The Greedy Role of Sport: Exploring Athlete Role Engulfment

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Holding multiple roles, such as scholar or musician, is beneficial to an individual’s mental and physical health (Hong & Seltzer, 1995). In spite of these benefits, individuals in high performance settings are often asked or expected to sacrifice multiple life roles in pursuit of a singular role, with the expectation that focusing efforts on fewer roles will maximize performance (Giulianotti, 2005). Such is the case with elite athletes, including but not limited to college athletes. While an athlete may enter college with a broad set of life roles, these life roles are often subsumed by the overbearing nature of college athletics (Anderson & Dixon, 2018).

Role identity theory suggests that the various roles a person holds make up who they are and how they behave (Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995). For example, a person is likely to spend more time and energy in roles that are more salient or valuable. In this process, roles may become so salient that a person becomes engulfed in a singular role, which is the reality for many elite athletes. Adler and Adler (1991), for example, discussed the negative outcomes associated with role engulfment in college athletics. While we understand some about the outcomes of role engulfment, little is known about the processes and people that lead to role engulfment. How do athletes come to understand, expand, or narrow their role set? Do they make changes voluntarily, or out of a sense of obligation or coercion? The purpose of this study is to examine how involvement in college athletics impacts the number and nature of social roles that college athletes hold, and how these roles and management thereof impacts their overall sport and college experience.

I am in the process of conducting a season-long ethnographic study of a Division I volleyball team, including observations, interviews, journals, questionnaires, and documents to capture the everyday experiences and role perceptions of the athletes and the surrounding culture of the team and university (Tedlock, 2000). Once all the data has been collected, I will engage in discourse tracing of their role perceptions. This method is oriented toward “asking how and why such issues came into being and how various levels of discourse play a role in their creation and transformation over time” (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1522). Discourse tracing will allow me to detect the emergence of conversations, meanings, and social processes across time that may lead to role engulfment, and the way that knowledge becomes institutionalized, “shaping social practices and setting new practices into play” (Du Gay, 1996, p. 43).

From a theoretical perspective, unpacking athlete experiences within teams will build a more integrated understanding of role identity formation and the role engulfment process and how it unfolds in teams or organizations. From a practical perspective, this study will bring insight and raise consciousness about the cultural practices and norms in sport that lead to role engulfment, and how messages and practices might be reframed toward broader role sets and enhanced athlete well-being.