

Athletes' Identity Transition Out of Sport Pedagogical and Educational Tools

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Abstract: Le transizioni identitarie di fine carriera in ambito sportivo rappresentano una tematica ampiamente approfondita in psicologia, la quale ne riconosce una dimensione processuale che non interessa solamente il momento della transizione, bensì l'intero percorso sportivo ed oltre. La processualità di tale fenomeno chiama direttamente in causa la pedagogia, sollecitandola a riflettere su quali intenzionalità educative porre alla base di tale processo e quali strumenti di intervento utilizzare per sostenere una efficace riorganizzare identitaria. Lo strumento educativo prescelto è rappresentato dall'orientamento formativo, intendendolo sia come l'approccio teorico di fondo al quale educativamente riferirsi sia come lo strumento operativo per prevenire e accompagnare le possibili forme di disagio legate a questo periodo di transizione e riorganizzazione del Sé.

Abstract: Identity transitions out of sport represent a widely research theme in psychology, which recognizes a processual dimension that does not concern only the moment of transition but the entire sports path. The processuality of this phenomenon directly calls into the question the pedagogy, urging it to reflect on which educational intentionality putting at the basis of such phenomenon and which tools to use to support an effective reshaping identity process. The chosen educational instrument is represented by educational guidance, interpreting it both as the main educationally referring theoretical background and as the operational tool to prevent and accompany the possible forms of discomfort associated with this period of transition and of reorganization of Self.

Parole Chiave: Transizioni identitarie in ambito sportivo, Educazione, Pedagogia dello sport, Orientamento formativo

Keywords: Identity Transition out of Sport, Education, Sport Pedagogy, Educational Guidance

1. Introduction

In recent decades humanities continue to expand the interest for the sport phenomenon. This great deal of studies and researches is due to the fact that sport hired more and more importance in different cultures from a social, economic and political point of view (Frasca, 2006). Nowadays contemporary sport can be defined as an *open system* (Heinemann, 1992), always "in movement" because it generates various meanings, where different sciences like sociology, psychology, pedagogy, medicine and



physiology study the sport phenomenon from different approaches. Particularly, psychology and pedagogy focus their interests about psychological and educational aspects of individual and/or groups that practice sport at different levels, whether we are talking about simple exercise, physical activity or strictly sport.

The first sport psychology scientific studies were in the early 1920s (Green, Benjamin, 2009), even if the recognition of the sport psychology like a fully mature discipline took place in the Sixties. Sport pedagogy instead started to grow up at the end of the Sixties with the intention to give a scientific reliability to the physical education (Grupe, Krüger, 1997); although epistemologically founded, sport pedagogy is still difficultly universally accepted in scientific field worldwide. Differently from Italy, for example, where pedagogy stands for the theory of education, in some countries it's preferred to use the term education either we are speaking about theory or we are speaking about practice of education processes, giving to pedagogy the features of a generalist type of speech (Isidori, 2015). For this reason, in the pedagogical literature the amount of studies that have analyzed the education *with* and *through* sport is significantly lower than the psychological ones that have deepened the emotional, cognitive and behavioral aspect of individuals who practice sport and physical activities. The athlete's identity transition out of sport is a rather explored theme in psychological literature while it seems not to be deepened in the pedagogical one. Why pedagogy should be interested in the athlete's identity transition out of sport, which is the difference of interests and analysis from psychology and which pedagogical and educational tools are more suitable to manage this moment of the athlete's life?

In this paper we are trying to give an answer to this question, not pretending to be fully exhaustive, trying to outline the differences between the psychological and pedagogical perspectives. We aim to briefly identify the area of theoretical study, research and educational practice of pedagogy, science interested in an analysis of the educational processes of individuals *lifelong* and *lifewide*, in every context in which they live, even sport.

2. Athlete's Identity Transition Out of Sport in Psychology

Ending a competitive top level sport has been recognized as a problem to cope with for a lot of athletes (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997). The reason why is the shift from a non-ordinary life, such as the one that athletes use to live in during their sport career, to another one, such as the common everyday ordinary life, that may cause different forms of emotional discomfort related to a deeply change, not only in lifestyle but also in personal, social, and financial factors. The motives of this possible discomfort are closely related to the re-configuration of identity that often represents as dramatic for all the individuals who, by changing their professional role, have the necessity to restructure their personal identity all-round. Psychology started to show its interests about the athlete's identity transition out of sport during Sixties and Seventies. At the beginning, the first studies intended the retirement as a unique event but, with the passing of the time, the athletes' identity transition out of sport started to be considered as a real process with a variable time of conclusion; in other words athlete's identity transition out of sport

is considered as a process rather than an event unhooked from the other events of anyone own life (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994).

Identity-related problems during the transition are connected with a sort of “identity confusion” of the athletes that interests both the professional and personal identity construct; in other words many athletes are still hooked on the sport context because it represents a real resource of their identity all-round (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). It seems that many athletes are incapable to imagine themselves like individuals able to be different from the past, as individuals more than athletes. However an exclusive identification with the athletes’ role can have both negative and positive consequences. Some positive effects are related to the achievement of *transferable skills* to other working contexts (McKnight, *et. al.* 2009), but it’s important to underline that the way in which an athlete live socially and emotionally this turning point, directly influences the quality of the transition (Clemmet, Hanrahan & Murray, 2012), positively or negatively (Grove, Lavallee, Gordon, 1997).

Which is the contribution that psychology has given in deepening this phenomenon from its study and research perspective?

At the beginning the first researches about the athlete’s identity transition out of sport focused their attention in order to increase the level of athletic performances; later this athletes event of life, a process rather than a singular event (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) as we said before, solicited researchers to focus their attention on the processes of identity transition to foster an adequate switching to other forms of adult life (Stambulova *et al.*, 2009). From this point of view the identity transition, without taking into account of the contexts in which it takes place, needs the individual will to change his life circumstances and a huge sense of adaptation to the new life conditions (Schlossberg, 1981).

Nowadays the psychological research intends to deeply study the variables that foretell the quality of the transition. In order to do this a systematic review have been identified four different personal and social resources that directly influence the quality of transition like *coping strategies, pre-retirement planning, social support, support program involvement* (Park *et al.*, 2012). Among them, the cognitive and behavioral functional resources can help individual to better cope with out of sport career stress-related and social support outside sport (like family or non-sport peers) is able to foster a non-dramatic transition out of sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Also a pre-retirement planning has been positively related to a good quality of athlete’s identity transition out of sport. From this point of view the pre-retirement planning is optimistically linked with a good quality of post-retirement transition with a proper adaptation to the new conditions of life. In other words this kind of proactive strategies were put in place to prevent the emotional discomfort in order to work on Self. It’s significant to underline, at this point, that testing a variety of different forms of identities outside of the sport context can be considered as a key part of athletes’ identity transition out of sport process (Lally, 2007), and this closely interest the pedagogical perspective about the phenomenon, as will be later discuss in this paper

A systematic review (Park *et al.*, 2012) reports different results, sometimes contradictory. Some studies report that the end of the career has some influences on the psychological distress for many athletes, some others instead suggest that there’s no direct correlation between the after sport engagement distress and the end of the sport career. According to this, if some studies have shown that the presence of certain coping

resources, as well as their lack, influence the quality of adaptation at the end of the professional sports career of many athletes (Gordon, 1995; Murphy, 1995) some others underline that there is no definite evidence that certain coping strategies are more functional than others to foster a good quality of athlete's identity transition out of sport.

Above all, during the transition the sport-professional identity showed a significant relation with coping processes and the new uncertain identity dimension elicit anxiety about work-related future decisions (Grove, Lavallee, Gordon, 1997). Furthermore social support and avoidance-oriented coping strategies as well the acceptance of the "new lifestyle" are mostly frequent to cope with this perceived problem. Among these supports, the ones received from the significant adults seems to positively influence the quality of the transition (Park *et al.*, 2012).

At this point, the argument interests the intervention strategies that can help athletes to overcome this event of their life. At present, there is only one longitudinal published study which verified the efficacy of an out of sport career program (Lavallee, 2005). For this reason there's a need of further researches that deeply study the effectiveness of these specific interventions, in order to deeply understanding the strategies to cope with sport retirements problems and which specific kind of personal resources to promote. However, although there are scientific data that confirm different perspectives, generating some antinomies, it's opportune to consider that the athlete's identity transition out of sport is a multi-faceted and articulated process and it can manifest itself in different ways and forms; this point of view suggests to researchers to deepen this phenomenon through a multiple-perspective and a multiple-criteria approach (Coakley, 1983), considering the individuals interrelated in the environment, as a system among systems.

3. Pedagogical Perspective about the Phenomenon

Retiring from a top-level sport activity is an experience full of emotional involvement. Which is the contribution that pedagogy can offer to deepen this phenomenon from an educational point of view and which pedagogical and educational tools are more suitable to manage it?

Pedagogy is interested in the athletes' identity transition out of sport because this phenomenon calls into question an important educational process: the *construction of subjectivity*. This ongoing process interests the whole individuals life, independently from the single context of life. Subjectivity it's something built from the mix and combination of the different spheres of our life and it needs an educational guide, above all during the many transitions and developmental tasks that individuals always have to overcome.

If the aim of psychology is mostly to define the characteristics of the athlete's identity transition out of sport and to bring out both predictors and personal and environmental variables able to determine the quality of the transition (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007), pedagogy focuses its interest both on the educational process and on life-long and lifewide learning if, as emerged in some research papers, the identity transition necessitate the individual will to change his life circumstances and a huge sense of adaptation to the new life conditions (Schlossberg, 1981), where significant adults seems to influence positively the quality of the transition. The development of the will to

constantly change is a specific field on which pedagogy built the whole educational process and it needs a particular pedagogical reflection and educational intervention.

As underlined in some research papers, during the athlete's identity transition out of sport an athlete "descends from the heights of the extraordinary into the mundane world of ordinariness" (Sparkes, 1998, p. 644); from this perspective an athlete may face some challenges when rethinking about his life after sport, where the athletic identity can have an important role in influencing post-retirement depression and anxiety symptoms, among athletes; from this point of view, the degree of athletic identity may be a risk factor for the psychiatric distress in the months following the retirement and identity-focused screening or an intervention during athletes' sport careers could moderate psychological difficulties associated with sport retirement (Giannone, Haney, Kealy, Ogrodniczuk, 2017). So, if imaging differently from the present is optimistically linked with a good quality of the transition and the ability of experimenting different forms of identities outside of the sport context can be considered as a key part of athletes' identity transition out of sport process (Lally, 2007), it's of a fundamental importance to work on education, to lead athletes to think about themselves in different and original ways of being.

From a pedagogical perspective, there's the necessity to foster and maintain the mental health and general well-being of the individuals throughout this transition, but not only. Pedagogy is mostly interested to reflect on the different educational components that influence the whole educational process, to propose strategy of intervention useful to sustain the identity crisis and the possible discomfort related to it; after all pedagogy, as the science interested in the educational and training process from a lifelong and a lifewide point of view, looks at the educational intervention not only as a process strictly oriented to develop technical skills and ability, but as a path of definition and re-definition of one's own Self which may put reflexively the individual to research one's own identity, an identity that is at the same time something stable and variable (Cambi, 2010). In other words, if on one hand the individuals feel the necessity to embrace the ongoing changing processes linked to the natural inclination to learn in the environment, on the other hand the individuals feel the necessity to perceive him/herself as an individual that may have stable nucleus of personality, allowing him/her to stay in the world in relationship with the category of space, time and others. This refers to the individual project of life, pushing the individual to constantly think about his/her competences, what he/she knows and knows-how.

From a pedagogical point of view, the key components at the basis of the athlete's identity transition out of sport on which is important to educationally reflect are:

- the athlete's identity develops starting from the role that the athlete assumes in the sport context, mixing it with other identities developed outside the sport context;
- elite sport activities represents an area of athlete's life that assume a substantial role and that literally polarizes athletes' interests and involvement;
- significant adults can influence positively the quality of the transition.

Regarding to this, intended the points above as the three *core educational components* in the athlete's identity transition out of sport, the pedagogical perspective leads us to think at this phenomenon as a real *biographical transition*, a process rather than a single event, that needs to be managed both from a pedagogical and a didactics point of view. To sustain a proactive perspective about athlete's identity transition out of sport it's

important to foster during the whole sport career, since the beginning, some educational paths that lead the athletes to reflect in a critical perspective about their project of life and life planning, as well as giving them the possibility to test a variety of different forms of identities outside the sport context too. Trainers have a fundamental role in this process, since that they very often mainly insist on the sport performance, overlooking those educational aspects that significantly and proactively can contribute to a good quality of the athletes' identity transition out of sport.

Behind this approach there is an idea of sport different from the most common and popular ways to interpret it. A sports vision, coherent with educational developments described here, assumes a greater integration among the various experience's fields of the athlete's life. This implies the aim to give athletes the opportunity to experiment their different identities in other contexts, giving them a chance to start using their abilities, skills and competences acquired through sport outside of it, experimenting in often original contexts and thus formulating hypothesis about one's one Self in antagonism, addition or completion of the sport identity. Experiencing that, sport does not take over the incidence of a unique and exclusive context, decreasing the pervasive quality that it generally takes (Cunti, 2016). From this point of view education is an essential support which accompanies the athlete along the conquest of an autonomy and differentiation of Self, an emancipator process that allows the definition of personal identities that constantly changes over time, with respect to the succession of the experiences and the emergence of new needs and desires (Guichard, 2012).

The guiding value of sport necessitate a teaching and didactic quality focused on subjectivities, on the analysis and the choice capabilities that must be sustained and educationally oriented. It's necessary that all trainers, mostly in general all teachers and educators who turn around athletes, may use appropriate instruments able to promote the expression and the emancipation of the subjectivity, promoting the integration of experiences. The solution is to *re-think from a systemic perspective* the relationships that are established in these learning contexts, in order not to risk that the athletes' identity, as well as self-esteem and self-efficacy, primarily builds itself starting from their sporting achievements. Being involved in a top level sport, in fact, should not prevent the opportunity to experiment individual life; after all, any intentionally-oriented educational process should always lead the individual to live life fully, so that each component of one's own identity should be able to globally influence personal lives; in this sense, the sport contexts should ensure the individual to learn how to be permeated by what he/she lives, harmonizing the different shapes of identity in a continuous educational process.

Through a precise *educational intentionality* and *educational care* from all trainers is possible to build guidance paths aimed to support the complex process of identity construction (Bellantonio, 2014), considering identity as a real "pedagogical construct" (Cunti, 2014). In this sense, intentionally educating individuals from the perspective of educational care means putting in light individual evolving needs and developmental tasks. Therefore, a sport that promotes and supports the continuing identity definitions and re-definitions necessarily assumes a guidance value (Cunti, 2016).

Educational intentionality and *educational care* become the two pedagogical categories to interpret the athletes' identity transition out of sport phenomenon, *educational guidance* is the selected tool to build a real *identity-centered developmental program* in order to sustain proactively the identity discomforts and crisis related to the

athletes' identity transition out of sport. All this is in line with the promotion of personal resources in athletes, since their adolescence (Bellantonio, 2014), functional also to overpass critical events regarding the difficult process of identity transition out of sport.

For the reasons described above, the educational guidance can offer the proper support for an adaptive athletes' identity transition out of sport. How is possible to combine educational guidance and competitive sport in order to foster athletes' identity transition out of sport and which competences trainers should learn to daily act in the sport context?

4. Guidance as an Educational Tool

Individual lives are always marked from constant change and a pedagogical interest for the athletes' identity transitions out of sport is linked to the need to educate the athletes to live these moments with a certain degree of autonomy and awareness, as well as to prevent possible forms of discomfort. In sport contexts, with reference to the research mentioned in the previous paragraphs, it's important to wonder which is the individual meaning of the transition but, above all, how the change should become a useful resource to proactively live the future. Among the variables that determine the quality of the athletes' identity transition out of sport, there are some that can sustain some pedagogical reflections. They refer to an *intrapersonal sphere* – the athlete's identity and self-perception – and to a *contextual sphere* – capabilities of managing both sports and life contexts and experiences (Bellantonio, 2016). The pedagogical reflection focus on the modalities, strategies and intervention times through which sport contexts can promote a good redefinition of athletes' identity transition out of sport. Pedagogy, in fact, is mostly interested in deepening the knowledges on individuals and contexts in which educational processes play an important part in influencing the ways of being, the choices and the behaviors.

Intending education as an intentional process aimed to the fundamental purpose of providing individuals adequate capabilities and competences to foster the knowledge construction, self-awareness and critical-thinking to access to reality, it means that education has a specific guidance function. The educational characteristic of guidance lies in an interpretative and methodological option to put in close connection educational paths with life projects. This means not reducing guidance to single opportunities that the socio-historical conditions offer to the individuals, but intending guidance as the critical ability to recognize these as developmental conditions and real opportunities to build the life project (Lo Presti, 2014).

From this point of view, the most important and widespread guidance models, such as Savickas' *Career Construction* (2005) and Guichard's *Self-Construction* (2005) call implicitly into the question the educational dimension. Self-awareness, potentiality development, capacity of choice, problem-solving and problem-posing, environmental influence, changing management, in fact, are pedagogical key topics since Sixties, that pedagogy has precisely deepened through fundamental definitions. Both described models share a guidance idea as a self-built process through a subjective reading of personal experience that, in the first approach corresponds to the reflexive activity on the different forms of identity, while in the second it coincide to the narratives that gives

meaning to the personal experience. In a *Narrative Career Counselling* practice (McIlveen & Patton, 2007) one approach is supplementary to the other because it's the reflective activity which makes the experience capable to be narrated and it's the experience which allows the reflective process. The development of Self, self-evaluating abilities, making autonomous choices to build the project of life are pedagogical and educational matters that seem to find their key in the reflective capabilities of the individuals. From this point of view, guidance is an important educational tool.

The overspread and well structured guidance models mentioned before can be useful in sport contexts too. From this point of view, trainers can become active facilitators of learning paths to help the athletes to manage the identity transition out of sport; in this sense, the educational relationship should put emphasis on the aspects of personality, on the dynamics of life, corporeality and personal stories, with the aim of an emancipation of individuals as persons and as athletes.

In an educational-oriented kind of sport, identity and guidance should be an inseparable triplet, because it's through such an idea of sport that is authentically possible to support the construction and consolidation of identity, inside and outside sport. Such educational competences represents an opportunity to lead in a conscious and professional way the relational process in sport. For this reason, trainers' guidance competences represent an added value to their professionalism, in order to foster the athletes' personal resources to cope with difficulties, consciously choosing and blurring anxieties and tensions arising from the end of sport career. At this point, it's right to think that the educational interventions during the identity transition does not interest the time of the transition but covers the entire process of subjectivity building. Thus, if athletes are somehow "educated" to feel themselves as athletes, but not only, without that an identity dimension prevails over the others, then the existential transitions out of sport can become exceptional moments of Self experimentation. Such a change of perspective allows the individual to express his/her personality with greater degrees of freedom, living different experiences and projecting towards future. For this reason, the guidance function becomes an essential quality at the base of sports training.

In the end, the competences that trainers should daily act in the sport context refers both to *systemic* and *guidance* competences, where the former concerns a wise interconnection among the athletes' personal and environmental developmental needs and desires, in and outside sport, and the latter refers to an adequate fostering process of choice about the own athletes' history through a critical-reflective perspective.

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