The Use of Role Theory and Method to Support Expanding College Athletes Role Repertoire: A Literature Review

Danielle Gervais
Lesley University, dgervais@lesley.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lesley.edu/expressive_theses

Part of the Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons

Recommended Citation

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School of Arts and Social Sciences (GSASS) at DigitalCommons@Lesley. It has been accepted for inclusion in Expressive Therapies Capstone Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Lesley. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lesley.edu, cvrattos@lesley.edu.
The Use of Role Theory and Method to Support Expanding College Athletes Role Repertoire: A Literature Review

Capstone Thesis

Lesley University

April 29th, 2021

Danielle Gervais

Drama Therapy

Laura L. Wood, PhD, RDT/BCT
Abstract

College student athletes tend to prioritize the role of athlete versus the role of student due to positive early life responses to their athletic pursuits (Menke & Germany, 2019). When the collegiate athlete then retires and/or graduates, they are at an increased likelihood of suffering negative psychological symptoms and/or an identity crisis now that the role of athlete is no longer relevant to their identity. Drama therapy’s role theory and method, an embodied form of therapy that focuses on identity formation and development in a less verbal and more expressive way, could potentially be used as a preventative treatment in preparing for these transitional periods (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). This literature review will explore how one’s athletic identity is developed from childhood through their college career and the drama therapy theory and techniques of role theory, role method and role play. The intention of this thesis is to emphasize a need for psychological intervention with this population and to suggest further research on integrating role theory and role method within this intervention.

Keywords: Identity, Identity Formation, Student Athlete Identity, Role Theory, Role Play, College Athletics, Student Athlete, Embodiment
The Use of Role Theory and Method to Support Expanding College Athletes Role Repertoire: A Literature Review

Introduction

In the United States, the term student athlete or college athlete is used when referring to those individuals enrolled and sponsored by an educational institution, such as a university or college, who are competing in a high level of sport and athleticism (Coakley, 2017). Collegiate athletics require years of hard work, physical training and mental toughness (Nichols, 2011). A majority of these student athletes have played their sport at a highly competitive level since early childhood and greatly identified as an athlete ever since (Menke & Germany, 2019). With their great levels of effort and achievement in their sport, some college athletes will have long successful careers and are drafted into professional leagues but, “98% of all college athletes will not make a career out of sport,” (Menke & Germany, p.17, 2019). At the end of their college careers, these student athletes begin to undergo two difficult retirement transitions as they will no longer have an opportunity to play their sport at a professional or collegiate level: student to working professional and athlete to non-athlete. In studying athletes making these transitions, it was noted by Russell et al. (2018) that those who do not have strong social identifiers other than athlete, tend to suffer from major social and emotional symptoms, such as denial and mental and behavioral disengagement upon immediate retirement.

In the following years post-retirement, collegiate athletes who do not have other strong social identifiers are more likely to suffer from depression, anxiety and substance use disorder (Menke & Germany, 2019). The leading cause of death in young men aged 18-24 who are undergoing difficult life transitions is suicide (Calear et al., 2017) which raises concerns for the
well-being of a majority of retiring collegiate athletes who will likely fit this description (Miller & Buttell, 2018). When these student athletes can confidently access other social identifiers that they feel work well for them, they are more likely to make a successful retirement transition into the working world (Killeya-Jones, 2005). It can be difficult for student athletes to identify with other social identifiers or roles in their lives, because they have been praised or encouraged by their peers, coaches, family, communities and society to exhibit only characteristics that would correlate with successful athleticism and have been discouraged to pursue other interests or aspects of their identity (Menke & Germany, 2019).

When psychological intervention is offered whilst the student athlete is still within their college career, there is a higher chance of expanding their identity to contain a broader range of positive identifiers, obtaining a better overall retirement transition and improving their mental health (Miller & Buttell, 2018). Knowing that athletes are very attuned to their bodies, using an embodied approach to therapy, such as drama therapy, could be effective in evoking emotional arousal and expanding their identity (Armstrong et al., 2015). These student athletes are also familiar with witnessing, embodiment and performance in their athletic fields, which are similar to drama therapy’s core processes that will be explained in further detail in the literature review below. Within drama therapy, a theoretical orientation known as role theory (Landy, 2021) posits that an individual’s identity and personality are made up of a multitude of roles, with each role serving a different purpose within the individual’s life. Operating under this theory, one will engage in role method, which involves embodying various roles salient to an individual’s developmental needs. Using this approach, this literature review will aim to detail the potential efficacy of aiding collegiate athletes in expanding their identities through drama therapy’s role theory and method.
Researcher Reflexivity and Limitations

This literature review is written by an author who identifies as a white, cis-gender, heterosexual woman and understands that their position in examining research on predominantly white, heterosexual, male-identifying individuals does not completely encompass the experience of all collegiate athletes. The author is studying drama therapy practices within North America and predominantly reviewing literature based in the same continent, therefore the experiences, practices and findings may not be universal or similar in other parts of the world. The author would like to acknowledge that they themselves are not an athlete, but they do have a connection to the population studied through years of living with and supporting a family member who has been greatly involved with and a part of this population.

It is important to note that this literature review is focused primarily on team sports that are popular within North America such as basketball, football and hockey. This was due to the fact that the author was able to locate more research regarding these sports in terms of athletic identity and retirement transitions and were most familiar to the author. Additionally, it should be noted that there are identified gender role differences within identity formation that should be accounted for when reading the published literature that is predominantly performed on male, cis-gender, heterosexual identifying individuals (Steensma et al., 2013). There is also an often a racial and ethnic component in identity formation with People of Color undergoing a very different experience than their white counterparts, especially within the athletic communities (Clammer, 2015).
The goal of reviewing this literature is to demonstrate the need for expansion of the mental health treatment of collegiate athletes for maximum efficacy in preventing possible negative psychological symptoms that can arise when the retirement transition is not properly prepared for. It aimed to demonstrate that it could be beneficial for the collegiate programs to create additional mental health programs in order to provide their student athletes with the appropriate resources for their success post-graduation.

The author was drawn to this work when looking at her younger brother’s experience playing competitive hockey. When her brother was 16 years old, he was diagnosed with post-concussion syndrome. He was playing hockey for a preparatory school in Connecticut, suffered a head injury and continued to play through his various symptoms of headache, floaters, blurry vision, etc. After some time dealing with these symptoms, he had called the author and told her he was convinced that he had developed a brain tumor. Upon receiving medical attention, the doctor told him he had post-concussion syndrome and would need to take six months off from playing any sports. This recovery time set him back both mentally and physically, but also was a realization for the family that he may need to stop playing completely. Her brother has played hockey since he was four years old and has identified as a hockey player and competitive student athlete ever since. When their mother approached him with the idea that he may need to retire, he had said that this was his life and he did not know what he would do without hockey.

After that moment, this author began to notice all of the young athletes around her and their identity crises upon retirement. The author grew up with a lot of young men in Canada who had aspirations of playing professional sports and when they did not accomplish this goal, they
Identity Development

Identity development is a lifelong process beginning in early childhood, through late adulthood (Sokol, 2009). According to Erik Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages, identity formation begins to solidify and take precedence in a person’s life in early adolescence as an individual undergoes the stage “Identity vs. Role Confusion,” (Cohen, 2016). Within this stage, the person begins to develop their idea of self as an individual: who they are, what they like, what they value, etc. Prior to this stage of development, these questions were answered by familial, cultural and societal values. In later adolescence, the person will likely separate themselves from their
family and begin to develop ideas of self as an independent person within society: what role they want to play in their immediate community in terms of occupation, relationships and level of involvement with various communities, on both immediate and global levels (Cohen, 2016).

Erikson did not define an age range for this stage, but it can be assumed to be from today’s North American standard to be 12-18 years of age (Sokol, 2009). Within this period, there exists a great deal of questioning, trying on different social identifiers and developing opinions as a part of identity discovery and formation. When a person does not adequately explore the different aspects of their identity to its fullest extent, there is a possibility for role confusion with the person becoming overly rigid in their identity or overwhelmed and confused by their identity and possibilities (Cohen, 2016). Jeffrey Arnett (2004) determined that with more young people attending post-secondary institutions, women having children later in life to achieve careers, the average age of marriage increasing to 30 years and the increased number of parents living with adult age children, that this stage of identity formation likely moved beyond the age of 18.

Arnett (2004) suggested that an additional stage in-between adolescence and adulthood be added to development, titled “Emergent Adulthood,” that encompassed the years of 18 to mid-20s, in which there are major features of identity exploration, instability, self-focus, feeling in-between and the idea of hope and possibility (p. 8). During this stage, the individual develops their identity in terms of mainly occupations, relationships and clarifying their wants and values from life. For many modern North Americans, this will involve leaving their family home to attend college or gaining an increased level of independence, without the responsibility of owning a home or providing for a family, as they would in their true adult years. Arnett (2004) compared this to Erikson’s idea of prolonged adolescence, where the individual used role
exploration in industrialized societies to find their niche within society. He found that 35% of North American teenagers in high school agree that they were unprepared for college educationally and did not take high school seriously in terms of academics. For many, college becomes the place where responsibility and academic achievement actually become a necessary priority for these young people’s futures (Arnett, 2004).

**Collegiate Identity**

Within North America, the social expectation for a majority of young people is that they will attend some type of post-secondary education and as Arnett (2004) detailed, “By age 25, nearly 70% of emerging adults have obtained at least some college education,” (p.120). College has become a place for young adults to explore and solidify their identities in all aspects: physically, emotionally, sexually, relationally, etc. The North American post-secondary educational systems created an environment in which it is expected that young people attending these institutions find the best “fit” for themselves in terms of a possible career and it provides these individuals with the opportunity to try on a wide range of occupations in the forms of classes and training (Arnett, 2004). Arnett (2004) discussed that young people are often seeking an “aha” moment, where the individual feels that click or calling toward a particular career field through their college experience (p.122). It is common practice for college students to change their concentration of study or take a wide range of classes seeking an answer to the question, “What kind of job would fit me best, given my abilities and interests?” (p.122).

Breen, Scott and McLean’s (2019) study of touring college student’s dormitory rooms and social media pages, in order to gain insight into their identity formation, found that the college dormitory rooms and social media pages were physical representations of the changes in self and the idealized self for these students. These newer college students had access to more
public and viewable spaces in their dormitories than previously in their family homes that they could personalize to demonstrate their identities or idealized identity to others. They did this by showing or hiding photos, quotations, personal belongings from childhood, relationships, etc. Arnett (2004) indicated that since this is the first time many college students are leaving the controlled environments of their family homes, this will be the first opportunity for many to have the “college experience,” which included parties, drinking, unmonitored social lives, sexual relations and sporting events (p.126). Self-control and self-discipline techniques learned in the collegiate years become very important to these students' success in academia and can shape their identities for the rest of their lives (Arnett, 2004).

In Kroshus, Hawrilenko and Browning’s (2021) study they conducted an online survey on over 5000 incoming college students, three times during their academic year to measure levels of depression, anxiety, grade point average, stressors and coping skills. The authors found that there was an increase in reported depressive and anxiety symptoms beginning in the summer prior to the student’s entry to college through the spring semester of a student’s first year. They reported that this developmental transition can be difficult for students as they are leaving the highly structured environment of their family homes and into the more independent environment of college, as Arnett (2004) had also suggested. If the students were able to develop an identity containing self-compassion, resilience and a strong support network, they were more likely to develop successful coping skills and generally report a better transition, compared to those who were dealing with chronic stressors, such as: financial stress, lack of support, multiple demands or responsibilities, family needs etc. (Kroshus, Hawrilenko & Browning, 2021).

Kaufman (2014) stated that college became a place where young people use symbolic interaction, an interpretive process of meaning making through social interaction, to form
personal identity. He expanded George Mead’s idea that we form our identities with not only ideas we create of ourselves, but also use the thoughts and opinions of the “generalized others” we surround ourselves with to form aspects of our personal identity (p.37). College becomes a physical and symbolic area for young people who are moving through a developmental stage to find consistency with their personal identity and their social identity through the interactions they have with other students (Kaufman, 2014).

There is a socio-economic aspect to attending college that impacts identity as well. Kaufman (2014) detailed that, “Education has always been viewed as the medium through which individuals can achieve upward social mobility,” (p.38) meaning that it is assumed that individuals who complete college are more likely to hold professional occupations post-graduation and achieve middle to upper socio-economic status. For young adults from these upper socio-economic backgrounds, this may not be very influential to their identity formation, but for those from lower socio-economic backgrounds, attending college can become a great social identifier and highly influential for their identity formation (Kaufman, 2014).

**Athletic Identity**

Brewer, Van Raalte and Linder (1993, as cited by Yao, Laurencell and Trudeau, 2020), defined athletic identity as, “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete's role,” (p. 376). Jonathan & Migliaccio (2009, as cited by Heird and Steinfeldt, 2013) detailed that athletic talent is often discovered early in one’s life and then fostered through a great deal of time and psychological commitment to the sport. Therefore, by the time these student athletes have reached high school, they have strongly internalized the athletic identity. Yao, Laurencell and Trudeau (2020), deemed that this role and identity is unique within society with drastically ever-
changing characteristics including positive physical performance of sport and activity, keeping personal appearances, high levels of fitness and positive nutritional habits.

Chang et al. (2018), expanded upon this through surveying 198 student athletes twice over a three-month period, measuring athletic identity, psychological flexibility and athlete burnout. They found that a person’s athletic identity is formed through positive and negative experiences in their sport, such as winning and losing. Athletes who received praise from their coaches and performed well tended to have increased levels of self-worth and a higher level of confidence with their identity as an athlete, whilst those who performed poorly and did not receive praise tended to struggle building their athletic identity. When athletes received a great deal of praise for their athletic performance, they tended to identify greater with their athletic identifier than other social identifiers they may hold where they did not receive this type of praise (Menke & Germany, 2019). Chang et al. (2018), noted that those with strong athletic identities would react strongly to wins and losses, because they had a very distinct idea of what their role as an athlete was in terms of positive performance.

Having a strong athletic identity could be both a positive and negative trait, according to Chang et al. (2018). In studying athletic identity and burnout, Chang et al. (2018), determined that those with strong athletic identity were more likely to be motivated and energetic within their athletic role, but they were also more likely to suffer emotional difficulties when facing poor performance outcomes, such as losing. They found it required a great deal of psychological flexibility on the part of the athlete to moderate the emotional toll of pressure to perform well and maintain an athletic identity. When an athlete had a strong tie to their athletic identity, they may have had stronger reactions to both their successes and perceived failures. Both the positive and negative situations provided information to the athlete as to who they are and is strongly tied
to how the athlete defined themselves. When the athlete underwent a great deal of negative performance it could become draining and resulted in the athlete feeling powerless within their role (Chang et al., 2018).

**College Athletics**

Intercollegiate athletic, National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) programs are largely prominent throughout North America and bring in a great deal of financial revenue through games, competitions, conferences, licensed clothing and branding etc., that causes the institution to rely on these athletic programs to build student, alumni and community involvement (Pflum et al., 2017). Some institutions will use collegiate athletics as a marketing tool, particularly in rural communities, to bring financial success and build community, whilst other institutions will use this as a recreational opportunity for students. If an institution placed a great emphasis on winning and positive performance outcomes, Pflum et al. (2017) detailed that the student athlete may also have felt a lot of pressure to perform and placed emphasis on their role as a student athlete, which continued even post college. Since the pressure for positive performance is so large and these athletes are also maintaining the status of a college student, many high-level institutions will provide their athletes with medical attention, tutoring services and academic advising, to ensure their athletes can continue to play whilst maintaining NCAA division requirements (Menke & Germany, 2019). These requirements are put in place in an attempt to keep the athletes balanced and safe, detailing that the athlete is educationally and physically eligible to compete (Menke & Germany, 2019).

High school student athletes will often be recruited to play their sport at a collegiate level for scholarships, a chance to continue playing the sport they love and for some, with the hope that they will be recruited to play professionally (Pflum et al., 2017). Kissinger and Watson
(2009) determined that colleges and universities reinforce the idea that these athletes will play at a professional level post-collegiately, by placing an emphasis on positive performance and winning, which can lead to the role of athlete becoming an integral part of their identity and feel like an obtainable career option post-college (as cited by Pflum et al., 2017).

**Student Athletic Identity**

An athlete playing a sport professionally deals with a great deal of pressure and student athletes face additional challenges due to their position as an athlete and student such as: the pressure of performing in a high level of competitive athletics, the difficulties of keeping up with the demands of their classes, identity crises that are associated with that role of student athlete and the need to maintain a balanced social life (Pflum et al., 2017). According to Parham (1993, as cited by Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013), student athletes face six major demands; balancing athletics and academics, balancing social activities and athletics, dealing with athletic success and perceived failures, managing physical health and injuries, navigating relationships with coaches, peers and loved ones, as well as preparing for the probable upcoming termination of their athletic careers.

Pinkerton et. al, (1989, as cited by Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) deemed that this group could be at risk for negative psychological symptoms because of the multitude of complex demands placed on the student athletic identity and lifestyle. Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020) found that student athletes were at equal rate as the average college student to develop psychological symptoms such as depression or anxiety, but only 10% of the student athletes would seek out mental health services, as compared to the 30% of college students as a whole who would seek out these services. This suggested that the demand of the student athlete role would not allow
these individuals to seek mental health services or that the student athletes have perceived negative consequences for doing so (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020).

Johnson & Migliaccio (2009, as cited by Menke & Germany, 2019), found that student athletic identity may be constructed around the idea of a career in sports indicating success in life and an attempt to achieve the American or African American dream. This meant that the individual believed if they are hardworking, dedicated to their training, sport and have talent, they will have achieved success in life by becoming a professional athlete. Beginning in youth athletics, retired college athletes reported in Menke & Germany’s (2019) study, that they were encouraged by their coaches, family and peer supports to be highly motivated in their athletic practice, which they thought demonstrated their determination for success. These characteristics then followed these athletes into their collegiate careers; the athletes had to become incredibly motivated and competitive in order to balance all of the challenges of their education and athletic pursuits. This competitive, hardworking and focused nature then becomes a staple of one’s athletic identity (Menke & Germany, 2019).

There is a high level of structure that comes with being a student athlete (Menke & Germany, 2019). Parham (1993, as cited by Heird & Steinfeldt, 2013) detailed, that athletes must follow a strict regime in order to stay eligible to play, including modifying their school schedules, homework, workouts, training, coaching, social lives and games (Menke & Germany, 2019). The student athlete is typically provided with schedules created by the athletic team in order to fulfill these responsibilities. In turn, they are expected to exhibit strong work ethic and demonstrate the ability to deal with balancing their numerous duties in order to follow NCAA guidelines and stay eligible to compete (Menke & Germany, 2019). In O’Neil, Amorose and Pierce’s (2021) study of student athlete’s commitment to both academics and athletics, the
authors referenced Snyder’s (1985) typology which determined that student athletes are holding two roles at the same time: the roles and responsibilities of a student and that of an athlete. Snyder (1985, as cited by O’Neil, Amorose & Pierce) deemed that some student athletes will find balancing these two roles compatible for them and they will be able to maintain dual commitment to the roles, but many will find these roles become in conflict with one another and prioritize the role of athlete (Snyder, 1985, as cited by O’Neil Amorose & Pierce, 2012).

Killeya-Jones (2005) expanded upon this further, using identity discrepancy theory and the Hierarchical Class Model (HICLAS) with a study of male collegiate athletes to measure whether or not the two roles of student and athlete were congruent, or in conflict for these athletes. Killeya-Jones (2005) found that when the roles were held with equal importance, the student athlete was more likely to report positive academics, satisfaction with sports and with life, but when one role was held in higher importance than the other, they suffered role conflict: often prioritizing athletics and reporting less satisfaction with academics, sports and life as a whole. Killeya-Jones (2005) suggested that psychological intervention, such as counseling, should be performed prior to the student athlete’s retirement, in order to address the conflicting roles of student and athlete, solidify other positive social identifiers and create a more positive retirement transition.

Graupensberger et al. (2020) found in their study, surveying 234 student athletes twice during COVID-19 (once upon initial closure and again in April of 2020), that for many athletes, the social element of being part of a team was crucial to their identities. The researchers deemed that being in contact with other athletes on their team helped validate and maintain student athletes' identity, particularly since these are the individuals that the student athlete is in contact with most; for training, transportation to events, living situations, socialization and performance
in the sport. They found that during COVID-19, when sporting events were cancelled, some student athletes reported greater symptoms of depression, but when they were able to keep in contact with their teammates, via phone calls or video chatting, these symptoms lessened and their athletic identity remained intact, or even strengthened. Graupensberger et al. (2020) suggested that this focus on team connectivity should be fostered by the athletic directors and educational institutions past the pandemic and for mental health purposes during times of break in the academic school year, such as: spring break, end of season, injury etc.

**Student Athlete Retirement**

In Bjornsen-Ramig et al.’s (2020) study of student athletes and their potential retirement transition due to graduation, they found an overwhelming sense of negative emotions surrounding athletes’ retirement such as: uncertainty, anxiety, depression, fear, dread and an overall sense of lack of excitement surrounding post-college life. They noted that the students reported in their interviews, based on the IS-Wels Factors model, that this was due to the upcoming lack of structure that was provided for them within the collegiate environment and an increase in autonomy that these individuals were not used to (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020).

Bjornsen-Ramig et al. (2020) uncovered in their interviews that there were several aspects of the collegiate athlete experience that lead to them having these reported negative thought patterns toward retirement. They detailed that the participants felt that since these students were spending so much time in their sport, they did not have time to adequately spend time on classes, internships or other future career building opportunities and felt unprepared to enter the working world. Since they were spending so much time on athletics, these college athletes did not have time to create other social supports, so they relied heavily on their coaches, teammates, trainers etc., for social interaction; fearing losing these social supports upon
retirement and increasing the fear of not knowing how to socialize outside of these athletic based circles. There is great physicality required to participate in this level of athletics, hence participants in this study identified feeling anxious about no longer exercising as extensively or finding opportunities to have a physical outlet, as they once had with training and competing in their sport (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020). As stated previously with Yao, Laurencell and Trudeau’s (2020) study, physicality and physique are two characteristics of the athletic identity, which are reduced when the student athletic career ends.

One of Bjornsen-Ramig et al.,’s (2020) major findings was that students highly identified with the role of athlete and did not know how to think of themselves any differently after retirement. One student was quoted as saying, “I can't picture myself not as a soccer player. I can't really see it. It just really crushes me, and I think about the season ending, your career ending and it's just, it's emotional ... just shattering mentally,” (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020, p.13). They cited Adler & Adler (1987) in detailing that since these athletes are so greatly committed to their sport, their athletic identity becomes the most important to the student athlete and other identifiers become underutilized and underdeveloped. With this reliance on their athletic identity, the student athletes have not explored career, academic or social opportunities, they have relied heavily on their athletics as a foundation of their identity and feel lost in defining who they are after retirement (Bjornsen-Ramig et al., 2020).

**Drama Therapy**

Renee Emunah (2020) defined drama therapy as, “the intentional and systematic use of drama/theatre processes to achieve psychological growth and change,” (p.26). She detailed that drama therapy has a long history, rooted in psychotherapy and using theater and drama as tools. Phil Jones (2007) expanded this further to say that drama therapy helps to facilitate change
through the dramatic material with the drama providing the potential for clients to reflect on and transform experiences in life with emotional expression as a way to work through their problems. Mayor & Frydman (2021) building on the work of Jones (2007) further detailed the core processes within drama therapy that help facilitate change within the therapeutic environment. Alongside Jones (2007) they identified that dramatic projection, distancing and empathy, role and personification, interactive audience and witnessing, embodiment, playing, life-drama connection, transformation and triangular relationship make up the core processes in drama therapy.

**Embodiment**

Jones (2007) explained that across cultures, the body is the main way humans communicate. Within drama therapy, embodiment, “involves the way the self is realised by and through the body,” (Jones, 2007, p.113). Humans communicate through body positioning, gestures, expressions, and their voice on both an unconscious and conscious level. Therefore, the way the body relates to a person, others in the world and identity are all important within drama therapy work. This means that when engaging in drama therapy work, it often involves a client working within their body, taking notice of their body and physically moving as a form of emotional expression throughout a session. This could be useful for all since identity is strongly connected to how one’s body is presented in a social space, but particularly for those who are not typically connected to their bodies or who feel more comfortable communicating in a very physical manner (Jones, 2007).

Armstrong et al., (2015), found in watching filmed therapy sessions in *Three Approaches to Drama Therapy* by Robert Landy (2005), when the clients were engaged in dramatic embodiment, they were more likely to experience an increase in emotional arousal. Jones (2007)
provided further support to this in explaining when the body and mind are engaged together, they are more likely to make discoveries, “Issues are encountered and realised through physical embodiment - they are made, and encountered through, the body,” (p.114).

**Performance/Active Witnessing**

Within drama therapy, witnessing involves actively serving as an audience to others or to oneself (Jones, 2007). Through the theatrical therapeutic experience, witnessing provides bi-directional support for the audience and the performer and the possibility for mutual understanding (Jones, 2007; 2016, as cited by Mayor & Frydman, 2021). Using a traditional theatrical approach, an audience can exist in a variety of forms. There is typically not an audience of non-therapeutic individuals, as one would see in a traditional play or theatrical performance, but an audience can exist in group work when the client is acting as an audience or witness to another client’s work. The role of the audience can be crucial for support, used for confrontation, to share a message or story, etc. A client can become a witness to themselves through the techniques of doubling, using projective objects to represent themselves, or projecting aspects of themselves onto others within the audience. Having the ability to have someone witness the client’s story, message, and emotions can be incredibly powerful for both the client and the audience who may project themselves into the role of the client performing (Jones, 2007).

Athletes are familiar with the role of the audience as they are typically witnessed in their sport by an audience of fans. This audience participation is similar to the way Jones (2007) described an audience as an active witness. In their athletic performance, the audience can act as a support to the players (Scoppa, 2021). Scoppa (2021) found that during the European men’s soccer league regular season, the home team tended to score 0.5 more points than the away team,
which they believed was due to the comfortability of the athletes playing on their home base, but also due to the encouragement from the fans/audience members. When the COVID-19 pandemic led the league to not allow fans into the stadiums, they found a notable decrease in all skill-based performance areas of the players, which lead to the conclusion that the audience or fans did support and contribute to the players success within the game (Scoppa, 2021).

Whilst the audience can be a positive reinforcement for the athletes, Sanderson (2016) determined they can also be a detriment to their emotional expression. In a survey done on ESPN.com, after NFL quarterback Derek Anderson’s emotional response during a Monday night football game, Sanderson (2016) found that while some fans and audience members found this emotional expression to be appropriate behavior, others found it to be unprofessional and a major character flaw. This fan response suggested that athletes may be regulating their emotional responses in an attempt to please their audience or fans, despite their seemingly internalized negative feelings.

**Role Theory**

Role theory, through a drama therapy lens, originated through a few major theorists throughout history, such as William James, Charles Cooley, George Herbert Mead and Ralph Linton (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). In 1959, Erving Goffman published his work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, in which he detailed a psychological view of life as a performance. All of these theorists, “believed that the dramatic metaphor of life as theatre and people as actors can be applied to an analysis of social and cultural life and inner psychological processes” (Ramsden & Landy, 2021, p.84). Joseph L. Moreno, a doctor and psychodramatist, took this thought a step further, believing that “life is not like theatre, life is theatre,” (p.85). This provided the foundation for Landy’s (2021) role theory and method as it is known today.
Role theory operates under the idea that human beings are naturally role takers and players (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). A role is defined as, “discrete patterns of behavior that suggest a particular way of thinking, feeling, valuing or acting,” (p.86) that can change over time and are dependent on the individual’s experiences. One’s personality and identity are formed through the roles that they are introduced to, play with, the role’s interactions with other roles the individual holds, interactions with other people’s roles and the world. They originate in early childhood through observation and modeling and are honed and developed over time. The idea of roles comes from the theatrical experience of the concept of role, wherein an actor takes on a particular role with a character that has specific defining features and behaviors. Landy (2021) detailed that a person is capable of playing a wide range of roles that make up one’s role system. He determined that there was a Taxonomy of 84 archetypal roles that a person could play, although this number is disputed, as these roles are shifting with the patterns of our society to more appropriately include gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity, etc. (Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

Ramsden and Landy (2021) used the example of the role of the mother, which archetypally typically contains behavioral patterns of being nurturing, kind, warm and loving that are exhibited by one’s mother or motherly figures. This could change within an individual if they experience a mother who exudes the opposite of these characteristics or undergoes an experience where the more traditional idea of a mother is no longer true (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). Landy (2021) detailed that each person is made up of myriad roles that each serve a specific purpose. He felt that when the person was put in a particular situation, they would take on, or enroll as, the role they feel that best serves them and they have developed most to play in that moment. This can be detrimental to a person when they have underdeveloped, unavailable or inappropriate roles in their role system.
If a person has suffered repeated abuse or trauma in their lives, they often are forced into the role of the ‘victim,’ meaning that they are often feeling weak and powerless and behave accordingly. This person would have a well-developed ‘victim’ role, but an underdeveloped role of ‘hero’ or ‘person with power,’ so when this person is put in a situation where they may need to stand up for themselves or others, they would likely resort to the role of ‘victim’ as this role has become more easily accessible and familiar. Role theory assumes that when a person enters the therapeutic space, they are lacking or have an underdeveloped role that they need in order to be successful in life. It can then become the job of the drama therapist to aid the client in identifying these roles and experiment in playing them, so the client can have access to this role when they need it (Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

**Role Method**

When a client and drama therapist begin working within role theory, they use role method (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). The client and drama therapist work together to identify a role the client plays or wants to play and then identify its counter role, which is defined as, “not necessarily the opposite of the role, as evil is to good, but rather other sides of the role that may be denied or avoided or ignored in the ongoing attempt to discover effective ways to play a single role,” (p.87). Ramsden and Landy (2021) clarified that this does not always have to be the darker part of the role, although it can be. For example, with the role of the mother, the counter role may be the brother, which depending on the individual, could be a role that is caring and protective or mean and abusive. It is important that the client be able to play and experience both roles, as there is a complexity to life and a need to understand all parts of the role in order to achieve access to them. “To be a truly moral person demands an ability to acknowledge and make peace with the immoral or amoral qualities that exist on the other side,” (p.87) and
according to Ramsden and Landy (2021) this peace making between all qualities within the self becomes an integral part of the therapeutic process.

Landy referred to role method as working in a triad; role, counterrole, and guide (Ramsden & Landy, 2021). The guide is the role that stands in between the role and counterrole, helping the client to bridge them together and navigate between them. Landy (2021) suggested that the reason one comes to therapy is that the client is unable to do this navigation and bridging on their own and this results in the therapist often taking on the role of the guide for the client. Thus, the goal in role method is to support the client in expanding their role system, so that the roles that have fallen out of the person’s consciousness can be recalled and developed for future use when necessary. When the therapist is working with the client, the therapist will enroll as the particular role to enact a story, often fictional, that mirrors or reflects the client’s life, typically called role play. This allows for appropriate aesthetic distance, which is the ideal balanced emotional closeness and level of thought in which a client feels connected to the story or role in order to achieve the therapeutic purpose. When a client is not in aesthetic distance, they can be considered over distanced or under distanced. Over distanced refers to when the individual is stuck in the thoughts and not emotionally close enough to the story and under distanced refers to when the individual is flooded with emotions from the story (Ramsden & Landy, 2021).

According to Ramsden & Landy (2021), a wide range of populations and mental health issues have been known to succeed in using role method including: incarcerated persons, those in in-patient facilities, people with substance use disorder, children with trauma, refugees, adults with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and personality disorders. Keisari (2021) also found success in working with role method, surrounding aging adults and ultimately found that when
they were able to work within roles in a group, they found a sense of community and togetherness as well as feelings of being still relevant and important.

**Discussion**

Based on the presented literature, there is a great deal of evidence that collegiate student athletes are at a high risk for identity-based issues upon retirement, which could lead them to negative psychological symptoms. As educational institutions rely on these athletes for financial and entertainment value, a strong argument can and should be made, that these institutions are responsible for providing student athletes with the resources that enable them to thrive post-retirement. Within the collegiate athletic communities, there has been a great deal of literature published as of late (See: Sanderson and Siegfried (2015); Groves (2016) regarding financially compensating student athletes, beyond tuition. Providing mental health services, such as drama therapy groups, may be a strong way to additionally compensate student athletes.

In reviewing the literature, parallels can be made regarding the potential efficacy of using drama therapy with college, or student athletes, in order to reduce negative psychological symptoms associated with their retirement transition. As Yao, Laurencell and Trudeau (2020) mentioned, athletes often have a great emphasis on physical fitness and are very embodied in their work, so it would likely be a natural transition into the embodied world of drama therapy for these student athletes. As Sanderson (2016) demonstrated, it is expected of athletes not to verbally express their emotions, as not to upset their fans or other important figures in their lives, hence these athletes are likely used to suppressing their emotions and not used to verbally expressing them. By using an embodied form of therapy, as drama therapy provides, they may be
more comfortable and feel more aesthetically distanced in expressing themselves through their bodies and find this form of therapy more effective than traditional talk therapy.

As Scoppa (2021) noted, athletes are familiar with the element of performance and affected by the presence of an audience, therefore the potential for drama therapy, with its core principles and concept of active witnessing, may be of particular usefulness to athletes in supporting their retirement transitions. Drama therapy is often performed in groups, as it can provide the opportunity for witnessing and an audience, which would be useful in creating an environment where the athletes feel supported and safe enough to engage in the therapeutic process with their teammates or other athletes who understand their experiences present. Given the COVID-19 pandemic and the effect it has had on student athlete’s mental health due to cancelled sporting events, Graupensberger et al. (2020) suggested that continuing to connect virtually could support the athletes during times of isolation; drama therapy offers strong potential for connection and engagement even in online formats as Wood et al. (2020) found in their recent study on the efficacy of group drama therapy performed via telehealth.

Given this, the author suggests that higher education institutions could consider providing drama therapy and more specifically, role theory-based groups for student athletes during their time in college in order to address the identity issues faced by the student athletes. This should be conducted with students within the same athletic team in order to provide connectivity and enhance identity formation as Graupensberger et al. (2020) suggested, and also to promote comfortability and safety in being emotionally vulnerable with those who have similar experiences and share familiarity with one another.

One way to conceptualize the complex roles that student athletes hold is through applying Landy’s (2021) concept of role conflict. Role conflict states that one role is easily accessible
because it has been fostered and explored, whilst other roles are underdeveloped and underutilized. This emphasis on the athletic role serves a great purpose for the individual until they are faced with the retirement transition and do not feel comfortable accessing other possible roles that they could or should play in different situations such as: working professional, friend, romantic partner etc. By engaging in role method, these student athletes would be allowed a safe enough environment to explore the other roles within their Role Taxonomy, as Landy (2021) described, and ideally feel more confident in playing these alternative roles when they have made their retirement transition.

Given this, ideally role method would be introduced in a group therapy session, led by a drama therapist and supported by the athletic institution, whilst the student athlete is still early in their college careers, in order to give them as much time as possible for experimentation and exploration into their own role taxonomy. Although less ideal, this author believes that this process could also be accomplished successfully during the student athlete’s senior year retirement or even years post-retirement. Although the focus may change slightly if the student athlete has graduated, the process could still be applicable and accomplished with a group of retired athletes of any sport or institution and still provide the role exploration necessary for these individuals to be able to access other roles for their success in the world as retired student athletes.

In reviewing the current published literature based in drama therapy and role theory, there is no official research completed using drama therapy with athletes. There is, however, published research comparing the similarities of the world of dramatic arts and performance to the world of athletics, such as Dick et al. (2013). Ansari & Lalani (2014) explored using expressive arts therapies techniques of creative writing, including dramatic writing, music, painting, sculpting
and photography with athletes suffering from sports related injuries and found that these techniques reduced stress levels and improved physical and mental well-being. This study would suggest that since Ansari & Lalani (2014) found success in using these expressive arts techniques with athletes suffering from injuries, there may be success in using drama therapy techniques, as they are within the realm of expressive arts therapies, with student athletes. Based on this author’s review and previous success with other forms of expressive arts therapies, future directions could include qualitative studies conducted regarding drama therapy, in particular role theory and role method, with athletes and student athletes to determine if a drama therapy based intervention group could effectively aid in the expansion of student athlete identity formation and prevent negative psychological symptoms associated with the retirement transition. Surveys surrounding the topics of identity, satisfaction with life and depression and anxiety scales could be given prior to the group’s intervention, at the half-way point and post-retirement in order to determine said efficacy, as well as interviews with the participants in order to gain their insight.

Based on Landy’s (2021) theory and practice, this author would suggest that a drama therapist working with student athletes begin with developing what the role of student athlete is. They then could determine how to embody the role of the student athlete in terms of characteristics, movement, patterns of speech etc. The drama therapist could have each version of the student athlete interact with one another and speak from the point of view of the student athlete. They could also then have the role of student athlete evolve, using the empty chair technique, a Psychodramatic, role based role play technique as described by Dayton & Moreno (2004) as a way for the individual to experiment with trying on roles: one chair representing the student athlete role upon entering college, the next chair representing the student athlete as it presents today and the final chair representing the student athlete a year post-graduation.
This author suggests that after they have explored all of the different elements of the student athlete and how the role could evolve, the drama therapist could have the group participate in role profiles, based on Ramsden & Landy’s (2021) activity where common roles from the role taxonomy are evaluated in terms of what roles are seemingly accessible or inaccessible to the individual, or a role brainstorm as to what other roles the group feels they have access to or would want to explore more. Engaging in a wide range of role-playing games that allow the student athletes access to new or underdeveloped roles would likely be crucial to their success in accessing these necessary types of roles as they arise in their lives in retirement. Renee Emunah (2021) has a plethora of group and role play based games and drama therapy interventions that would be useful in this instance detailed further in her book, *Acting for real: drama therapy process, technique, and performance*.

Knowing the complexities of the student athlete’s identity development and the mental health challenges they face post-retirement; it is evident that this is a population that needs further psychological intervention to succeed after graduation. There is also evidence that further research should be conducted in using drama therapy techniques with this population in order to benefit both the student athletes and to further the field of drama therapy research. This author hopes that this literature review will raise awareness to the issues described above, support further research and the development of studies with athletic populations and drama therapy techniques and influence implementation of additional mental health resources for student athletes.
References


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2020.113514

https://doi.org/10.1080/01609513.2020.1811014


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101766


https://ebookcentral.proquest.com


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101799


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.joep.2020.102344


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.yhbeh.2013.02.020


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jshs.2018.08.006
THESIS APPROVAL FORM

Lesley University
Graduate School of Arts & Social Sciences
Expressive Therapies Division
Master of Arts in Clinical Mental Health Counseling: Drama Therapy, MA

Danielle Gervais

Student’s Name: ____________________________

Type of Project: Thesis

Title: ____ The Use of Role Theory and Method to Support Expanding College Athletes Role Repertoire: A Literature Review

__________________________________________

Date of Graduation: May 22nd 2021

In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

Thesis Advisor: ____ Laura L. Wood, PhD, RDT/BCT

Electronic Signature 4/28/2021 7:29pm EST____