities extend into local sport contexts, such as their training environments, to shape their experiences and performances. Ronkainen and colleagues (2015, 2016) conducted meta-analyses of athlete identity in sport psychology and found that researchers extended their focuses from examining the construct and functions of a singular, essentialist athletic identity, to analyzing the powerful impacts of sociocultural considerations about athletes as whole persons with multi-dimensional identities, and how these identities can develop and change within different contexts. In an effort to advance holistic and culturally attuned understandings of athletes and their support needs, critical and cultural sport psychology researchers have re-conceptualized athletes' identities as being multi-faceted, socially constructed, and continually evolving [17].

Often grounded in constructionism, identity is constructed rather than a stable psychological consequence within one's mind, wherein language and cultural discourses, or stories, play a central role in its formation process [12, 19]. Douglas (2009) criticized that in mainstream scholarship, athletes have continued to be constructed with a narrow focus on sport dedication, performance, and the competitive nature, failing to recognize that athletes are people who are also doing and being things outside of sport (e.g., as women, students, family members, spiritual beings, community members). When narrow performance-based conceptualizations of athletes are perpetuated within sport contexts, athletes are in jeopardy of fixating on that single identity and lacking alternative narratives to support their life transitions outside of sport [7]. Thus, expanding the understanding of

athletes and how they present themselves as holistic people related to the cultural and institutional environment has been called for [10]. Douglas (2009) unfolded her own life stories to illuminate how her identities as a woman and daughter shaped her behaviors and decisions during her professional golf career. McGannon and Schinke (2013) explored how women linked motherhood to physical activity participation, finding that the cultural stories of being a good mother formulated the females' identities and obstructed physical activity participation. Although the aforementioned writings were not explicitly framed through the lens of intersectionality, the authors did explore multiple, fluid identities and revealed how they are infused within sport contexts. Schinke and McGannon (2015) wrote an editorial in *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, the leading empirical journal in sport psychology, to centralize intersectionality within our domain's research. The authors explained how the diverse sociocultural identities of sport participants need to be considered in sport psychology research and practice, rather than focusing on a singular and taken-for-granted athlete identity [see 8, 12, 19]. The aim is to open up more culturally inclusive sport spaces that are supportive and empowering rather than marginalizing for diverse athletes, and that facilitate athletes' holistic developments and wellness [10].

Through such efforts, researchers have advanced a cultural praxis agenda that shifts the aim of academic research from knowledge production to social justice activities [15]. By bringing forward the voices and needs of diverse sport participants, such as those who identify as female, racial and/or ethnic minorities, LGBTQ, older adults, and/or disabled, these traditionally marginalized identities were visualized and empowered as parts of whole athlete understandings. Consequently, the perpetuated narratives of white, heterosexual, and masculine within sport psychology research and practice were enriched [see also 7, 12, 14].

An Intersectionality Approach. Emerging from the work of critical feminist and race scholars, intersectionality was initially brought forth to argue



that the experiences of being black women could not be understood as being black and being women independently [e.g., 5]. Intersectionality thus refers to the critical insights that identities and meanings of race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, dis/ability, and age interact and contribute to people's lived realities [4]. Easteal (2003) used a kaleidoscope metaphor to explain how "our perception is the outcome of a multitude of filters that twist and turn according to our own individual experience and knowledge" (p. 1), and which shape our sense of the world around us. Thus, intersectionality highlights the multiplicity, fluidity, and contextual meanings of identities and the social status people can have within a certain historical and cultural context [11]. Spawned by these intersectional insights, in the current project, we examined how elite female boxers from a national team constituted themselves and their experiences with multiple identities, and implications of the intersecting identities to their performance and psychological well-being.

Project Review. This project was the first empirical research in sport psychology exploring the intersecting sociocultural identities of athletes and how these identities connect to various experiences of exclusion and challenge within a national team sport context. Boxing in Canada has a highly diverse athlete population in terms of nationality, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational status, sexual orientation, and immigrant/newcomer status [18]. Moreover, boxers are often attracted to their sport to achieve a "better life" on various sociocultural levels, with many having experienced ongoing forms of identity marginalization [18]. We chose female boxers because boxing was culturally and traditionally considered as a men's sport, where females tended to experience more identity conflicts within this environment. Ten female boxers on the Canadian National Boxing Team were recruited. At the time of the interviews, the participants varied in age from 26 to 31 years old (mean = 28.3), and had been selected on the National Team for two to 10 years (mean = 5.6). All of the participants had competed at a World Championship, with four of the 10 boxers being World Championship medalists and six being Major Games medalists.

The intent of this study was to explore how the female boxers' layered identities, comprised of numerous identity characteristics, interact with the sport environment to influence sport experience and well-being. Intersectionality was used as an analytical lens to understand the participants' identities as socially constructed, ever-changing, and always in process of creating and being created by dynamics

of power [3, 4, 8]. Through revealing the numerous fluidity of athletes' identities, this lens helped us gain dynamic insights into how female elite athletes engage and interact in the national team environment. These efforts facilitated cultural praxis, which is the centralization of culture as a means of social justice through sport, by revealing how sport psychologists can work with diverse athletes to support them based on how they self-represent [1, 13, 14]. The research was guided by the following questions: 1. How do female boxers construct (story) themselves within the Canadian National Boxing Team? 2. What meanings and experiences do these athletes associate with their identities, particularly in terms of difference and dis/advantage? 3. What are the implications of the athletes' identities for well-being?

Given that the participants were geographically distributed across Canada, we conducted remote online interviews over Skype [1]. The interview process began with a mandala drawing- an art-based method to elicit rich storytelling from an insider's perspective of participants about who they are as boxers on a national team. The following conversational interview was based on what the participants drew in their mandala. Each interview lasted 60 to 90 minutes, and was recorded and transcribed. An inductive thematic analysis [2] was performed on the interview transcripts to identify key narrative themes related to their identities.

Results. Nine social identities were brought out that appear to be salient and meaningful to the athletes' sport lives: (1) gender, (2) sexuality, (3) physicality, (4) race and ethnicity, (5) religion, (6) language, (7) socioeconomic status, (8) weight class, and (9) education. We clustered these identities into three groupings based on the associations of their meanings within the participants' stories, such as identities pertaining to race and ethnicity, language, and religion connected together; gender, sexuality, and physicality to understand female athletes' dilemmas in a male-dominant sport; and the socioeconomic status, weight class and education, which related to athletes' life opportunities and career developments. Our research team (2017) published the results of the first identity group with the aim of uncovering the issues of identity expression and oppression in relation to the dynamics of cultural differences and sameness and challenging racial privilege within boxing. In that publication, we demonstrated how minority racial athletes were aware of their skin color and language that separate them from the rest of the team, while the white Canadian athletes were dismissive of race and

ethnicity. In the second paper of this project (in press), we focused on the intersecting identities of gender, sexuality, and physicality, revealing how boxing is a safe and unsafe gendered space that could empower or constrain women performing different forms of femininity. In the third paper, soon to be submitted, we have analyzed the identities of socioeconomic status, weight-class, and education to understand how the athletes are deprived sport opportunities due to their financial and political disadvantage (i.e. unselected weight categories for Olympic Games), and how such different life situations divided the team and shifted athletes' life priorities towards and away from boxing.

Conclusion. This study was developed to facilitate more inclusive sport spaces and practices by illuminating how diverse athletes' experiences within a sport context due to their identity positions have resulted in individuals being privileged or deprived opportunities [7, 18]. When identities are understood as the process and product of shifting narratives, an intersectional approach contributes to social justice for the athletes by revealing power relationships and cultural constraints on their identities [1, 8, 13, 17]. Within the current work, we are committed to empowering the athletes through centralizing their life stories and bringing marginalized topics forward. Athletes continually negotiate their identities in relation to power dynamics, enacting who they are by moving between identities that are valued by their team versus identities that are not valued, leading to moments of open expression and moments of concealment / silence [1]. Their stories reveal possibilities for facilitating more inclusive sport spaces that resonate with who athletes are as people first, and then performers, second. The intention is to create mentally healthy training and organizational environments where athletes will flourish more often. This process of being a national team athlete is not easy for the best of performers, though performance over the long-term becomes much more likely when athletes are supported for who they are, which then frees them to perform to their potential.

Sadly, this understanding of athletes' identities as layered and integrating several different dimensions, either simultaneously or across time and discussions is not often considered by sport psychologists, the world over. Rather, interventions are often over-simplified, tending to centralize one aspect of an athlete over another. This simplification can contribute to mentally unwell athletes, who might then suffer from burnout, over-training syndrome, and depression catalyzed through their training environment. Opening up examinations of identity also offers the possibility of

sensitivity training for coaches and sport psychologist, so that the very best of athletes who might rise to the top in any sport system, lead long-standing athletic careers. At the same time, we would anticipate that more athletes will rise to the top through inclusive practices, not as survivors, but as people who develop to their potential, using sport to achieve their fullest.

Recommendations. Below we provide brief practical sport psychology recommendations that will contribute to healthier identity practices through training environments:

1. Sport psychology practitioners and coaches need to recognize athletes have complex identities rather than a singular and universal athletic identity that narrowly focuses on sport performance. Sport psychology practitioners and coaches need to view and support athletes as holistic people who are doing sport but also pursuing other aspects of their lives. For example, with student athletes, understanding how they balance their dual careers and identities would be of some benefit rather than solely emphasizing dedication to sport, and so, the singular realm of athletics.

2. Researchers and practitioners need to draw attention to the sociocultural backgrounds of their athletes, wherein athletes are integrated and driven by certain cultural values, such as giving the meanings to their lives not only from mental and physical aspects, but also from emotional and spiritual dimensions. Besides, the sport subculture may intersect with a country's mainstream culture, creating specific challenges for athletes with their identity constructions and sport practices, such as being female athletes within a male-dominant sport, where they might struggle with presenting themselves between femininity and masculinity.

3. Athletes' identities change within different sociocultural contexts, where meanings and embedded status can shift relating to who they interact with. That is, on some occasions, athletes will be privileged, while in others, they may experience marginalization and silencing within their training environments or sport sub-culture. The fluidity of identities accompanied with changes in values and behavior patterns can result in adaptive and maladaptive psychological consequences. Hence, being aware of the fluidity of athletes' identities and how to encourage and support more of these identities, would facilitate sport psychology practitioners and researchers in understanding athletes embedded in the dynamics of their sport contexts, as they live their lives and pursue world class performances.



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