

ATHLETES IN TRANSITION: A Novel Intervention Targeting Elite Athletes' Identity Development

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Abstract

It has been estimated that 72% of America's youth participate in organized and team sports in a given year (Sabo & Veliz, 2008). Sport is an activity the cuts across diverse individuals, cultures, and socioeconomic contexts, holding special meaning for many participants. However, the end of one's sport career can be distressing as individuals contend with the social, vocational, and emotional changes that accompany retirement from sport. Indeed, such changes may place athletes at a heightened risk for developing psychological problems following their retirement from sport, such as depression, anxiety, and the loss of one's identity. Despite substantial evidence identifying adjustment difficulties among retiring athletes, scant research has examined interventions which support athletes' career transition.

The present study investigated a brief psychoeducational intervention aimed at facilitating adaptive career transitions from sport. A repeated measures research design was employed among competitive athletes, including those with/without disabilities from various organized and team sports, to evaluate the effect of the intervention on personal growth initiative, mental health literacy, and attitudes toward help seeking. Surveys were administered at baseline and post-intervention.

Repeated measures ANOVA, among study completers (N = 75), revealed significant improvements in mental health literacy, help seeking behaviors, and the extent to which participants believed they would access and utilize resources to assist with sport career transition. No differences were found between athletes with disabilities and athletes without disabilities. These findings suggest that participation in a brief psychoeducational intervention may improve positive health behaviors among athletes, helping them cope with the loss of their athletic careers by enhancing help-seeking, knowledge of mental health, and personal agency. Study findings have further implications for career development, wellness, and prevention for the athletes with whom we work in counseling psychology.

Introduction

- Due to their rigorous involvement in sport, some elite athletes may develop a constricted identity that can limit adaptive responses to life challenges, thereby contributing to psychosocial problems in retirement.
- In collaboration with AthletesCAN, a psychoeducational workshop was developed titled, "Athletes in Transition" to help athletes better prepare for the known risks associated with a constricted identity in sport retirement.
- The aim of the study was to measure how effective the workshop was at improving athletes' mental health literacy, personal growth initiative, and attitudes towards help-seeking.

ATHLETES IN TRANSITION WORKSHOP OVERVIEW:

- The 1.5-hour intervention was facilitated by the first author and included the following psychoeducational components:
 - Theories of identity development
 - Psychosocial risks associated with sport retirement, including a constricted identity and other mental health challenges
 - Overview of strategies used to diversify identity
 - Provision of appropriate resources/referrals

Method

PROCEDURES

- A repeated measures research design was used, with non-probability sampling.
- A total of 75 athletes were recruited to the study through community and online postings.

MEASURES

- Personal Growth Initiative Scale-II** (PGIS-II; Robitschek, Ashton, Sperring, et al., 2013). A 16-item, self-report instrument that measures individuals' motivation for pursuing personal development goals and identity exploration/awareness.
- Mental Health Literacy Scale** (MHLS; O'Connor & Casey, 2015). A 35-item, self-report instrument that measures participants' understanding of various aspects of mental health.
- Attitudes Toward Seeking Professional Psychological Help: Shortened Form** (ATSPPH: SF; Fischer & Farina, 1995). A 10-item, self-report instrument which measures participants' attitudes towards seeking professional psychological help.



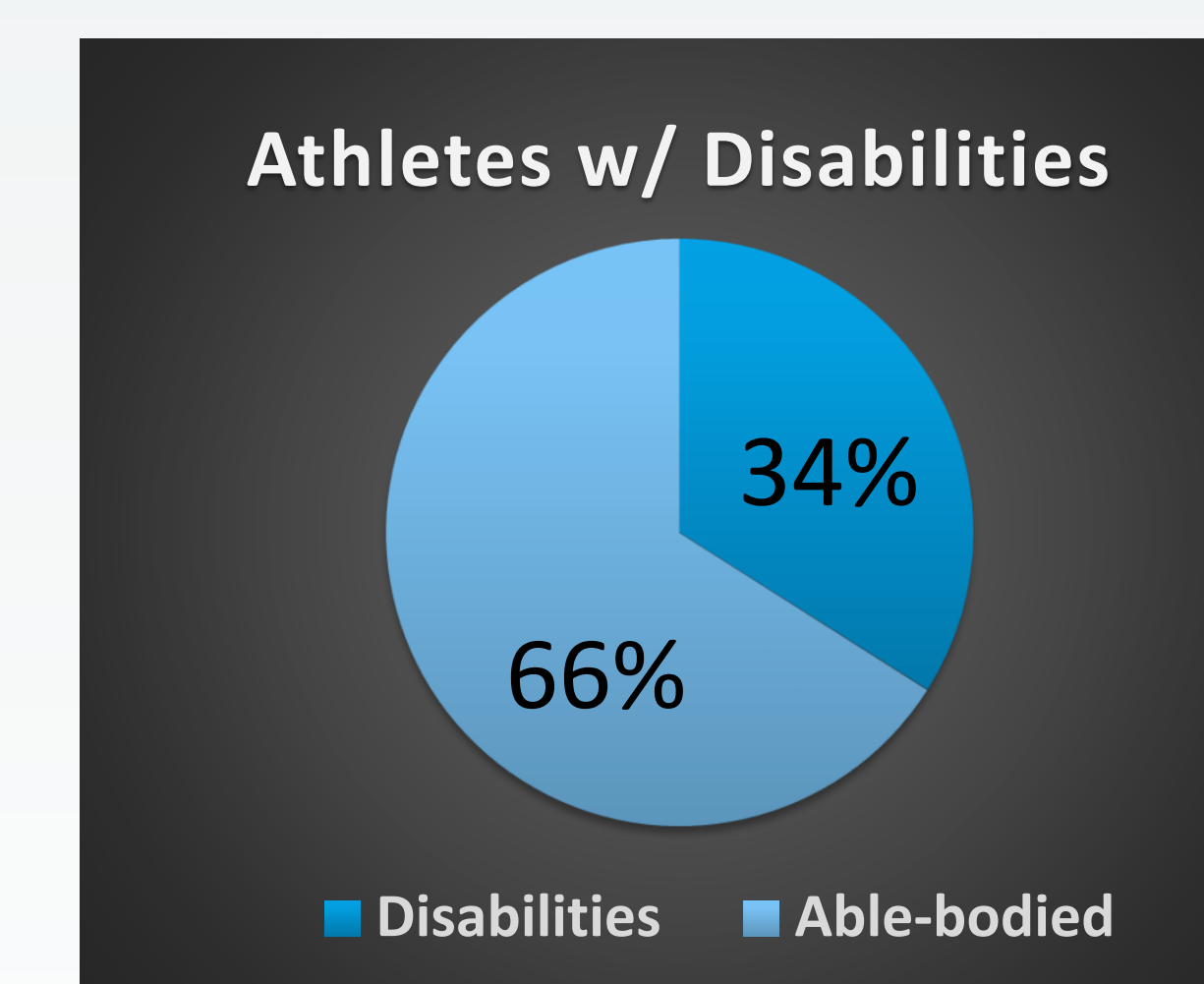
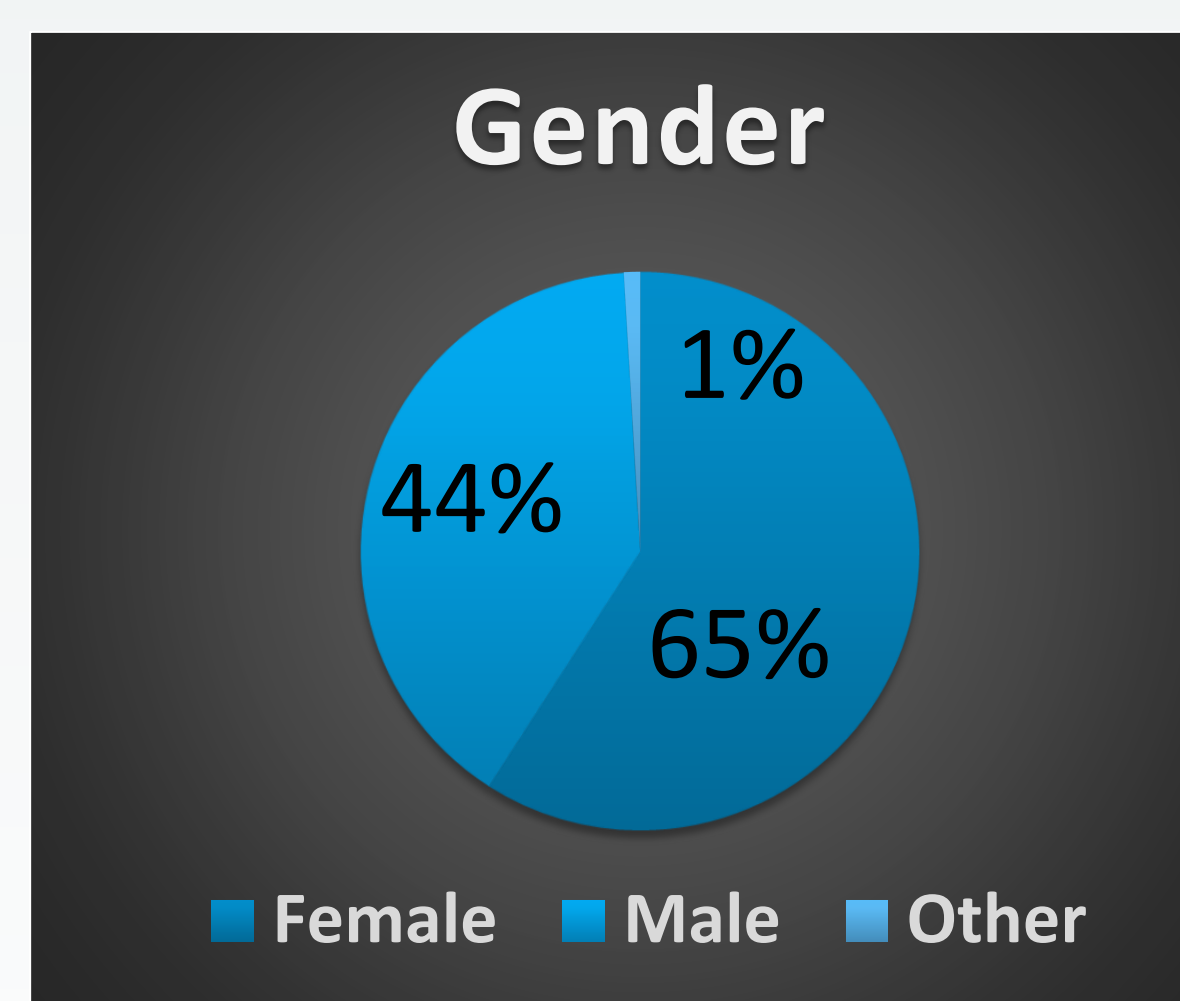
Results

ANALYSES INDICATED SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN:

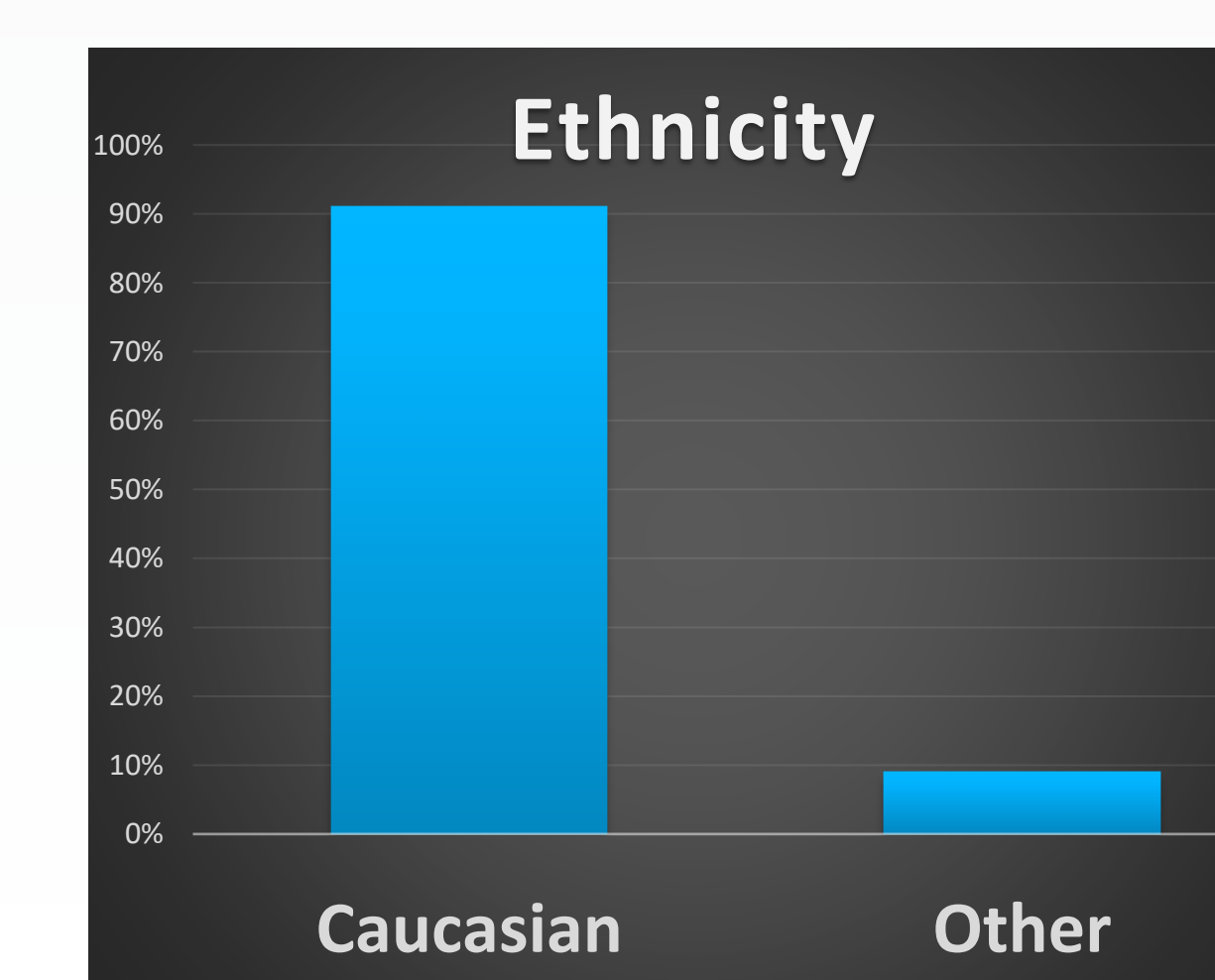
- Help-seeking behaviors $t(74)=-3.338, p = 0.004^{**}$
- Mental health literacy $t(74)=-2.648, p = 0.014^*$
- Beliefs about access and utilization of transition resources $t(74)=-2.343, p = 0.028^*$

Scale	Pre X	Post X
PGIS-II	3.6	3.7
MHLS	3.7	3.8
ATSPPH: SF	2.0	2.2

Participants



$\bar{x} = 28$ years old



Discussion

- Results from the present study suggest that participation in a brief psychoeducational workshop may improve positive health behaviors among elite athletes, contributing to enhanced psychological adjustment post-retirement.
- Future research may include developing and testing more sophisticated interventions which support athletes' transition to retirement.



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