Identity Regulation in the North American Field of Men’s Professional Ice Hockey: An Examination of Organizational Control and Preparedness for Athletic Career Retirement

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Following a significant commitment of time, energy, and role identification, athletes retiring from sport may experience any number of difficulties, including emotional distress, diminished subjective well-being, and identity disruption (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). These difficulties may be particularly acute for those who hold a salient athletic identity (Park et al., 2013). Notwithstanding an expansive body of literature on the subject of sport career cessation, few works have examined how athletic identities have been maintained and/or transformed by managers and organizations (notable exceptions include the works of Hickey & Kelly, 2008; McGillivray, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005; and Pink, Saunders, & Stynes, 2015).

Providing a compelling case for such an examination was the North American field of men’s professional ice hockey. The field, composed of the National Hockey League, two lower-level affiliates, and a number of related associations, has long supported the development of athletic identities. This support, despite its service to the achievement of athletic outcomes, has complicated the process of sport career cessation (e.g., Chambers, 2002), and triggered the introduction of several interventions. As a result, multiple questions arose: how have organizations/managers in the field regulated athletic and non-athletic identities; and how might such regulation affect preparedness for sport career cessation.

To answer these questions, an interpretive study, informed by Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) concept of identity regulation (“the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction,” p. 625), was undertaken. As part of the study, interviews were conducted with players/alumni (n = 3), and managers from the National Hockey League (n = 1), National Hockey League Players’ Association (n = 1), Professional Hockey Players’ Association (n = 1); Core Development and Career Enhancement Programs (n = 3); and seven National/American Hockey League teams (n = 7; N = 16). In addition, 3902 documents (primarily online articles) were reviewed.

Analysis of the data revealed that regulation entailed the construction and maintenance of a salient and bipartite athletic identity (defined by performance excellence and beneficence), a largely self-directed/non-sporting alternative, and a nascent merger between the two. Consistent with Alvesson and Willmott’s (2002) conceptualization, each of the identities was defined by multiple motives, sets of values and characteristics, and bodies of knowledge and skill. Building upon the conceptualization, the analysis also revealed that organizations fostered identity adherence and performance, to varying degrees, through scouting, monitoring, evaluation, and enforcement; explicit conveyances; auxiliary resource allocation; exemplars; awards/rewards; routinization; and/or publicity. Attempts of identity disruption/change, moreover, were subject to insulative measures.

The study ultimately found that the product of regulation, and the organizational practices that undergirded as much, was an eminent athletic identity, one that could continue to complicate the process of sport career cessation. To avoid exacerbation of the process, it is suggested that managers exploit extant regulation practices in novel manners (e.g., scout for prospective program applicants; appoint team-level career enhancement personnel; and supply charity management education). In this way, broader identities, conducive to the process of athletic career retirement, may be developed.