Examining the Relationship of Gender, Sport Type, and Athletic Identity to Student Athletes’ Career Maturity: Perspectives from Career Construction Theory

Jin Park, University of Louisville
Alicia Cintron, University of Louisville
Mary Huns (Advisor), University of Louisville

Student-athletes have been a major focus of sport management research for a number of reasons. Student-athletes as a whole are affected by a number of sport management-related issues (i.e., mental and physical health, career development). The number of both male and female student-athletes in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) reached an all-time high in 2014, with over 470,000 competing. There are 271,055 male student-athletes and 207,814 female student-athletes participating in sports in Division I, II, and III (“NCAA Student-Athlete Participation”, 2014). In particular, the number of female student-athletes has increased exponentially since before the passage of Title IX from 16,000 in 1968 to approximately 208,000 in 2014 (Acosta & Carpenter, 2010; “NCAA Student-Athlete Participation”, 2014).

As the number of student-athletes has increased, researchers started focusing on various aspects of their athletic experiences, including stereotypes of student-athletes (Czopp, 2010; Engstrom & Seldlacke, 1991; Feltz et al., 2013; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005) or their academic performances (Comeaux & Harrison, 2011; Milton et al., 2012; Sellers, 1992; Scott et al., 2008). Despite the increased number of female student-athletes, few researchers have focused on what factors could influence female student-athletes’ career choices, what career goals they have, and how they develop appropriate career paths during their college years. Career Construction Theory (Savickas, 2002) could be a good starting point for answering these questions.

Career Construction Theory is a prominent career theory seeking to explain individuals’ occupational choices and vocational behaviors. On the basis of Super's (1957) vocational development theory, Career Construction Theory may provide a salient conceptual framework to examine student-athletes’ career development. The framework explains that individuals develop their careers considering both individual characteristics (personality, ability, and self-concept) and social contexts (society, work environment, culture, and other circumstances), and adapt themselves accordingly (Savickas, 2002). Career Construction Theory proposes three primary elements to explain the process of making career choices: vocational personality, career adaptability, and life themes (Savickas, 2002). Among the three elements, the concept of career adaptability became a major component of recent career studies since it assesses an individual’s unique dispositions to make career choices. Career adaptability can be measured by the Career Maturity Inventory-Revised (CMI-R) (Crites & Savickas, 1996).

Career maturity has been a valid construct in career studies as Savickas (1984) defined career maturity as the readiness to make career decisions and to cope with vocational and educational developmental tasks. An individual is career mature if he or she has gained the knowledge and skills to make an intelligent and realistic career choice (Busacca & Taber, 2002; Levinson et al., 1998; Luzzo, 1993). Several studies revealed that student-athletes tend to have lower career maturity than general college students (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Smallman & Sowa, 1996; Sowa & Gressard, 1983). In a recent study, Linnemeyer and Brown (2010) discovered that the gap between student-athletes’ and college students’ career maturity is narrowing due to declines over time in expectations to play professional sports after college. Kennedy and Dimick (1987) reported that 48% of student-athletes expected to play professional sports, and the percentage gradually declined from 34% in 1996 to 27% in 2010 (Linnemeyer & Brown, 2010; Smallman & Sowa, 1996). Other studies also discovered that student-athletes who play revenue-producing sports are more likely to have lower career maturity than those who play non-revenue-producing sports (Blann, 1985; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy et al., 1996; Stuart, 1985). However, Smallman and Sowa (1996) found that the career maturity levels of student-athletes in revenue-producing sports and student-athletes in non-revenue-producing sports did not significantly differ, which was not consistent with the prior studies (Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy et al., 1996). The relationship between student-athletes’ career maturity and type of sport needs to be further
examined since the literature indicates the inconsistencies. In addition, previous studies discovered that student-athletes who have higher athletic identity tend to be less interested in career planning or development, indicating lower career maturity (Adler & Adler, 1991; Blann, 1985; Brown & Hartley, 1998; Lally & Kerr, 2005; Murphy et al., 1996). Athletic identity can be measured by the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) (Brewer et al., 1993). Furthermore, most aforementioned studies were not generalizable because the studies were conducted with predominantly male samples (Brown & Hartley, 1998; Kennedy & Dimick, 1987; Murphy et al., 1996; Smallman & Sowa, 1996; Stuart, 1985). Thus, the effects of gender and athletic identity on student-athletes’ career maturity has not yet been examined in relation to type of sport.

Considering the lack of a comprehensive research on student-athletes’ career maturity, the purpose of this study is to examine the relationship of gender, sport type (revenue-producing/non-revenue-producing), and athletic identity to student-athletes’ career maturity. Based upon the above literature review, three hypotheses will be tested:

H1: Student-athletes who play revenue-producing sports would have lower career maturity than student-athletes who play non-revenue-producing sports.
H2: There would be a significant gender difference in student-athletes’ athletic identity and career maturity.
H3: There would be a significant relationship between student-athletes’ athletic identity and career maturity.

The current study employs 2 (gender: male / female) x 2 (sport type: revenue-producing sport / non-revenue-producing sport) design. The Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS) and Career Maturity Inventory-Revised (CMI-R) will be used to measure each group of student-athletes’ athletic identity and career maturity. The AIMS measures the degree or the tendency to commit exclusively to an athletic role, and the CMI-R measures competence (knowledge of occupations/career decisions) and attitude (attitudes and feelings toward making the best career decisions).

The results of this study and its implications will be discussed during the presentation.