The Influence of Peer Groups in Organized Sport on Female Adolescents’ Identity Development

by

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Abstract

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The purpose of this study was to explore the potential influence of peer groups in organized sport on female adolescent identity development. Data were collected through photo-voice and semi-structured interviews of eight female athletes between the ages of 13 and 17 years. Participants in the study played a variety of sports and competed at various levels. Results revealed that female adolescents tend to learn about three major aspects of the self: the social self, the physical self, and the psychological self, through interactions with their teammates in sport. Each aspect of the self was described in detail by participants using examples of characteristics learned through their peer groups in sport. The results of this study are examined in relation to classic psychosocial theories (i.e. Erikson and Festinger) as well as current literature in the field of sport psychology. Recommendations for future research in this field of study are discussed.
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Introduction

According to McCabe, Roberts and Morris (1991), the journey from childhood through to adulthood involves various changes, including internal (e.g. psychological and emotional) and external (e.g. physical) modifications of the self. As a result, the individual is required to continuously re-evaluate the self in accordance with these modifications (McCabe et al., 1991), a process known as identity development. This process of identity formation can be described as being similar to the construction of a jigsaw puzzle (Josselson, 1987); each person has different talents, interests, intellectual abilities, physical characteristics and life experiences which fit together to form a unique identity (Josselson, 1987).

With regards to identity development, the transition into adolescence for young females tends to be particularly challenging and unique from that of males (Brown & Gilligan, 1992). More specifically, Mary Pipher (1995) suggests that girls in their childhood have to cope with developmental, cultural and social changes which may significantly alter their childhood identity and may lead them to experience confusion or a loss of self. For example, in a sport specific context, girls in their childhood are able to explore different interests without some regard for gender stereotypes, yet as they progress into adolescence, they tend to feel pressure to modify their identity to be more consistent with gender-appropriate expectations (Pipher, 1995). The study will focus on the process of identity development in female adolescents in particular.

This thesis is grounded in human development theories from the field of psychology which recognizes the importance of identity formation during adolescence. More specifically, Erik Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968) was chosen as the theoretical framework for this study as this theory incorporates the development of physical, emotional,
social and cognitive facets of the self. According to Erikson’s theory, the process of identity development during adolescence is enhanced through role experimentation, self-evaluation and peer groups. While role experimentation and self-evaluation have been explored within the sport psychology literature, the influence of peer groups on identity development in female adolescents has not received the same attention. Furthermore, Smith, Ullrich-French, Walker and Hurley (2006) suggest that peer groups receive insufficient attention in the sport psychology literature in comparison to the role of significant adults (e.g. coaches or parents) on psychosocial development of youth.

The purpose of this thesis therefore was to further our understanding of the potential influence of peer groups in sport on the identity development process in the female adolescent. This work has been influenced by Smith (2003) who encourages researchers to examine the ways in which identities are formed through peer interactions in sport. Essentially, I am interested in understanding how peer groups in sport influence the way in which female adolescents learn about themselves.
Personal Reflection

My sport experiences began at the age of three when my parents enrolled me in the local t-ball league. It was that summer in 1993 when the foundation for my love of sports was built. From that moment on, there wasn’t a summer spent away from the baseball park until I was 17 years old. To pass the time in the winter season, my parents registered me for figure skating at the age of four. Shortly after, I witnessed my older sister fall to the ice and scrape her chin during a competition. Since I feared the same injury would happen to me, I decided I needed to play an on-ice sport with more equipment. The next year, I signed up for ringette and have been playing ever since.

Growing up in a small town ensured that my sport experiences on representative ringette and fastball teams were unique. Unlike most competitive teams, the pool of athletes for team selection every year in a small town is typically very small or non-existent. As a result, I had the opportunity to play with the same core group of teammates for most of my athletic career. Since I spent the majority of my time at the baseball park and arena, the relationships I developed with these teammates had a substantially positive influence on the person I am today. In general, my teammates helped me learn about commitment, highlighted my unique personality traits and taught me what it means to be a friend. My teammates were my closest friends on and off the field and I always felt they truly knew me best.

While the ongoing interactions I had with my teammates over the years influenced who I am overall, there are a few aspects of my personal identity that provide the strongest examples of the impact of my peers from sport.
Prior to beginning my involvement with competitive representative baseball and ringette, I was very shy. Around the family and friends who were close to me, I was outgoing, open and good-humoured, however, I struggled in new situations where I was unfamiliar with my surroundings or the people within them. Since the majority of my teammates were not students at my school, sport – specifically ringette – provided an outlet to develop new meaningful relationships and challenged feelings of uneasiness in new situations. Ringette was particularly influential in this process as I was always most passionate about my involvement with this sport. As a result of this desire to create new friendships on my team, I was encouraged to step outside of my comfort zone and reveal the outgoing and enthusiastic side of my personality that was so important to me. Interestingly, it was both interactions during the free moments before and after practices as well as sport specific situations that facilitated this process. More specifically, conversing about common interests, life at school and friends outside of sport with teammates during warm-ups, between drills and after practices or games were equally as important for developing my confidence as sharing feelings of excitement in moments of success and communicating with one another following mistakes in practices or games. In addition, as I became an increasingly competitive athlete, I was part of regional and provincial teams which provided similar new situations more frequently. I strongly believe my teammates had a substantial impact on helping me overcome feelings of shyness by providing a positive atmosphere in which we all felt confident to be ourselves. Furthermore, I am now very certain in my ability to adapt to new experiences in my everyday life.

My feelings of confidence with my personal identity were solidified when I was voted captain of both my ringette and fastball teams. Being voted captain of these teams was important to me as it demonstrated that the personal development I recognized in myself was also visible to
my teammates. Throughout the years that I served as captain for these teams, my teammates helped me learn about the qualities that make someone a great leader and helped me to believe that I had the characteristics to fit that mold. I learned that I was determined and trustworthy, but most importantly, I learned about the impact I could have on others if I confidently pushed past the expectations I had for myself. Although these characteristics developed through sport, I believe they are very important aspects of my identity outside of sport, too.

The impact of my teammates also extended beyond the sporting environment. In the summer of 2005, I asked my parents if I could switch high schools. Switching high schools meant leaving the Catholic school board I had been a part of since kindergarten, in favour of transferring to a public high school where many of my ringette teammates attended. While I had an enjoyable group of friends at my high school, I always felt that my teammates truly knew me best. Despite my parents’ initial apprehension towards this idea, I began my grade eleven year in a new school. This decision to switch schools proved to be one of the best decisions I have ever made, as my academics improved and my teammates encouraged me to join several extra-curricular activities I was not previously involved in, such as student council and peer mentoring of elementary school students in the community. These same ringette teammates, who helped me to overcome shyness as well as recognize and develop my leadership skills within and outside of sport, remain my closest friends today.

Despite the positive experiences I had with my peers in sport, I recognized that not all female adolescents feel this way. Several of my friends who participated in other sports had negative experiences with cliques on teams and personal issues with self-esteem. In addition, my sport experiences have exclusively revolved around team sports; as a result, I wonder if individual sports may differ from team sports in important ways.
The significant impact that peers have had on the development of my overall identity has influenced the choice of focus for this research. When reviewing the literature on this topic, it was revealed that very little research has connected peer groups in sport to the development of a positive identity. Through my own experiences and the lack of theoretical representation in the literature, my thesis question emerged.
Review of Literature

This review of literature will begin by defining identity and highlighting the importance of identity development during adolescence. A special emphasis will then be placed on the unique psychosocial processes that female adolescents experience which may lead to a confused identity. Next, identity development will be described through one prominent psychosocial development theory – namely, Erikson’s theory. In addition, three main conditions that facilitate identity development – peer group, self-evaluation and role experimentation – will be discussed. Emphasis will be placed on peer groups as the focus of this study. Finally, a summary outlining the main points of this review will be provided.

Defining Identity

Identity is referred to as “a well-organized conception of the self, consisting of values and beliefs to which the individual is solidly committed” (Berk, 2010 p.314). For example, if an individual values the family, she may consider her role as a sister, daughter, or granddaughter, an integral part of her personal identity. Motivations for deriving a personal identity include the desire to build self-esteem (e.g. discovering unique talents) and create meaning in one’s life (e.g. achieving personal goals) (Deaux & Burke, 2010). For the purpose of this literature review, identity will be discussed in terms of the process of identity formation in adolescent females. In this light, the process of identity formation is categorized by the way in which individuals organize and interpret their past and present experiences and utilize these experiences to direct their future (Josselson, 1987). In addition, identity formation is characterized by the active exploration of an individual’s different interests (e.g. nature, sports, reading and music). Through the exploration of different activities, an adolescent can discover which interests and abilities are
most personally expressive (Marcia, 1980; Waterman, 1985). As a result of exploring different interests, personal identities may be more open, flexible and resilient (Forthun, Montgomery, & Bell, 2006). Furthermore, as the individual gradually allows her social circle to widen and she becomes involved in an increasing number of meaningful activities, identity refinement usually occurs (Josselson, 1987).

Erik Erikson (1968) was the first theorist to acknowledge the development of identity as the most influential milestone of adolescence. Adolescence is an extremely important period of identity development, as this is the first time that individuals are encouraged to adjust the meanings they previously asserted toward ascribed characteristics such as social class, education or religion (Josselson, 1987). Stated differently, adolescence marks the developmental time frame in which individuals are encouraged to gain autonomy from the family, experiment with new roles, and test their capacities within these various roles in order to discover which characteristics and values personify the self (Josselson, 1987). Simply, adolescents may no longer be confined to specific childhood roles in society; instead, they have the opportunity to be active in the choices of roles that provide the best representation of the self as they progress forward (McCabe et al., 1991).

Research on identity is extremely important as there are several potential outcomes for individuals who are or are not actively involved in the development of a mature identity. In terms of positive outcomes, adolescents who explore different roles or develop a mature identity tend to have higher self-esteem, achieve a higher level of moral reasoning and recognize future possibilities that will enable them to fulfill their potential (Adams & Marshall, 1996; Kroger, 2007; Serafini & Adams, 2002). On the contrary, adolescents who do not actively engage in the search for identity tend to experience great difficulty with academic challenges, experience
issues with time management, possess feelings of hopelessness, and are more inclined to abuse drugs (Archer & Waterman, 1990; Schwartz, Pantin, Prado, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2005).

Prior to engaging in this study, it is important to acknowledge the different perspectives of scholarship surrounding identity. It is recognized that there are many different identities which carry personal meanings for an individual. These identities include but are not limited to gender, athletic, academic, social and ethnic identities. Each of these identities are valued in their own right, could merit individual study and together comprise a substantial part of a person’s overall identity. More specifically, previous studies have discussed issues of equitable sport environments and gender identities (Reeser, 2005), commitment to sport participation in individuals with differing ethnic identities (Walter, Brown, & Grabb, 1991) and the difficulties associated with strong athletic identities and retirement from sport (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Lally, 2007).

However, for the purpose of this study, I am interested in learning about global self-identity which is considered the integration of domain specific identities (e.g. athletic, social and academic identities) to create an overall multifaceted identity (Goossens, 2001). From this perspective, the participants will share stories about the development of their “whole-selves.”

Females as the Focus

Female adolescents may experience a distinct psychosocial process as they embark on their journey toward adulthood. Pipher (1995) describes this journey as a difficult time where the challenge to develop into successful adults tends to present demands that are overwhelming for these girls to understand and fulfill. Girls are required to reinterpret their childhood actions to resemble more closely the acceptable actions of adulthood (Gilligan, 1993).
Pipher (1995) describes childhood as a time where girls are typically interested in a vast range of activities including but not limited to: sports, playing outdoors, art, people, books and music. As a result of their perceived acceptance for any interest they may have, they may take on the role of a “tomboy”, a title (albeit problematic) that asserts courage, confidence and skill in athletic endeavours but also may result in the translation of these important characteristics to other aspects of their lives (Pipher, 1995). Simply stated, girls in their childhood tend to be able to engage in activities free of gender constraint (Pipher, 1995).

Upon entrance into puberty, the life of the adolescent girl tends to become quite turbulent. According to Currie, Kelly and Pomerantz (2009), girls begin to reveal contradictory constructions of themselves. For example, Pipher (1995) states that girls in their early adolescence may greet situations with pessimism, respond with little resiliency when faced with a set-back and replace their curiosity with disinterest. It is evident that characteristics such as optimism, resiliency and curiosity are critical to the formation of a healthy identity which makes these changing attitudes particularly troubling. In addition, females in this age group lose their inclination to take risks, as they perceive that the chance of failure is simply not worth it (Pipher, 1995). The confident and dynamic characteristics that were seen in childhood tend to be overcome and replaced with characteristics such as an inability to voice opinion, agreeableness, as well as the disposition to become extremely self-critical (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Harter, 2006; Pipher, 1995). As Straus (2007) writes, young girls represent only fragments of their whole selves (p.97). Furthermore, several scholars suggest that this absence of voice may lead to a loss of selfhood (Gilligan, Ward, & Taylor, 1988; Brown & Gilligan, 1992).

This stage is followed by a transition into puberty, which is typically associated with three factors of vulnerability – developmental change, cultural and social factors. The interplay
of these factors of vulnerability may lead to the “confusion of self”, a stage in which a developing individual may become lost or apathetic in their quest for a mature identity.

From the physical development standpoint, girls in this age range experience various changes, including adjustments in their body shape (i.e. weight gain, breast development, etc.), an influx of hormones, changes in their skin (i.e. possibility of acne) and alterations of their motor development (Berk, 2010). As stated by Gilligan (1993), the physical changes girls experience during puberty visually detach them from childhood. In addition, females progressing through puberty may also experience changes in their psychological mood states and emotional reactions to situations. For example, females who once greeted difficult situations with calmness and confidence, which allowed them to use their problem solving skill set to progress through the situation, may now greet similar situations with anxiety or doubt. This may hinder their ability to act rationally (Pipher, 1995). Due to their doubts about coping with the circumstance, their confidence when confronted with similar situations in the future may be hindered (Pipher, 1995). As a result of their difficulties in understanding and accepting this new stage in their lives, female adolescents tend to become increasingly self-conscious and their self-esteem often diminishes (Shafii & Shafii, 1992).

As females enter puberty, they tend to become more interested in media culture and are often influenced by what they observe. This includes an interest in television shows, celebrity icons, magazine articles and the internet, all of which may condone sexism, promiscuity and the evaluation of a female exclusively based on their physical characteristics (Gilligan, 1993; Pipher, 1995). Stated simply, females in this age range tend to be extremely aware of and focused on their physical appearance. Coincidentally, as girls become more invested in a media culture which valorizes thinness as beauty, their bodies are changing and their previously thin and
muscular physique from childhood is often replaced with a more softened, rounded and shapely figure (Pipher, 1995). It’s important to note that recent literature suggests females are more likely to be influenced by images of the “ideal” body in the media than their male counterparts (Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007). Adolescents may become confused by the depictions in the media because the icons that are most often displayed within this realm are the celebrities who fit society’s perception of the “ideal” body, a representation very few female adolescents can duplicate (Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007). In addition, icons in the mass media who do not fit society’s perception of the “ideal” body often garner negative attention for their seemingly “overweight” body (Peterson, Paulson, & Williams, 2007). Research also suggests that interactions with peers may further the desire for “thinness”, as appearance related discussions frequently surface within this population (Sinton & Birch, 2006). Interestingly, adolescent girls who are dissatisfied with the quality of their friendships also report negative perceptions of their appearance (Keefe & Berndt, 1996; Kroger, 2007). As a result of their inability to replicate the perceived societal standard of the “ideal” body, females tend to become very self-critical as well as critical of their family members and peers (Pipher, 1995).

Perhaps the most important factor in the development of an identity is the social influences adolescents confront (Pipher, 1995). While the role of the peer group as a necessary condition for the development of identity will be discussed in detail, the general importance of social influences throughout adolescence will be discussed next.

The importance of peer groups is an influential factor which differentiates the adolescent identity formation process for girls and boys. More specifically, a study by Brown and Gilligan (1992) found a major contrast in how adolescent boys and girls learn about themselves. Brown and Gilligan (1992) found that girls define themselves through their relationships (or lack
thereof) with family members and peers, while boys learn about themselves through separation and independence.

When girls enter into adolescence, they gradually abandon their need for parental approval and turn to validation from their peers (Josselson, 1987). As a result, adolescent girls are faced with the choice to conform to social norms and reject their individual identities, or risk abandonment from their peers because they choose to remain authentic (Pipher, 1995). In this context, Pipher (1995) describes authenticity as the acceptance of all emotions, thoughts and interests, including those that may not receive approval from their friends and acquaintances. It is important to note that there is a fine balance between rejecting the self and remaining authentic. More specifically, individuals who choose to display their unique characteristics and experience abandonment from their peers may report great unhappiness as a result of their diminished support networks (Pipher, 1995).

The continuum that exists between authenticity and social conformity is quite complex. The majority of adolescent girls who experience this social pressure do not embrace one identity over the other, instead, they tend to become trapped between embracing their unique identity as well as embracing an identity that is culturally scripted (Pipher, 1995). Stated simply, adolescent girls have the tendency to transform into who they are “supposed to be” when in the presence of their peers (Pipher, 1995). This confusion between their desired and scripted identities may lead to the loss of confidence and self-respect (Pipher, 1995). Gilligan (1993) supports this idea by stating that if girls are too vocal about their personal thoughts, they risk losing friendships that are important to them. These ideas provide evidence for the importance of the support from the peer group in terms of role experimentation as part of identity development. If peers do support individual expression of unique characteristics, confusion between desired and scripted identities
may be avoided. These ideas are supported by Grotevant and Cooper (1986) who suggest that unconditional support regarding the exploration of different opportunities and interests results in the encouragement of a positive identity.

While it may be suggested that adolescent boys struggle with the same social pressures, the difference is found within the roles expected of females in adolescence versus the roles expected of males. As girls progress through adolescence, they are often expected to embrace their vocation as females (Pipher, 1995). For example, girls are expected to maintain proper behaviour and respectful attitudes at all times. Most often, the slightest deviation from this expected behaviour may be greeted with punishment and disappointment from family members, teachers or peers. However, if males participated in similar behaviour, there is a greater likelihood for family, teachers or peers to accept this behaviour and perhaps find reasoning in the cliché, “boys will be boys.”

Finally, it is important to discuss the effects that peer influence has on the relationship between adolescent girls and their parents. As girls attempt to cope with new pressures, they are often influenced by their peers to let go of the bonds they have developed with their parents and rely on the support of friends instead (Pipher, 1995). This becomes particularly problematic for girls as they tend to be increasingly susceptible to the negative effects of interpersonal stress (Cyranowski, Frank, Young & Shear, 2000). Female adolescents may attribute their increased interpersonal stress to the strained relationship they have with their parents, as it can influence them to adopt negative attitudes and hinder their ability to cope effectively (Chen, Johnston, Sheeber, & Leve, 2009).
While adolescent girls appear to accept their new peer support network, research suggests that they strongly desire to maintain closeness with their parents, though few actually do throughout this stage (Pipher, 1995). In addition, it is also suggested that if parents appraise their daughter’s behaviour and reliance on peer support negatively, the level of conflict between the parents and adolescent may heighten (Chen et al., 2009). This heightened level of conflict may influence the adolescent’s apprehension toward expanding their peer group and taking on new roles. Apprehension toward taking on new roles is likely to have a negative impact on identity development as experience with different peer groups is a very important task of self-definition (Josselson, 1987). Therefore, continuous parental support is crucial for girls in this stage.

In summary, the psychosocial process adolescent females tend to experience begins with common childhood experiences and advances through puberty where girls are often subjected to three factors of vulnerability: developmental (e.g. physical and psychological), cultural (e.g. mass media) and social (e.g. peer influence and parental relationship) challenges. As these factors interact, the maturing adolescents may become confused with their identity. It is through the connections with their peers that the girls are able to experiment with different roles, choose which roles are most suitable for them, and progress forward with confidence. In addition, parental support plays a significant role in assisting the adolescent in the development of a unique identity.

*Critiques of the Girl-Crisis*

Although this study is inspired by and grounded in the experiential work of clinical psychologist Mary Pipher, it is important to recognize interpretations and criticisms of this work by other scholars in the field.
According to Farady (2010), the “girl-crisis” movement has not been adequately discussed or supported in peer-reviewed literature. In his critique, he claims there are few psychologists who express support for the girl-crisis movement, but suggests that many psychologists tacitly support the movement. In addition, Farady (2010) expresses doubt concerning the relevance of this movement for contemporary female adolescents. Moreover, he suggests that girls are sufficiently represented in current literature (Farady, 2010).

The major critique of Pipher’s work involves her concept of the loss of “voice” in female adolescents. “Voice” in this context refers to adolescents’ willingness to be assertive and express themselves (Farady, 2010). Considered a second-wave women’s movement, the girl-crisis is substantially influenced by this notion of loss of “voice.” Since few quantitative studies have assessed loss of “voice” in female adolescents, Farady (2010) claims that our current understanding of the girl-crisis is not valid. Furthering this argument, Farady (2010) references a study by Harter, Waters and Whitesell (1997) in which they quantitatively assessed a loss of “voice” in female and male adolescents. Harter et al. (1997) developed a questionnaire which “tapped into voice in five different relationship contexts: with parents, male friends, female friends, classmates, and teachers” by measuring participant responses on a four-point likert scale (e.g. lowest level of voice (1) to highest level of voice (4); (p.161). Questions revolved around the adolescents’ ability to express what they were thinking (Harter et al., 1997). In addition, the researchers asked participants to declare six attributes related to each relationship context (e.g. “I’m talkative with female friends”) (Harter et al., 1997). The researchers then analyzed the attributes associated with each participant and divided attributes into “low voice” and “high voice.” Overall, Harter et al. (1997) found that there was no evidence of loss of voice among female adolescents.
Though Farady (2010) makes an excellent point in that we must provide research-driven support for the experiential work of Pipher, it is suggested that qualitative studies are the most appropriate methods for creating empirical data in this area. The aforementioned quantitative study by Harter et al. (1997) is incomplete without a subjective and detailed account of the personal experiences of the individuals involved in this study. Perhaps with further probing by researchers, results from that particular study would be different.

Therefore, it is believed that the value of Pipher’s experiential work remains strong. Although it is not empirically tested, Pipher’s work captures the impactful personal narratives of her clients. As a result, one goal of this study is to empirically complement her contributions to the literature.

*Girlhood in Other Areas of Scholarship*

In addition to shedding light on the critiques of Pipher’s work, it is also important to acknowledge different perspectives surrounding the notion of girlhood. More specifically, recent sociocultural research has suggested that contemporary girls are powerful and confident individuals who are active agents in the social world (Harris, 2004; Jiwani, Steenbergen, & Mitchell, 2006; McRobbie, 2000, 2009). In addition, girls are believed to be complex and contextual individuals (Pomerantz, 2009).

Perhaps the most prominent contrast lies in the idea of the “can-do” girl. This perception of girls suggests that young adolescents who are lacking fundamental needs (e.g. education) have the power to take responsibility and overcome these barriers (Harris, 2004; Sensoy & Marshall, 2010).
Though there are similarities in the understanding of the girl as a complex being, a behavioural perspective would challenge this view of the powerful girl by highlighting the psychological challenges a girl faces as she enters adolescence. It is these psychological challenges (e.g. developmental and social changes) that will provide rationale for the focus of this study.

Identity Theory

Grounding this literature review in the most prominent theoretical framework of identity is integral to an overall understanding of the processes adolescents engage in throughout the search for their unique individual identities. This theoretical framework provides a critical foundation of the focal aspects of identity formation, such as expected behaviours, changing relationships and developmental tasks that must be understood and nurtured during the time frame of adolescence. Stated simply, it is extremely important to understand the theoretical processes underlying the path towards a mature sense of identity.

Erik Erikson’s Theory of Human Development (1968) was chosen as the guiding theoretical framework as it incorporates many different aspects of development (e.g., emotional, social, psychological and physical) which contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of adolescent processes.

*Psychosocial Theory of Human Development: Erik Erikson, 1968*

As previously mentioned, Erik Erikson (1968) was the first psychological theorist to recognize the development of identity as the most significant task of adolescence. According to Newman and Newman (1995), the psychosocial perspectives of Erikson encapsulate three critical features that together differentiate Erikson’s theory from other theories of human
development. First, Erikson’s theory discusses development across the lifespan, indicating the poignant psychosocial challenges that individuals face as they progress from early infancy through to their elder years (Newman & Newman, 1995). Second, Erikson’s theory recognizes that every individual has the opportunity to enrich his or her psychological and social growth by integrating, categorizing and attaching personal meaning to their experiences in order to develop and progress through the lifespan (Newman & Newman, 1995). In this sense, Erikson encourages individuals to be active in their own growth, as opposed to attributing their development merely to biological influences (Newman & Newman, 1995). Finally, Erikson’s theory discusses the influence that cultural demands have on guiding an individual’s goals, directing his or her future ambitions and instigating perceived pressures as a result of social expectations (Newman & Newman, 1995). The interplay of these three features shed light on Erikson’s unique perspective on identity development.

The theory is classified by eight stages of development, commencing at birth and progressing through the lifespan, with the last stage of development beginning at approximately sixty-years-old (Erikson, 1968). The categorization of stages recommends areas of emerging challenges and tasks that may provide reasoning for a wide range of behaviours (Erikson, 1968). It is important to note that progress from one stage to the next is not necessarily dependent on the chronological age of the individual, even though the stages of development are arranged in this manner (Erikson, 1968). For example, personal experiences may cause an individual to progress through a particular stage at a rapid rate. While the temporal aspect may vary for each individual, every person experiences each stage at some point. Within each stage, the individual is challenged by a particular psychosocial task, which demands the individual to develop and utilize personal assets in order to positively persist through this psychosocial task and continue
on his or her pursuit for a mature identity (Erikson, 1968). Each particular psychosocial task to be resolved is termed the “psychosocial crisis” of each stage, and can result in a positive or negative orientation related to the psychosocial task that may lead the individual toward his or her future mature identity (Erikson, 1968). For example, for children between the ages of four and six years-old, the psychosocial crisis is initiative versus guilt. A positive resolution of this crisis would be the development of initiative, a skill that allows children to feel confident in making independent choices to engage in tasks. On the contrary, a negative resolution of the crisis would be the development of guilt, suggesting that children may lack confidence in initiating different tasks independently.

To facilitate a resolution of the psychosocial crisis, Erikson assigned a set of relevant skills and competencies termed “developmental tasks”, for each particular stage. These tasks are believed to assist individuals in mastering their environment (Erikson, 1968). Individuals who master the tasks within each stage are more likely to positively resolve the psychosocial crisis (Erikson, 1968). Furthermore, individuals who attain the relevant skills for each particular stage are more likely to have greater success learning the skills and competencies that may challenge the individual in the future (Erikson, 1968).

While all psychosocial skills are important across the lifespan, Erikson’s stages emphasize the approximate age range in which each particular psychosocial skill is most crucial for continuous development (Erikson, 1968). The overall goal of Erikson’s psychosocial theory is to develop a positive identity as the individual progresses through the stages, across the lifespan (Santrock, MacKenzie-Rivers, Leung & Malcomson, 2003).
In Erikson’s theory, adolescence includes individuals who are between the ages of 12 and 19 (Erikson, 1968). This literature review will focus on female adolescents within this age range. In this context, Erikson’s theory focuses on the psychosocial crisis of *group identity* versus *alienation* in early adolescence. This stage will be discussed in detail below, including an explanation of the psychosocial crisis as well as a description of the related developmental tasks crucial for a positive resolution of the crisis.

*Early Adolescence: Group Identity versus Alienation*

Group identity versus alienation is the psychosocial crisis that represents the experiences of early adolescents (Santrock et al., 2003). Group identity is defined by Newman and Newman (1995) as “the aspect of an individual’s self-theory that focuses on membership in and connection with social groups” (p.448). Membership in a group fulfills most adolescents’ deep desire to feel connected to others (Erikson, 1968). This connection with others can be achieved in various different settings, including but not limited to: the sporting environment, youth groups, religious affiliations and/or with peers in the classroom. It is the experimentation within each of these different settings that allow the adolescents to discover which groups best represent their personal needs and values (Newman & Newman, 1995).

On the contrary, alienation refers to the adolescent’s inability to find meaningful connections to a group (Mau, 1992). This social estrangement may occur if the individual avoids experimentation with different groups or passes by the available social groups because they do not meet their personal needs (Erikson, 1968). It is also suggested that adolescents may not discover meaningful peer groups as a result of possessing very different interests than their peers,
being bullied by classmates or team members, and/or lack of acceptance from peers in the group they desire to be a part of.

Lack of social connection in this population can lead to low self-esteem, loneliness, and the inability to adjust to school-related demands (Newman & Newman, 1995). It is important to note that adolescents who positively resolve this psychosocial crisis are still vulnerable to feeling lonely and isolated from their peers from time to time. Overall, establishing ties with one or more groups that shares one’s values and satisfies personal needs is a significant psychosocial task on the path to a committed identity.

The developmental tasks that facilitate formation of group identity include physical maturation, formal operations, emotional development, membership in the peer group and sexual relationships. While the development of formal operations and initiation of sexual relationships are significant tasks of early adolescence, they will not be the tasks of focus in this literature review.

In terms of physical maturation, there are three ways in which an individual’s psychosocial growth is influenced. First, as a result of the adolescent’s changing body, physical growth affects task performance (Newman & Newman, 1995). For example, an individual who grows taller at a rapid speed may experience difficulty coordinating movements during physical activity. Second, physical maturation can provoke peers to change their perceptions of the adolescent (Newman & Newman, 1995). For example, a boy who grows taller and more muscular may now be seen as intimidating by others. Finally, physical changes alter the way the adolescents perceive themselves (Newman & Newman, 1995).
The next developmental task of focus is emotional development. As individuals enter early adolescence, they have a greater range of emotions (Erikson, 1968). More specifically, early adolescent girls are likely to recognize new emotions such as shame and guilt and direct those negative feelings inwardly (Ostrov, Offer, & Howard, 1989; Stapley & Haviland, 1989). In addition to recognizing their own emotions, adolescents in this stage are increasingly aware of the more complex emotions of others (Erikson, 1968). Above all, the goal for the development of this task is to embrace the new emotions that these girls feel and accept them without judgment.

Membership in the peer group is the final developmental task of the early adolescent stage. This task highlights the emerging structural nature of friendships in this stage. More specifically, friendships become increasingly intimate and are founded on selective criteria (Erikson, 1968). For instance, if an adolescent seeking friendship is a strong leader, physically active, and outgoing, they may look for similar qualities in others. In addition, this task is characterized by clique formation, the drive for popularity and acceptance as well as the establishment of a particular reputation among peers (Newman & Newman, 1995).

In order to facilitate the acquisition of developmental tasks and ultimately, a positive resolution of the crisis, there is a “central process” found within each stage. According to Erikson (1968), the central process acts as the critical intersection between the psychosocial needs of the individual and the cultural challenges emphasized within each stage. Each central process encourages individuals to extend their personal boundaries, re-evaluate their ideals and reflect on how they perceive themselves as well as others (Newman & Newman, 1995, p.55).

The central process for this particular stage is peer pressure. Peer pressure functions as a central aspect of group identity because it allows groups to adopt a particular set of values which
tend to encourage members to act in a certain way (Erikson, 1968). For example, a study by Gardner and Steinberg (2005) found that adolescents are more inclined to take risks in the presence of peers as opposed to when they are alone. Therefore, when an adolescent seeks membership from a particular peer group, he or she tends to start mimicking the behaviours and sharing the values of other individuals found within his or her peer group of choice (Newman & Newman, 1995). Evidently, the nature of the peer pressure an individual experiences is highly dependent on the peer group to which he or she belongs.

Despite the tendency to perceive peer pressure as negative, there are several positive outcomes that cannot be overlooked. First, adolescents tend to perceive the expectations of others as pressure to be greater than they believe themselves to be (Newman & Newman, 1995). For instance, previously timid adolescents may feel inclined to be more outgoing within their peer group of choice. This perceived pressure encourages adolescents to engage in personal development and may result in increased confidence. Further, research by Brown, Lohr, and McClanahan (1986) found that adolescents in their study associated peer pressure with a desire to improve academically and maintain positive relationships with their parents. Second, peer pressure influences adolescents to identify with a particular group, which encourages a sense of belonging and tends to facilitate an increasingly positive sense of self (Newman & Newman, 1995). Although one often associates peer pressure with conformity, it is important to remember that peer groups also require the unique personal characteristics of each member to define roles within the group (Newman & Newman, 1995). For example, an individual who possesses natural charisma may adopt a leadership role within the group.

In summary, group identity versus alienation is the psychosocial crisis of the early adolescence stage. The developmental tasks that facilitate a positive resolution of this crisis are
physical maturation, formal operations, emotional development, initiation of sexual relationships and membership in the peer group. The central process that facilitates the acquisition of the developmental tasks within this stage is peer pressure.

Conditions that Facilitate Identity Development

The next section will connect the theoretical frameworks to the broader adolescent identity literature. Upon analysis of the various themes embedded in identity literature, three dominant conditions emerged, including role experimentation, self-evaluation and peer groups. It is recognized that adolescents who have positive experiences with these three conditions tend to develop healthy individual identities. In addition, it will become evident that the three facilitating conditions are very interrelated. Finally, this literature review will place emphasis on peer groups as the focus of the study. It is suggested that girls derive their identities mainly through their interactions and relationships with others (Josselson, 1987).

Role Experimentation

The first facilitating condition is role experimentation. Role experimentation is achieved through interaction with various peer groups during participation in activities which provide adolescents with an opportunity to explore different values and beliefs (Barber, Stone, Hunt, & Eccles, 2005). When provided with the opportunity to test different roles, adolescents are able to assess their ability to perform the skills necessary to carry out each given role (Josselson, 1987). Furthermore, role experimentation allows adolescents to determine which roles are most suitable for them, as experimentation ensures that they accentuate different competencies at different times (Diamant, 1991).
According to Barber et al. (2005), involvement in community activities, such as volunteering and sport or music participation, provide valuable opportunities for role experimentation because it encourages interactions with diverse peer groups who possess different talents and personality traits. For example, in a sport environment, a coach can exercise role experimentation by providing players with an opportunity to play different positions, rotating the captain from game to game and assigning different players’ roles such as preparing a warm-up or being responsible for creating a music playlist for the team.

Overall, experimentation is integral to identity development as it allows individuals to discover the roles with which they identify best. In addition, role experimentation provides adolescents with an opportunity to become acquainted with various skills they may not have known they had. Ultimately, experimentation may have an effect on an individual’s flexibility and openness to change, two significant assets of a “healthy” identity (Santrock et al., 2003).

*Self-evaluation*

The second facilitating condition is self-evaluation. Self-evaluation is extremely important as adolescents often discover the characteristics that make them unique by distinguishing themselves from the peers or family members with whom they feel most like (Josselson, 1987). In addition, self-evaluation acts as a personal judgment of competence with regards to the capabilities of their peers (Harter, 2006). For example, within the sport context, athletes may compare their ability to perform a particular skill against the ability of their teammates, in order to derive their level of personal competence.

Within this age group, self-evaluation is specifically important. This age marks the shift from domain specific self-evaluations, depicted by statements such as “I am happy because I am
good at soccer”, to an integrated sense of self-worth, characterized by statements such as “Overall, I am a happy person because I have skills in soccer and I am pretty smart. I still have room for improvement in both areas though” (Harter, 2006). In addition to the development of an integrated sense of self, individuals in this age range also begin to develop negative self-criticisms (Harter, 2006). This is highlighted by the development of an imaginary audience. An imaginary audience reflects the adolescents’ idea that they are the continuous object of other peoples’ thoughts (Harter, 2006). This becomes particularly detrimental when adolescents assume that trivial inabilities (i.e. inability to shoot a free throw) which are generally unrecognizable to others, influence their peers to evaluate them in a negative way. On the contrary, imaginary audience may be a positive aspect for adolescents who believe that their specific talents are recognizable by everyone.

Overall, self-evaluation acts as a personal assessment of competence for maturing adolescents (Harter, 2006). In this age group, self-evaluations are particularly important as they contribute to the adolescent’s integrated sense of self.

*Peer Groups as the Focus*

Peer group is perhaps the most important condition that facilitates identity development as it is a vehicle through which the adolescent may shift a significant amount of the loyalty previously reserved for the family (Josselson, 1987). With regards to females, the peer group is particularly important. It is widely recognized in psychological literature that females derive a compelling portion of their identity through the relationship they have with their peers (Josselson, 1987). This idea is echoed in the sport literature, which claims that girls involved in sport emphasize the importance of friendships, intimacy and emotional support among their
teammates (Holt, Black, Tamminen, Fox, & Mandigo, 2008). Furthermore, the acceptance of an individual amongst their peers has been linked to an increased physical self-worth, internalized positive feelings and a greater desire to engage in physical activity (Holt et al., 2008).

Kroger (2007) describes the peer group as a “reference for testing new identity related skills” (p.54). For example, the peer group provides an ideal setting for experimentation in the leadership role. Since early adolescents are likely enduring the same challenges, the peer group also provides an excellent place to share experiences and receive encouragement (McCabe et al., 1991). Moreover, Harter and Whitesell (1996) states that social support in the peer group is an integral part of the development of global self-worth.

With regards to the specific feedback from peers (e.g. classmates), it is important to note that many early adolescents thrive on the input of the “generalized other” (Harter, 2006). The “generalized other” is described as an individual with whom the adolescent interacts with in the public domain (Harter, 2006). The “generalized other” can include friends, classmates, teachers or coaches. Adolescents tend to internalize the evaluations of the generalized other because they feel that these individuals provide the most objective assessments of their individual competencies and overall value as a person (Harter, 2006).

Within a particular peer group, there are two interrelated aspects; peer acceptance and friendship. Peer acceptance refers to an individual’s status and popularity within the group (Bukowski & Hoza, 1989). Related sport literature suggests that peer acceptance is an important source of reference regarding personal physical competence (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Duncan, 1992). In addition, athletes with higher skill levels were perceived to be more popular than those who didn’t possess high skill levels (Holt et al., 2008). The second aspect,
friendship, refers to particularities of a specific dyadic relationship (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995). In relation to sport, friendship has been associated with traits such as companionship, play, self-esteem enhancement and conflict resolution (Weiss, Smith & Theeboom, 1996). Overall, positive peer interactions in sport have been linked to several participation benefits, including, increased sport enjoyment (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Smith, 2002), decreased sport-related stress (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006) and increased commitment to the team (McDonough & Crocker, 2005; Weiss & Smith, 2002). These findings are particularly interesting, as attrition from sport is more frequent in adolescence, particularly for female athletes (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008; Wankel & Mummery, 1996).

Overall, in comparison to self-evaluation and role experimentation in sport, peer groups have received little attention. However, peer groups are a crucial condition for identity development as they encourage individuals to test new identity-related skills and provide support.

In review, there are three major conditions that facilitate development based on the theoretical connections to the broader identity literature: role experimentation, self-evaluation and peer groups. When these three conditions work together in a positive manner, a healthy and mature identity can be obtained.

Athletic Identity

While it is not the focus of this literature review, it is important to acknowledge the research centred on athletic identity. Athletic identity is defined as “the degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role” (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Most often, an identity based solely on athletic prowess is not regarded as a healthy identity. Those who
possess a strong athletic identity tend to experience great difficulty in adjusting to failure, de-selection, retirement and injury (Brewer, 1993; Cutler & Meyer, 1995; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Hinitz, 1988; Kleiber & Brock, 1992; Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1997). In addition, Stirling, Cruz & Kerr (2010) state that those who possess an intense athletic identity often view their overall sense of self-worth as contingent on their athletic performance.

These research findings reiterate the importance of developing a healthy identity and question whether the critical process of identity discovery can be facilitated through sport. As well, these findings stress the importance of encouraging adolescents to explore alternative roles within and outside of sport.

Summary

Erikson (1968) was the first theorist to recognize identity development as the major milestone of adolescence. Interestingly, it appears as though female adolescents experience a unique psychosocial process in their personal search for an identity. This process begins with girls in their childhood who hold many different interests and experience minimal gender constraints. As girls advance through their childhood and reach puberty, they tend to be subjected to three factors of vulnerability, including developmental, cultural, and social challenges. The interplay of these factors may lead to confusion of the self which is described as apathy towards the quest for a mature identity.

Through the connection of Erikson’s (1968) theoretical framework to the broader identity literature, three critical conditions are identified as facilitating identity development: peer groups, role experimentation, and self-evaluation. These three conditions are interdependent and a positive or negative orientation toward one aspect is likely to affect the others. Due to a lack of
research on the effects of peer groups on identity development, peer groups were chosen as the focus for this study.

Sport appears to provide an avenue to develop a positive identity, as it has the potential to foster healthy peer groups and role experimentation as well as allow for the development of positive self-evaluations. However, due to the lack of research in the area of identity development through sport, the positive or negative influence of sport on identity remains unknown. Therefore, this study aims to explore the influence that peer groups in sport have on the development of a personal identity.
Research Methods

The following chapter will review the methods for this study. The research design will be discussed, which includes a description of qualitative methods and the pilot study, details of the participant sample and recruitment process, data collection procedures and ethical considerations.

**Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research methods focus on unpacking individual experiences with a given phenomenon (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). The purpose for understanding each particular phenomenon coincides with the research question and disciplinary viewpoint of the researcher (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Through qualitative methods, participants provide rich narratives, photographs and/or art representing the lived experience which enhances the understanding of the context that the phenomenon occurs in, as well as the phenomenon itself (Sofaer, 1999). Qualitative methods are particularly important for providing a “voice” in underrepresented populations such as minority groups and youth (Sofaer, 1999). In addition, qualitative methods are essential for understanding the feelings, values, and meanings corresponding with the experiences of individuals possessing different roles in diverse communities (Sofaer, 1999).

**The Researcher**

It is important to recognize the critical role of the researcher in qualitative methods. Due to differing life experiences, each researcher has a personal biography which informs the perspective in which she or he views the phenomenon of study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Each researcher approaches a research question with a particular set of ideas and judgments which
lead to subjective interpretations of that phenomenon when in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). From the poststructuralist and postmodernist views, purely objective observations and analyses of data are not possible. All observations are altered by the perspective of the researcher and are represented through the researcher’s lenses of language, gender, socioeconomic status, etc. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p.19). Therefore, it is critical for the researcher to acknowledge his or her own life experiences and purposes for studying each phenomenon, prior to engaging in the study.

**Pilot Interviews**

Prior to beginning this thesis study, I conducted a series of pilot interviews with female adolescent athletes. The purpose of these pilot interviews was to test the interview guide that I had created, which was based on the existing literature surrounding developmental psychology in adolescence and my own personal experience. In addition, the pilot study also provided a chance to gain experience interacting with female adolescents in the same age range as my future thesis participants in an interview setting. This was important for testing the comprehension of terminology used within the interview guide, honing my interviewing skills and ensuring the interview progressed appropriately. Due to the age of my participants, I also included interactive activities in the interview guide to prompt their thinking surrounding their “personal identity”. Before meeting with my pilot interviewees, my supervisor and I were unsure of whether these brainstorming techniques would be effective and/or useful. However, throughout the pilot interviews, it was confirmed that creating identity diagrams (e.g. outlining characteristics, roles and values of personal importance) were critical to the girls’ understanding of their own identity which in turn affected the richness of the data produced.
There were three participants included in this study: participant one was a 17 year-old track athlete; participant two was a 16 year-old gymnast; and participant three was a 15 year-old swimmer. Interviews typically lasted between forty to sixty minutes and were digitally recorded with permission from the participants. Consent was obtained for the pilot interviews through a Letter of Consent signed by the participant’s parent/guardian and a Letter of Assent signed by the athlete. Following each interview, the participant was asked if she had any additional thoughts or issues regarding identity and peer groups that may have been missed in the interview guide. All participants responded that the interview guide was appropriate and relevant.

The data generated from the pilot interviews were not used for this thesis study. It is also important to note that few changes were made to the interview guide following the pilot interviews, however, additional probes were prepared for the thesis interviews to facilitate in-depth narratives.

Participants

As mentioned in the previous chapter, females undergo various psychosocial changes as they progress through early adolescence which is typically considered to be between the ages of 11 and 14 years-old (Kroger, 2007). When I initially proposed this study, I was interested in seeking female adolescents aged 15 and 16 to participate. The purpose for seeking adolescents in this narrow age range was based on a belief that recruiting participants who have likely progressed through their early adolescent stage may allow for increased depth in the data as they have had more time to reflect on the processes of early adolescence and the importance of their own personal identity. It was also hoped that recruiting older adolescent females may alleviate potential parental apprehension for their child’s participation.
Despite the initial specifications listed above, it became evident through the recruitment process that there were female adolescent athletes outside of this age range who were eager to make their voice heard through participation in this study. However, prior to inviting athletes outside of the proposed age range to participate, it was important to refer back to the literature to ensure inclusion of these athletes was consistent with the chosen theoretical framework. As previously mentioned, Erikson’s Theory of Psychosocial Development (1968) suggests the stage of adolescence occurs between the ages of 12 and 19. Highlighted developmental tasks of this stage include physical maturation, emotional development and the importance of membership in peer groups. Though I anticipated discrepancies may exist regarding the ability to reflect and articulate thoughts on personal identity in a wider age range, I believed it was very important to the study’s merit to include participants who felt they had valuable narratives to share. Therefore, with the support of Erikson’s theory, the age range was expanded to include adolescent athletes between the ages of 13 and 17.

Eight adolescent females were purposefully sampled for this study based on their active engagement in extra-curricular organized sport. Participants were included in the study if they were involved in a competitive organized sport which required commitment outside of the school environment. Athletes solely involved in high school sports were not considered for participation in this study. Furthermore, there were no stipulations placed on the particular type of organized sport or the level of competition the participants engaged in.

Inclusion Criteria:

Individuals who met the following criteria were eligible for participation in this study:

1. Adolescent girls aged 13 to 17 who volunteered to participate
2. Current participation in any organized sport which meets a few times per week for practices and/or competitions
3. Signed Letter of Consent and Photograph Waiver from parents
4. Signed Letter of Assent by the athlete

Exclusion Criteria:

Individuals who met one or more of the following criteria were not eligible for participation in this study:

1. Athletes who do not fall in the required age range (13-17 years old)
2. Athletes who participate in school-based sports only
3. Athletes who do not have the Letter of Consent or Photograph waiver signed by their parent or guardian
4. Athletes who do not provide a signed Letter of Assent

Recruitment Strategies

Participants were recruited by word of mouth. I began by contacting administrators for the Junior Blues athletic programs facilitated by the University of Toronto. Upon contact with the athletic administrators, I requested e-mail referrals or meetings with teams and/or individual athletes in person. In accordance with my request, I was invited to meet with several groups of young female athletes and discuss potential participation in my study. In addition, I was provided an opportunity to present at the Parents-Coaches Day for Junior Blues Gymnastics. Through interaction with these contacts, I was also able to make connections with parents who had children participating in other organized sports outside of the University of Toronto.
Aside from recruitment within the University of Toronto community, I also contacted friends, colleagues and family members searching for adolescent female athletes who may fit the participant profile.

Initial contact with the potential participants occurred in two ways. In situations where I presented information to potential participants in person, I handed out the Letter of Consent, Letter of Assent and Photograph Waiver, and then requested the athletes contact me via e-mail if they were interested in participating. However, in cases of referral, I made the initial contact with the potential participant via e-mail. Within this e-mail, I described the study, invited questions and attached the Letter of Consent, Letter of Assent and Photograph Waiver as sources of additional information.

Once the athlete established an interest in participating, I arranged the first meeting to discuss the photography assignment. At the end of the first meeting, the participant and I discussed an appropriate time-frame to take the photographs before the next meeting. The location of the initial meeting and the interview were chosen by the athlete. I recommended locations for each meeting (e.g. University of Toronto Athletic Center or the sport club to which they belong) however, in some cases the athletes preferred alternative locations. For these meetings, Toronto was the preferred location, but I traveled up to 110 kilometers.

Procedures

For the purpose of this study, two qualitative methods were employed. Phase One consisted of photo-voice as a method of data collection. This part of data collection was followed by individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. It is important to note that these phases of data collection were not mutually exclusive. The narratives shared in the semi-
structured interviews often reflected the photographs chosen by the participants. The theoretical importance of these methods will be discussed in the following section.

**Phase One: Photo-voice**

Photo-voice gained prominence in the early 2000s as an “action-oriented” qualitative method, developed by Caroline Wang and Mary-Ann Burris (Wang & Burris, 1997; Wang, Morrels-Samuels, Hutchison, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004). This method is considered “action-oriented” because it allows participants to capture the lived experience of a chosen phenomenon, as it happens (Wang & Burris, 1997). By using photo-voice to capture the lived experience, participants are able to provide the researcher with photographic evidence of their individual reality (Koltz, Odegard, Provost, Smith, & Kleist, 2010). In addition, this method is particularly unique as it allows the data to emerge entirely from the participant’s personal perspective. For example, the participant decides upon all intricacies of the photograph, including the angle at which it is shot and the contents included within the photograph. It is believed that the particularities of the photographs provide a more compelling account of the participant’s experiences than spoken words alone (Alexandersson, 1997; Carlsson, 2001; Harper, 2002).

Interestingly, Hurworth and others (2005) claim that photo-voice also tends to generate unpredictable data, an aspect of the method that is critical to this study. More specifically, providing an opportunity for adolescent females to visually demonstrate their personal feelings towards identity development and how that might be positively or negatively shaped by their peer group in sport, may act to deconstruct my previous notions of this phenomenon. As a result, the guide for the semi-structured interviews may be revised, during the interview, in light of the photo-voice results to more accurately reflect the perceptions of the participants.
In the case of youth, photo-voice appears to empower the young participants as it acknowledges that the beliefs, opinions and lived experiences of youth matter significantly (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004). In addition, Strack, Magill & McDonagh (2004) claim that in taking photographs of family, friends and the community to which they belong, the youth involved in their study had an opportunity to reflect on who they were and the person that they aspired to be (Strack, Magill, & McDonagh, 2004).

This phase of data collection began during the initial meeting with the participant by explaining the purpose of photo-voice as a research method. Following this explanation, I asked the girls to make a personal identity diagram (Appendix D). For this diagram, each participant brainstormed various roles and personality characteristics she possessed that make her unique. This activity proved to be very helpful for the photography piece, as many of the girls took sport-related photographs to represent several characteristics listed on their diagram. After creating the diagram, I gave the participants a simple “photo mission” to guide their picture-taking experience. Strack, Magill and McDonagh (2004) define “photo missions” as broad guidelines to facilitate picture-taking which also allow for the participant’s creativity and unique perspectives on the subject matter to emerge. The photo mission I provided for this study was for each participant to take photographs in her sport environment that represent her personal identity or interactions with her peer groups. Along with this photo mission, I often provided at least one example. For instance, if a participant wanted to take a photograph to represent peer interactions, she might take a photograph of the area that the team performs warm-up stretches in. It is important to note that participants were asked to refrain from including teammates in the photographs, as the teammates did not consent to being photographed.
The recommended time frame for photo collection was two to three weeks. Participants were asked to select three or more of their favourite photographs to discuss during the interview. Discussions during the interview revolved around reasons that each particular photo was selected and connections between the chosen photograph and the photo mission.

**Phase Two: Semi-structured interviews**

Phase two of data collection involved one-on-one semi-structured interviews between the participant and myself. According to DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), interviews are one of the most frequently used qualitative methods for data collection. In particular reference to a semi-structured interview style, the researcher typically poses open-ended questions which allow the participant’s interpretation (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Open-ended questions provide the participants with an opportunity to share their true thoughts and feelings (Warren & Karner, 2005). The researcher maintains control of the interview through the timing of questions and use of probes, which stimulate in-depth stories but guide the participants to provide answers in accordance with the purpose of the study (Sorrell & Redmond, 1995). Semi-structured interviews were used as a method in this study to build on the data generated through photo-voice.

As outlined by DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree (2006), developing rapport with the participants is a crucial dimension of qualitative methods of study. More specifically, this study involves female adolescents who tend to be fairly self-conscious, which makes the establishment of rapport between myself and the participant particularly important. The development of rapport involves the building of mutual trust between the researcher and participant through the assurance of confidentiality and respect for the stories that the participant shares (DiCicco-
Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In addition, creating a participant-researcher relationship that is free of judgment is integral for the development of rapport (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). For this study, rapport was built during the initial meeting with the girls in person, where I outlined the exploratory nature of this study, asked and invited questions, and ensured that the girls understood that this participant-researcher partnership was a safe space where there was no right or wrong answer.

Data Analysis

Following each interview, I transcribed the complete interview verbatim. All eight interviews were transcribed by myself to allow for increased reflection on the participants’ responses to each question. Transcribing the interviews alone also provided me with an opportunity to make relevant changes to the interview guide when potential concepts emerged.

The process of analysis is grounded in the researcher’s categorizations of the data based on themes, concepts, similarities and differences in the data (Neuman, 2007). For the purpose of this study, data were analyzed together with my research supervisor, Dr. Gretchen Kerr. This collaborative analyses ensured that the findings of the study remained neutral and allowed any underlying bias (e.g. my previous positive experiences with sport) to be minimized. Coding is used in the analysis of qualitative data to encourage the emergence of higher-order themes and stronger theoretical findings (Neuman, 2007). For this study, the collected data was analyzed using three coding procedures; open, axial and selective coding. Open coding is the initial phase in data analysis in which the researcher determines themes based on the present data and identifies the primary characteristics of each theme (Neuman, 2007). Themes typically emerge based on the expectations of the research question, concepts found within the related literature or
thoughts evolving through the stories of the participants (Neuman, 2007). Axial coding is the second phase which refers to the search for linkages between the initially coded themes (Neuman, 2007). In this phase, researchers are encouraged to divide existing themes into related subthemes and/or combine closely-related themes into more general themes (Neuman, 2007). Selective coding is the third phase of the coding procedures which involves scanning the data and reviewing the previous codes (Neuman, 2007). This final phase involves comparing, contrasting and revising themes and integrating these themes to develop a concept or theory (Neuman, 2007).

Following data analysis, I provided each participant with a summary of the study’s findings and thanked them for their participation via e-mail.

Ethical Considerations

_Ethics Concerning Treatment_

When including participants in a study, it is important to consider all potential ethical concerns, such as, the risks and benefits of participation as well as issues involving informed consent, confidentiality and the location of the interviews.

_Risks and Benefits_

Due to the age of the participants and the nature of this study revolving around peer groups in sport and the impact peers have on identity development, consideration must be given to the potential vulnerabilities of the participants. More specifically, it was anticipated that there may be instances throughout the interview when participants discussed experiences with bullying or self-esteem and body image issues influenced by their peers. To ensure participants felt
comfortable at all times, I approached all interactions with the participants in a sensitive manner and communicated in a way which was best suited for the emotional state of the participants. Though there were few instances, if participants did have emotional responses during interactions with myself, I provided the participant with adequate space and reminded the participant that she may take a break or end her participation, if she wished.

Despite the potential risks, learning about female adolescent relationships and their effect on identity development could alter sport-program facilitation significantly. Participation in this study benefits young female athletes by ensuring that sport is facilitated in a developmentally appropriate manner in the future. A developmentally appropriate sport program would give special attention to the developmental milestones of each individual age group and nurture social relationships amongst teammates to foster an increasingly positive sense of self.

Informed Consent and Assent

Prior to participation in this study, participants were adequately informed about the purpose of the study, the research design and voluntary nature of their participation. Each participant was also required to seek signed permission from her parent or guardian prior to involvement in the study. Once permission was received from their parent or guardian, the participants were also asked to read and sign a Letter of Assent outlining the purpose of the study and research design. Each participant was briefed on the potential risks and benefits through their participation and were also invited to any ask questions they might have throughout participation.
Finally, the participant was informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time, without penalty. This was detailed in writing on the consent form to ensure the participant may refer back to it at any time.

Privacy and Confidentiality

In the Letter of Consent, Letter of Assent and prior to the commencement of the interview, participants were assured that all information they choose to share with myself will be kept confidential. Copies of the Letters of Consent and Assent are found in Appendix A. This includes, but is not limited to: their name, city in which they reside and the competitive team that they are a member of. Each interview conducted was digitally-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Confidentiality was protected by deleting any identifying information from the interview transcription, providing pseudonyms on written transcription and keeping all transcribed documents on my password protected computer. My research supervisor also had access to this data. Although some quotations from the interviews were used throughout the results and discussion sections of this thesis, the participants’ names were not associated with these quotations at any time.

Summary

In summary, female adolescents between the ages of 13 and 17 who are actively involved in competitive organized sport were recruited for this study. Participants were asked to take photographs of their sport environment depicting the ways in which their peer groups in sport influence their personal identity. Participants were then asked to select photographs which best represent the purpose of the study and provide a verbal rationale in the interview for their choice. In addition to this phase of data collection, participants were interviewed one-on-one using a
semi-structured interview guide. Data was then analyzed using open, axial and selective coding.

The results of the study will be discussed in the next section.
Results

The following chapter details the results of the data analyses. Since the two phases of data collected for this study are not mutually exclusive, relevant photographs are embedded within the text to provide an enhanced understanding of the concepts discussed.

To provide context for the results, I will briefly outline the participant sample as a whole and then discuss each participant specifically, prior to reporting the results that emerged from the process of data analyses.

Participants

Eight female adolescent athletes participated in this study. In addition to the eight participants, I also met with four other athletes for the initial phase of data collection, but due to their busy schedule or lack of interest, they did not continue with participation in the study.

Eight different sports were represented in this sample. The athletes’ level of competition within their sports ranged between club level to national level. All participants involved in the study participated in their sport for a minimum of one year and had experience competing in the sport. The only exception was Lauren, who was in transition between competitive sports. As a result, she discussed her previous extensive experiences as a horseback rider as well as her current participation in mixed martial arts, which she had been participating in for six months at the time of the interview.

The average age of the participants was 14.63 years, with the oldest athlete being 17 years of age and the youngest, 13 years of age. It is important to note that despite the wider age range, participants identified similar feelings and opinions regarding peer groups and identity development.
At the beginning of the photo-voice information session and the one-on-one interview, I asked each participant to create an “identity diagram.” These diagrams prompted participants to think about the values, roles and personal characteristics that were important to them. Although this diagram was mainly used as a strategy to help each participant conceptualize her personal identity prior to photo-taking and answering interview questions, each diagram is also an important segment of the findings. Due to the nature of this research revolving around identity development, it is critical to provide a detailed description of each participant, including the personal characteristics that were cited as being important to her.

**Participant 1:** Kate is a thirteen year-old competitive rock climber. She has been an athlete at her climbing gym for over two years and climbs at the club level of competition. Kate also has participated in cross country and baseball. In Kate’s identity diagram, she described herself as smart, brave, funny, hardworking and creative. She states that her wit, bravery and work ethic are the personal characteristics that are most influenced by her friends from climbing. In addition, she identified her most important roles as being a sister and an athlete.

**Participant 2:** Alexandra is a thirteen year-old gymnast. She has been involved in gymnastics for eight years and considers her peers from gym as her closest friends. She practices approximately fifteen hours per week and competes at the provincial level. Alexandra identified herself as self-motivated, artistic, independent, organized and hard working. Throughout the interview, Alexandra discussed sharing closer relationships with friends from gymnastics than school and recalled several characteristics that were influenced by her teammates. These characteristics included good-humour, a strong work ethic, and competitiveness.
**Participant 3:** Haley is a seventeen year-old lacrosse player. She has been involved in lacrosse for eight years and competes at the international level. In the lacrosse off-season, Haley participates in cross-country and track. Haley described herself as friendly, caring, organized and outgoing. During the interview, Haley often made reference to her age and how it affected her interactions with teammates. More specifically, many of the characteristics she learned from her older teammates related to her evolving maturity. For example, she learned to be committed, independent and organized. In addition to personal characteristics, Haley recognized her roles as a student, sister and athlete as important aspects of her identity. Finally, Haley believed that the work ethic she has learned through lacrosse has helped her in excel in academics. She noted that the leadership and sportsmanship learned in sport are also characteristics that she believes transfer to non-sport situations.

**Participant 4:** Lauren is a fifteen year-old mixed martial artist. At the time of the interview, Lauren had been participating in mixed martial arts at the club level for 6 months. Prior to mixed martial arts, she was involved with competitive horseback riding. For the purpose of this study, she discussed her experiences in both sports. Lauren described herself as awkward, patient, unique and confident. She also recognized that she is a great listener and is always open to learning new skills. In addition, she views herself a great team player, but does not consider herself a leader. With regards to her friends from sport, Lauren felt that they had the most influence on her identity. She referenced sharing common interests as an important foundation for these friendships. She specifically recognized the influence of her peers on her confidence in competitive settings and perseverance when confronted with a difficult sport-specific task.

**Participant 5:** Brooke is a seventeen year-old rower. She has been rowing at various levels for four years, including: high school, club and international levels. Brooke described
herself as studious, competitive, sarcastic, funny and easy-going. When creating her identity diagram, Brooke also described her ability to persevere in adverse situations and her tendency to be positive and uplifting. She also recognized her role as a leader among her teammates as an important part of her identity. Brooke considered her competitiveness, work ethic and commitment to rowing as prominent personal characteristics influenced by her teammates. In addition, Brooke cited the commitment she has learned from teammates in sport as integral to her academic success.

Participant 6: Allison is a thirteen year-old gymnast. She has been participating in gymnastics for nine years and competes at the provincial level. Allison described herself as hard working, intelligent, determined, outgoing and funny. Several of the personal characteristics listed in her identity diagram were influenced by her teammates, including, a strong work ethic and outgoingness. She also recognized that her confidence was impacted positively by her friends from gym. Allison also believed her roles as a friend and sister are significant aspects of her identity. In addition, she considered her friends from gym as her closest friends because she believed that they frequently contributed to her sense of self.

Participant 7: Jenny is a 16 year-old competitive soccer player. She has been playing competitive soccer at the club level for seven years. In her spare time, she also participates in rowing and discussed some of her experiences with rowing in the interview. Jenny described herself as being trustworthy, loyal, nice, competitive and funny. She attributed personal characteristics such as competitiveness and confidence to the influence of her teammates. She also recognized her role as a sister as an important part of her identity.
Participant 8: Peyton is a fourteen year-old hockey player who competes at the club level. She has been playing hockey for four years and described her teammates as some of her closest friends. In Peyton’s identity diagram, she described herself as creative, motivated, intelligent and shy. In her interview, she detailed the influence her friends from hockey have had on her ability to overcome shyness. Although she continues to consider shyness a part of her personal identity, she acknowledged the significant personal development she has experienced over the past four years. She also described her roles as a sister and friend as an important part of her identity.
Findings

As previously mentioned, the purpose of this study was to increase our understanding of the influence of peer groups in sport on the identity development process in female adolescent athletes. Stated differently, I was interested in understanding how adolescent females learn about themselves through the messages they receive from their peers in the sport environment. In order to gain an understanding of this relationship, I collected photo-voice and interview data from eight participants who were actively engaged in organized sport. Photo-voice data were collected by the participants, typically, over a period of two to three weeks. Each participant then brought three or more of their favourite photographs to our second meeting. At this meeting, I conducted a semi-structured interview with each participant which lasted between 45-65 minutes in length.

Throughout the data collection period, I transcribed interview data and identified meaning units based on the responses of the participants. Meaning units were then grouped into larger categories based on the similarities between them. These categories emerged from the data; they were not pre-determined by existing literature. Each category was based on an aspect of “the self.” More specifically, based on the photograph and interview data, “the self” was divided into three categories: the physical self, the psychological self, and the social self. It is important to note that these determined categories of “the self” are not mutually exclusive and certainly overlap and influence one another. However, for the purpose of this chapter, each characteristic or trait (e.g. hardworking or supportive) will be discussed in reference to its individual category (e.g. psychological self or social self).

Due to the study’s focus on personal identity, it is also critical to consider that each participant emphasized characteristics or traits that were significant to her. Evidently, participants did not always agree on or identify the same characteristics or traits learned through
interactions with their peers in sport. However, because this study values individual differences in identity development, if one participant spoke of a quality and was able to articulate a connection between peers and this quality, it was included in the results even if it stood alone.

In summary, the following section will explore the results of data analyses through three emergent categories of the “the self”: the psychological self; the social self; and the physical self.

The Psychological Self

This theme emerged as a result of the participants’ descriptions of personal characteristics that existed within their own frame of mind. More specifically, the characteristics found within this theme may exist independently of interactions with other individuals. All participants identified at least two characteristics pertaining to the psychological self. In addition, participants often cited the relevance of these characteristics to their everyday life.

The psychological characteristics influenced by peers in sport included: commitment, drive, perseverance, intelligence, and confidence.

Commitment. Participants described broadly how their friends helped them to learn about commitment, with Jenny, a rower and soccer player, stating:

They’ve always taught me – especially my soccer friends – commitment. They’re always there to support me and they’re always coming to practice. You want to be there too, to work as a team… It’s kind of an unknown thing but you’re not going to get any better if you stay home… My teammates are always there, so, if they go, I go.

Similarly, Alexandra, Peyton, and Brooke also identified commitment to the team as an important part of their identity that was influenced by teammates. Consistent attendance at practice and returning to compete with the same team every season were examples of their
commitment. When asked to provide a specific example of how a teammate influenced her commitment, Brooke, a rower, commented:

On December 26th, [my teammate and I] went out on the water and it was freezing cold… She texted me the night before and said, ‘we’re going out tomorrow, you better be there…’ She really likes going out on the water, so she motivates me to go out and actually do the water part when it’s cold. I hate the winter… It was so cold that as we were rowing, the water would freeze before it would go off the rigger… It’s a dedication thing. I have never been out [on the water] in weather that cold before.

Interestingly, the teammate who influenced Brooke to partake in outdoor training was her doubles partner of over a year. She knew that her partner would not be able to train as effectively without her there. Brooke took the photograph in the inset – on December 26th – to represent the commitment demonstrated by her and her teammates.

Several girls in the study also described how their organizational skills (e.g. punctuality) were influenced by their teammates and how these skills contributed to their commitment to the team. While Jenny recalled learning the importance of punctuality, in a positive sense, simply through the expectation of teammates (e.g. being on time for practice at 6:00 a.m.), Haley learned the importance of punctuality through negative associations. She provided an example of how she learned this trait through teammates by saying:

One thing that I’ve really learned is punctuality. When I was playing for a travel team, we were at a tournament and staying at a hotel as a team. Our coach had said a time for a meeting and one girl missed the memo. So, when the coach asked if everyone was there,
we were missing one. [When we brought her to the meeting] we did push-ups and sit-ups
and wall sits in the hall… Since then, I’m big on punctuality… What you do as an
individual affects your teammates.

It was evident from the participants’ reports that organizational skills such as punctuality
served as an important aspect of commitment.

*Drive.* Arguably one of the most significant characteristics found within a competitive
sport environment is work ethic. Perhaps due to the nature of sport, athletes tend to be committed
to improving their skills, reaching goals, and setting new objectives to work toward. This unique
atmosphere provided an excellent basis for athletes to learn about themselves through
interactions with their teammates. As described by Allison, a gymnast:

> My teammates have the most influence on me because I think that in sport you learn a lot
> of things like discipline and hard work; all of those traits that kind of make-up who you
> are. [My teammates’ influence on me] is a little bit more than school friends because
> school friends don’t teach you as much as your friends from gym.

When describing broadly how sport has influenced her to work hard, Brooke stated:

> I never wanted to try hard. I never wanted to put extra effort in. I always wanted to be the
> natural best and I’d only stay in things that I was good at. Rowing made me want to try
> hard at something I wasn’t good at.
There were several instances when participants identified a hardworking attitude as being influenced by teammates. For Peyton, a hockey player, her drive to work hard was most apparent in the off-season when she was preparing for the upcoming winter. The photograph in the inset depicts her hockey net – equipped with a target shooting tarp – located in her driveway at her home. She often spends time in the off-season performing target practice. When reflecting on the reason why this photograph represents her drive to work hard, Peyton stated that she practices on her own because she knows her teammates are, too. She said, “Everyone likes to push each-other because we’re in it together.”

For Alexandra, a gymnast, direct observation of her teammate working hard influenced her to develop a stronger work ethic. She described:

One of my close friends has changed as a gymnast so much because she is such a hard worker. When she started gymnastics, she wasn’t really strong or flexible. Now she’s the strongest and most flexible because of how hard she works toward it. I find it really admirable that she works so hard… I work harder because of her.

Similarly, Allison, also a gymnast, discussed the impact her teammates’ successes have on her own work ethic:

[As part of photo-voice] I took a photograph of the athlete recognition board in our gym. It shows who was working hardest that month…When you see other people on the board, you want to push yourself to do better. It makes me want to work a little bit harder to see if I can get up on the board, too.
As evidenced by the testimonies of the athletes in this study, the drive to work hard was strongly influenced by peers in the sport environment. More specifically, the girls in this study developed their own drive through observing the hard work of their teammates.

*Perseverance.* Complementing a strong drive to work hard, perseverance was identified by participants as a characteristic that was influenced by peers on their team. Perseverance serves as an individual’s ability to persist toward a goal in spite of challenges (Random House Dictionary, 2013). Interestingly, several participants chose to depict the importance of this trait through their photo-voice assignment. For Brooke and Haley, their perseverance was apparent throughout periods of injury. Brooke describes the significance of the photograph of her hand (inset) by saying, “[This picture] represents my willingness in this sport to go through pain and push myself… In order to win, you need to push yourself through the pain, the extra workouts and get more blisters.”

In reference to her teammates, Haley described the recovery process she endured following her injury and the feelings she experienced when she returned to competition. She stated:

Before we were scheduled to go to the World Cup, I tore two ligaments in my ankle in a tournament. That was a really big setback… I went from playing, to crutches for a couple weeks, to a full recovery playing with contact, all within about 6 weeks… The most meaningful thing happened was my first time back playing. The comments from my teammates meant a lot to me. It reinforced the idea that working hard to get back was worth it.
Haley recalled her teammates being very appreciative of how hard she worked to return to the line-up. In addition, Haley stated that the encouraging words of her teammates following her return to play made her realize that she was a very important member of the team. Haley’s photograph to represent perseverance is found in the inset on the following page.

Similar to learning work ethic, perseverance was also influenced by observing teammates progress through typical sport-related challenges encountered in practice. Lauren described perseverance in reference to the time-clock located in her gym, stating:

Every time my coach asks us to try something, we do it for a couple minutes. We’ll shadow-box for two minutes or do planks and core at the end. You have to keep going until the timer ends… Your body can do it but in your mind, you’re thinking you can’t… All my teammates are doing it though, they aren’t stopping, so why should I?

Furthermore, Kate described a situation in which all of her teammates – except her – completed a climbing task. She said:

If they all get a task and I go up, try it, and I’m the only one who can’t do it, that would make me feel bad… But, it would also make me want to go harder. I’ll work hard, I can get it… It just might take me a little longer… I’m proving it to my teammates but I’m proving it to myself, too.

Evidently, sport provides an environment which consistently presents athletes with challenges. For the girls involved in this study, the ability to overcome these challenges was significantly influenced by their teammates. Through receiving encouragement from teammates
and observing teammates complete difficult tasks, the participants developed the characteristic of perseverance and valued this characteristic as part of their personal identity.

Intelligence. Several of the young athletes identified intelligence as an important aspect of their identity that was influenced by teammates. More specifically, adolescents in this study believed that their teammates influenced them to appreciate their intelligence, which increased their comfort level in expressing this characteristic. Furthermore, intelligence represented both academic strengths as well as intelligence in her respective sport.

For Alexandra, the support she received from one of the members of her gymnastics team made a substantial impact on her willingness to reveal this characteristic. She says:

Being intelligent is really important to me… I like being smart. [My friend from gymnastics and I] like to share facts that we know with each other… I mostly share these facts with her because other people get annoyed by my facts. I like having her because she’ll say, ‘Whoa! That’s so cool! I didn’t know that!’… And I find other people will judge me, or they’ll just be like, why do you know that?

Alexandra’s photograph to represent intelligence as part of her personal identity is found in the inset. She described this photograph as a place in the gym, the leg exercises station, where she and this particular friend enjoy making up math problems and solving them during practice. It is clear that the support and enthusiasm that Alexandra received from this teammate allowed her to feel comfortable revealing a characteristic that is very important to her personal identity; a characteristic that she seldom feels comfortable sharing with others.

Math class. Photographed by: Alexandra
While Alexandra believed her intelligence made her stand-out among her peers, Allison viewed her intelligence as a positive way to “fit in” with her teammates. In reference to her friends from gymnastics, Allison stated:

Lots of my teammates are really smart. It influences me to be in with the ‘smart talk’… I just listen to them and catch on to their conversations… It doesn’t necessarily make me feel smarter but it makes me feel, like, more part of the group.

Interestingly, Allison identified intelligence as one of her most prominent characteristics in her personal identity diagram at the beginning of the interview. It is clear that this aspect of her identity contributed to a feeling of belonging within her group of sport friends.

Finally, Peyton believed her intelligence was influenced in sport-specific ways by developing strong relationships with her teammates throughout the course of the season. More specifically, she believed that as the hockey season progressed and her relationships developed with her teammates, she became more sophisticated in her style of play. For example, she is increasingly aware of where her teammates are on the ice and she is able to work together with them to execute more difficult strategies. Peyton attributes this understanding of her teammates to her intelligence as a hockey player.

In summary, Peyton, Allison, and Alexandra, believed intelligence was a very important aspect of their personal identities. The influence of teammates for this particular characteristic focused on producing a positive environment to express this characteristic, rather than the enhancement of their cognitive skills.

Confidence. Although several participants discussed the impact that positive and negative experiences with peers in sport had on their confidence, none of the participants included this characteristic, or conversely – insecurity – as part of their personal identity diagram.
Throughout the interviews, the participants typically made reference to their confidence in two ways: the ability to cope with challenges in sport-specific situations as well as positive and negative situations with peers that affected their overall self-esteem.

Alexandra, Brooke, Allison, and Lauren all agreed that peers had a substantial impact on confidence when confronted with a challenging sport-specific situation. For Alexandra, a gymnast, the impact of peers was particularly important in times of self-doubt. She said:

When you’re having a tough time in practice or competition and they say, like, ‘You can do it! You have so much potential! You can do it!’ It makes you feel good about yourself… If they believe in you, then you should be able to believe in yourself, too.

Similarly, Allison, also a gymnast, credited one specific teammate for increasing her confidence by standing at her side on ‘off-days’ in practice. She stated:

If I was having an off-day, even though I’d done a skill [on beam] before, I’d get really scared. When everyone else went to do floor skills, my teammate stayed with me and told me I could do it… The coach is supposed to do that, yeah, they can’t really leave you. But if a teammate stays there, they chose to do it for you… It made me feel better because it made me feel like she cared that I could get the skill. I wasn’t scared anymore.

Alexandra also believed that the confidence necessary to acquire or improve sport-specific skills is often influenced by peers in sport. She stated:

Sometimes, if you’re scared of something, like a certain skill, and you’re with your friends and they see that you’re scared, they’ll come talk to you and tell you that it’s okay. Or like, they’ll tell you that you can do it, because you’ve done it over and over before… When they’re trying to encourage you, it pushes you a little bit more… It helps you overcome your fears easier.
Furthermore, Lauren attributed her ability to cope with her fear of competition to the positive influence of her peers. The photograph found on the following page represented these feelings of newfound confidence influenced by her friends. Lauren recalled:

This photo was taken in my very first year showing horseback. I hate competitions. I hate pressure… My teammates were very encouraging and supportive. They all stood around the gate and cheered… It helped so much… It definitely made me feel calmer. Lauren also recalled feeling reassured when her teammates told her stories of their own personal disappointments in the show ring.

Her confidence in competitive settings was a direct result of the positive comments and shared experiences of her teammates.

From a broader perspective, Jenny, Alexandra, and Haley discussed the influence of everyday encouragement from teammates on their overall confidence. For example, Haley described how it feels to be complimented by teammates in practices. She said, “You get a lot of support from having a team… There are always girls cheering you on, you know? ... If someone says to you, ‘you had a really good workout today!’ It’s something that definitely boosts your self-esteem overall.” Likewise, Alexandra details the encouragement she receives from teammates following routines in competition by saying, “When someone compliments you on something you did, like ‘that was a fantastic routine’, it feels really good. Definitely raises my confidence.” Interestingly, Alexandra also felt that when friends pointed out tips for improvement in her routine (e.g. point your toes), it didn’t compromise her confidence. Finally, Jenny believed that consistent encouragement from teammates benefits the team as a whole, in addition to personal confidence. She said:
I think in sports my teammates influence my confidence in a good way. They always make me feel really good about myself. If you make a good move or something, they always say, ‘You’re really good; you should keep doing what you’re doing.’ It always makes you feel good about yourself… If everyone is happy and they feel good about themselves, you work better as a team, too.

When asked about the frequency of encouragement from teammates, Brooke said, “It’s totally random and only when it’s genuine. It happens pretty often, though.”

While most girls identified instances in which their peers in sport positively impacted their feelings about themselves, two participants also described situations when teammates damaged their confidence.

Brooke, a rower, recalled a period of time when a teammate – who also attended Brooke’s school – spread false rumours about Brooke to her teammates and classmates. Brooke believed that her teammate spread false rumours about her because she envied Brooke for earning a spot on a junior national team. Brooke recalled:

When I made the junior national team, I got the e-mail and she was really bitter about it… She had never really liked me. She used to say bad things about me to people at school; about how I was bad at rowing. No one at school has any idea about rowing because they don’t come to watch. They don’t really see the work that goes into it… [After she spread the rumours] all my classmates got really wrong impressions of me. That was really hard.

She also felt that this situation complicated the team dynamics, as the teammate who was spreading rumours about her was also close friends with many athletes in Brooke’s boat.
Therefore, she was unsure if her teammates shared these negative opinions of her, too. When I asked Brooke how this affected her confidence in everyday life, she said:

- Well, I got really down for a while… For about a month, I would like, I wouldn’t go anywhere. I’d just come home from school and sleep for, like, 15 hours because I didn’t want to do anything. That was really bad for a while.

She did note that coping with the situation was easier when several of her teammates approached her privately and told her they did not share the same feelings as her teammate. Despite her struggles, Brooke did see the silver lining, stating, “Once I got through it, I’d say I’m a stronger person for it. It made me switch my friend group and made me find other sources for positivity.”

Kate’s negative experiences revolved around her feelings as an outsider when joining a new team. She said, “Last year I was really new and everybody had their friend groups. So, no one really wanted to welcome me in. It was also my first year of competitive climbing, so I was new. It took me aback.” There was no particular instance when Kate felt like they centered her out, instead, she said, “I just never felt that they would cheer me on. They had a group of friends that like, just wouldn’t really talk to you.” When I asked Kate how this experience affected her confidence, she stated, “I just remember one day I was really sad; I just like, I didn’t know why they were so mean to me. So, I told my parents. They said to just concentrate on climbing.”

Interestingly, Kate reflected that she didn’t realize the impact this experience had on her confidence until this year when she began to develop relationships with these teammates and started to consider them friends. She stated:
Now that I’m looking back at last year, I’m like, ‘wow, that was hard.’ But when I was in the year, I don’t know. I had one friend. I had my coach. I was kind of more focused on climbing. But now I look at this year, and I’m like, ‘wow, this year is so much better!' Kate attributes these improvements to the development of strong relationships with peers in climbing.

Despite Kate and Brooke’s negative experiences with friends in their sport environment, the decisions they made to resolve the conflict with their teammates and continue in the sport is a true testament to their resilience. However, it’s important to note that both of these girls identified their school friends as having a more positive impact on their personal identity than did their sport friends. This finding was in contrast to the feelings of the majority of participants, who found peers in sport had the most positive influence on their identity.

In summary, the psychological self is an aspect of the whole self that consists of personal characteristics existing within an individual’s own frame of mind. The results demonstrate that peers in sport influence female adolescent athletes in this study to view commitment, a strong work ethic, perseverance, intelligence, and confidence as characteristics that are meaningful to their personal identities.

The Social Self

The second major aspect of “the self” that emerged from the data was the social self. For this theme, participants described personal characteristics that become apparent during interactions with friends. More specifically, participants believed personal characteristics such as outgoingness, honesty, competitiveness, good-humour and supportiveness were influenced by peers in sport. The following section will discuss each of these characteristics, as described by the participants.
Outgoing. In this context, outgoingness refers to a participant’s desire to be friendly or sociable with her peers. Stated differently, this characteristic refers to a participant’s willingness to be talkative and approachable during interactions with her teammates. There were several different examples of the ways in which the female athletes in this study learned about the relevance of this particular characteristic to their personal identity.

For Peyton and Allison, outgoingness was a very prominent trait in many of their teammates which, in turn, influenced them to be increasingly extroverted. Peyton, a hockey player, was previously very shy in social situations. She described the substantial change she felt as she developed relationships with her teammates, stating, “Now I’m louder and not as shy. They make me not as shy with everybody… Our team is close and it’s easier for me to get along with people better now.” When I asked Peyton to describe why she believes she has become less shy as a result of interactions with her hockey friends, she said, “Everyone is really loud on the team with each other. Throughout the years, we’ve gotten to know each other and it became almost hard to be quiet.” She also noted that she now attends high school with several of her teammates, and as a result, finds it easier to socialize with others at school, too.

To represent her changing feelings, she photographed a puck that was given to her after her first goal in organized hockey. In reference to this trait, she recalled the day she scored her first goal; she did not express her excitement because she was very apprehensive in social situations. This photograph is an important representation of her personal development as it reminds her that when she scores goals now, she is very expressive and can’t wait to share this excitement with her teammates.
Likewise, Allison described the effect her teammates had on her ability to be outgoing. She stated, “Most of my teammates are really outgoing because I’ve known them for a while. I guess you kind of catch on to being nice to people when that’s how they’re treating you. It’s contagious.”

On the contrary, Haley found it more difficult to be outgoing with her peers in lacrosse. Interestingly, she identified being outgoing as one of the traits that was very important to her personal identity. She attributed her reluctance to reveal this characteristic to being the youngest athlete on the team. She stated, “Having usually been the youngest player on the team, it’s intimidating to break into the group of older girls.” Unlike Peyton and Allison, Haley felt that interacting with teammates who had “big personalities” did not encourage her to be more outgoing. Instead, it encouraged her to find a different characteristic that defined her place on the team. When I asked her if it was difficult to conceal this aspect of herself, she stated, “It’s just who you are in different settings… It doesn’t really negatively affect me that much. I still really enjoy hanging out with the team.”

Finally, Lauren described how her peers in horseback riding helped her learn about her preference to be introverted:

Everyone at the barn is just so hyper and happy, always on the go and stuff. At shows, it would be ridiculous; I’d be chasing them around all day! I just realized that I don’t want to be running around and acting so crazy all the time… It does influence me to be more positive but I learned that I’m not as extroverted as them.

In summary, athletes seem to learn about the characteristics that they do possess, as well as the characteristics that they do not possess through interactions with their peers in sport.
Honesty. This personal characteristic is a stand-alone theme, as it was only discussed by Lauren. I have included it in this discussion as Lauren felt that it was an important aspect of her identity that was influenced by peers in sport. Although she did not learn this trait through participation in her primary sports – horseback riding and mixed martial arts – this trait was influenced by negative interactions with her teammates in rowing. She credited the learning of this trait to be one of the reasons she left the sport of rowing after a brief stint:

When I rowed for one year, a bunch of my teammates lied about their ergometer scores. They’d say they were thirty seconds lower than their score. Or, they’d pretend they hurt themselves, like, “oh, I sprained my ankle when I was running 10 kilometres,” even though they didn’t. They wanted others to see them as good. I saw how they were constantly pretending to be better. I didn’t want to do that… I’d want to be an honest person. I wouldn’t just want to have people see me as being good at rowing.

Through this quote, Lauren provided a compelling example of how influential sport can be on an individual’s identity. For her, the value she placed on being honest surpassed a desire to be the “best” athlete on the team and gain acceptance from her peers.

Competitiveness. Another significant aspect of the self that was influenced by peers in sport is competitiveness. This characteristic was most often discussed by the participants involved in more “individual” sports (e.g. gymnastics). More specifically, the girls who described the importance of this trait to their personal identity tended to encounter their teammates in some form of formal competition throughout the season (e.g. ergometer or gymnastics competitions).

In this context, competitiveness between friends was typically believed to be a positive aspect which facilitated increased motivation and a stronger work ethic. In reference to a
teammate cheering her on at an ergometer competition, Brooke described how competition between teammates was very motivating for her. She stated, “It’s motivating in two ways. It’s kind of like, she’s watching me and I want to beat her because she can see me. But, it’s also motivating because you know someone is there for you.” Likewise, Jenny, a rower and soccer player, described a similar situation in which competition between herself and her teammate encouraged her to work harder:

It’s a healthy competition between us. When we’re erging, I’ll look at her ergometer score or what she’s holding and I’ll try to be better than her. We feed off of each other. I think it’s good to have someone there that pushes you.

Alexandra also described how her competitive nature was influenced by a peer on her gymnastics team. She said, “There’s one girl and it’s weird because we’re like the same person. I’m really competitive with her.” Similar to Brooke and Jenny, possessing a similar athletic skillset was the main reason that Alexandra’s competitiveness was revealed through interactions with this teammate. She stated, “I think because we’re so similar in skill, if she does something better than me, it’s like I’m competing against myself, who is better than me.”

Brooke also stated that from a team perspective she was thrilled when her teammate succeeded, as she knew that at some point in the season they would be racing in the same boat. She negotiated her feelings towards this idea of competitiveness:

It’s a weird balance… I almost want to see my teammate get better… She’s going to be in my boat and we’re going to go fast together down the course. But, at the same time, I want to beat her because I see that I can… Because you’re a team, you want everyone to improve. But, because you’re an individual, and you’re there anyway doing the same workouts, you want to beat them.
It is apparent that the participants believed competitiveness was a characteristic that was influenced by their teammates. Participants also identified that this characteristic was influenced more by individuals who possessed a skill level similar to or greater than the participant’s skill level.

**Good-Humoured.** Several girls attributed their ability to laugh and act silly to the influence of their teammates and the positive atmosphere in which they interacted with their teammates. Interestingly, many of the girls who identified this trait as being important to their identity also commented on how it impacted their self-esteem positively.

Alexandra, a gymnast, did not consider herself inherently funny but interactions with particular friends on her gymnastics team brought forth this characteristic in her. She stated:

This year I started to get really close with a teammate… Once you get to know her, she’s really funny and silly. She’s pretty much the only person I’m silly with… It’s a really hard relationship to describe because I don’t have another one like it… We’ll just start making each other laugh.

When I asked Alexandra how it felt to have a friend who influenced her to reveal a trait that she doesn’t always believe to be a part of her character, she stated, “It’s really good. It’s one of the best friendships I’ve ever had. Even though we are silly, it’s like, I can just talk to her about anything. I find I’m so limited in that.” Perhaps Alexandra’s openness to be good-humoured with this particular friend also made her increasingly inclined to share other personal stories or feelings.

For Kate, a rock climber, her confidence was affected positively by her ability to be good-humoured with her teammates. She stated, “I always say little things that will just break my teammates down laughing. It makes me feel good because it’s kind of the heart of the team. It
breaks up all of the serious climbing.” When I asked Kate if there was a specific teammate who influenced this characteristic most, she said, “Yeah. One of my teammates is really funny. And she thinks I’m really funny, it doesn’t matter what I do. We just really get along in that way. We laugh about little things and have little jokes together.” Kate believed her teammates’ consistent comments about her ability to make them laugh are positively reflected in her overall confidence.

While Alexandra believed spending time with one of her teammates highlights this characteristic, Kate believed that her natural wit is amplified in the presence of her teammates. Though the circumstances differ, both girls perceived this characteristic as being important to their identity and was reportedly influenced through interactions with their teammates.

Supportiveness. Many of the participants identified supportiveness as being a valued characteristic that they had learned from their friends in sport. From a general standpoint, several participants described experiences when they had received support from their teammates which influenced them to reciprocate. Examples included but were not limited to: teammates providing instructional support to an athlete when she is unsure of how to complete a skill; teammates providing emotional support to an athlete when she feels centered-out by the coach; and peers showing support during games by patting a teammate on the back, tapping her stick, high-fiving, etc.

A few participants recalled specifically how their teammates influenced them to be supportive as well. The most common example to highlight the athletes’ supportiveness was through situations involving verbal encouragement. An example is provided by Kate, who said, “I always hype [my teammate] up! If we’re doing a climbing task, I’ll say, ‘C’mon! Hike yourself up! You can do this!’ And then she’ll try. Maybe she’ll get it, maybe she won’t, but I’m always there for her.”
Kate spoke often in her interview of how important being supportive of her teammates was to her. She took the photograph in the inset to represent this aspect of her personal identity.

Brooke, a rower, commented that her teammate’s continuous support for her influenced her to reciprocate. She also believed that understanding her teammates was a key aspect of her ability to provide support. She stated:

My teammate always coxies me at ergometer competitions. She’s the best because she knows what to say that gets me going. We train together, so she knows what bugs me. But for her, she hates having a coxie until the last 200m of the race. I guess it is all part of knowing each other. Since that’s what she wants, I watch the whole thing instead. I’m behind her the whole time. It’s a big support thing.

Interestingly, Brooke identified this trait as being one of her most notable characteristics on her identity diagram.

Similar to Brooke, Jenny attributed her ability to provide support to possessing a strong understanding of her teammates, too. However, Jenny learned she possessed a supportive quality through instances in which her teammates sought guidance from her to assist them in working through a problem. She stated:

I learned I was able to understand people and where they’re coming from. If a coach says something to a girl and she gets upset about it, I’ve always been, like, understanding and know how to make them feel better about what the coach might have said. I always help them improve on it… I also know what to say back to the coach if they don’t know.
When I asked Jenny why this trait had significance to her, she said, “When you’re a team, I feel like, you always have to have each other’s back. You’re into the same thing. You’re there for the same reasons.”

In summary, the social self is an aspect of the whole self that consists of personal characteristics that become apparent during interactions with friends. The results demonstrate that peers in sport influence female adolescent athletes in this study to view outgoingness, honesty, competitiveness, good-humour and supportiveness as characteristics that are meaningful to their personal identities.

*The Physical Self*

The final aspect of “the self” that emerged from the data was the physical self. For this theme, participants discussed their peers’ influences on the perceptions they held of their personal body-image. More specifically, participants discussed the ways in which their peers in sport enabled them to accept their personal appearance and made them feel as though they belonged to an atmosphere that was free of judgment. The following section will discuss each of these aspects of the physical self, as described by the participants.

For many of the participants, the sport environment was a place that allowed them to interact positively with their teammates. One of the major outcomes of these interactions was the development of positive body-image. More specifically, several girls discussed self-conscious feelings about their body and how these feelings changed through the verbal encouragement of teammates.

For Kate, rocking climbing helped to alleviate her feelings of self-consciousness about her very short stature. Kate is shorter than the majority of her peers within and outside of sport. She revealed her self-conscious feelings about her body by saying:
Sometimes my peers will make fun of me, you know, that I’m small and stuff, which can affect me in a bad way. [The negativity] is more at school… People will be like, “oh, you’re so small! When are you going to grow?”

Despite the negativity Kate sometimes felt from her peers in school, she found that her peers in sport encouraged her to embrace her unique build and recognize her strengths. She stated:

Nobody at climbing has ever been mean to me about being small… If I’m on a wall and I do something really fast because I’m so small, my friends will say, ‘wow, you’re so lucky that you’re so small!’… Or, ‘you can do so many push-ups because you’re so light!’… It makes me feel good because it makes me feel like, since I am small, there are a couple things that are good assets of being small. It’s not always negative.

Similarly, Jenny’s peers in soccer have helped her to realize the positive aspects of being tall, a physical attribute Jenny wasn’t always comfortable with. She states:

When I was younger, I was always the tall person and that always kind of bugged me. People on other teams would make fun of me. But, as I got older, my teammates helped me to use it as an advantage. I was put on defense because I was tall and I could stop the girls better with my long legs. I could run faster, like a gazelle… My teammates always complimented me for that.

Furthermore, Lauren discussed the ways in which positive comments from her teammates regarding her height positively impacted her confidence. She said, “[My teammates] would always say things like, “You’re so tall and skinny… You make the short, stalky ponies look great because you are so much taller than other horseback riders… It made me feel great!”
Evidently, peers in sport often associated unique physical characteristics with sport-specific tasks. In developing this association, physical characteristics that were previously disliked by the participants were then perceived as advantageous to their sport. It seemed that this viewpoint tended to alter the feelings an individual previously held for this unique physical trait. More specifically, the girls in this study felt more confident about their body-image as a result of their peer interactions in the sport environment.

In addition to verbal encouragement from teammates, many participants discussed the sport environment as a “judgment-free” zone with regards to physical appearance. In this light, “judgment” did not refer to sport-specific grading systems (e.g. gymnastics or horseback riding); instead, it referred to the degree to which a fellow peer emphasized the importance of physical characteristics.

For Brooke, athletic skill and commitment to the team surpassed the importance of physical appearance. She stated:

Oh God, I’ve always had low self-esteem about how I looked. I’ve always been bigger than everyone else. I was always taller than everyone in elementary school, so, you feel chubby and stuff. But with rowing, I really grew out of that… We just care about how strong each other are… You’re fast, you’re nice and you’re good in the boat, that’s all we care about… I think it’s far more important.

In addition, Brooke said, “[The atmosphere] is positive, totally. Once you see someone at a 4:30 a.m. workout on a Wednesday, you’ve seen them at their worst!”

For Allison, the gym was a place where her peers mutually recognized individualities in their physical appearance. She stated, “I don’t think at gym you judge people’s physical characteristics too much… There are not only short gymnasts; there are tall gymnasts; there is a
variation… My teammates and I don’t really focus on body-image because everyone is different.”

Further, Alexandra compared the atmosphere with peers in the gym to her experiences with classmates in relation to body-image. She said:

At school, I sometimes feel really self-conscious about the way I look… There are some very mean girls in my class who judge, um, very unfairly… I think sport has made me feel less self-conscious. It’s a place that I can just, like, throw all of those insecurities out the window.

In addition to the experiences quoted above, Jenny and Kate also identified their sporting environments as a place where they did not feel pressured by their peers to look or dress a particular way.

In summary, the physical self is an aspect of the whole self that consists of feelings toward personal body-image. The results demonstrated that peers in sport encouraged acceptance of unique physical characteristics and assisted in creating a sport atmosphere that tended to be free of judgment. It is important to note that many of the participants cited how important this judgment-free sport environment was to their overall personal body-image and identity, due to the mixed messages they often received from peers in the classroom.
Discussion

According to Erikson (1968), identity development is the most significant psychosocial task of adolescence. Throughout this developmental stage, adolescents are encouraged to evaluate their past and present experiences to guide their future aspirations (Josselson, 1987). This includes experimenting with different roles and seeking membership in various peer groups.

Although identity development is critical for all adolescents, females were chosen as the focus for this study due to the unique psychosocial process they tend to experience at this time. This psychosocial process includes developmental, cultural and social challenges that tend to make adolescent girls feel vulnerable (Pipher, 1995). Of these challenges, the social aspect was chosen as the focus as female adolescents often rely on their peers to learn about who they are (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Harter, 2006; Josselson, 1987). Therefore, the purpose of this study was to further our understanding of the influence of peer groups in sport on the identity development of female adolescents.

The results of this study support past research in this area and make critical connections between the psychology and sport literatures that advance this field of scholarly inquiry. The following chapter will explore the connection between the results of this study and Erikson’s (1968) theoretical framework. As well, Festinger’s (1954) theory of social comparison will be used to shed light on the social process in which participants learn about themselves through teammates in sport. In addition, the results will be examined in reference to Pipher’s (1995) conceptualization of adolescent girls. Finally, I will address identity development in relation to other scholarly disciplines, as well as the limitations of this study and recommendations for future research.
As previously mentioned, Erikson’s (1968) theory describes adolescence as the developmental time frame categorized by group identity. Group identity is defined as an “aspect of an individual’s self-theory that focuses on membership in and connection with social groups” (Newman & Newman, 1995, p.448). It is believed that experimentation within different settings (e.g. school, sport, arts) provides adolescents with an opportunity to determine which particular groups meet their personal needs and values best (Erikson, 1968). Membership within a peer group that meets an individual’s needs also fulfills a desire to be connected to others (Erikson, 1968). Positive peer interactions foster the development of a personal identity.

From a broad standpoint, the results of this study suggest that sport tends to provide an environment that encourages positive peer interactions. This notion is supported by recent research which suggests that sport provides athletes with a unique opportunity to develop close relationships with peers (Fraser-Thomas & Côté, 2009). In addition, Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) found that developing peer relationships was one of the most significant areas of personal growth identified by the athletes in their study. Several participants in the current study also cited examples of ways in which they felt connected to the peers on their team. For example, one gymnast in this study reported her willingness to reveal particular characteristics (e.g. intelligence) as a result of feeling encouraged by and comfortable with her teammates. In a different light, several participants discussed experiences in which they acted as a support system for their teammates (e.g. talking with a teammate when she is down). These results support previous research by Weiss, Smith and Theeboom (1996) who found that positive dimensions of friendship in sport include guidance (e.g. providing tangible support), intimacy (e.g. understanding each other) and loyalty (e.g. “being there” for one another). In addition, Weiss, Smith and Theeboom (1996) found that sharing things in common (e.g. interests, activities or
values) was also an important aspect of friendship in sport. This foundation of friendship is also supported by Erikson (1968), who states that relationships developed in the adolescent stage are based on selective criteria. Interestingly, a few participants from this study suggested that being a part of a collective group which shares common interests and values served as an explanation for sport being a more positive place for peer interactions in comparison to other environments they were a part of (e.g. school).

Although the majority of participants reported positive interactions, it is important to recognize the two participants who discussed negative experiences with peers in their sport. These findings support research by Owens, Slee & Shute (2000) who found that negative interactions between female peers are often categorized by indirect aggression. This type of aggression is typically demonstrated through manipulation, spreading false rumours and/or eventually excluding an individual from a peer group altogether (Owens, Slee, & Shute, 2000). Researchers have demonstrated that being new to a peer group (e.g. new school or sport) or a peer’s jealousy can often make one vulnerable to indirect aggression (Owens, Slee & Shute, 2000; Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000). Interestingly, both situations of negative peer interactions described by the girls in the current study are consistent with these suggested vulnerabilities. More specifically, one instance of negativity involved an athlete’s feelings of rejection from peers upon joining a new team; the other situation involved a teammate spreading false rumours about an athlete due to jealousy. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) also suggest that peer jealousy tends to have a negative influence on adolescents in sport.

In both circumstances of indirect aggression in the current study, the athletes reported feelings of low self-esteem and the emergence of other negative behaviours (e.g. excessive sleep). These accounts of negative feelings are consistent with research suggesting confidence in
female adolescents is closely tied to interpersonal relationships (Eder, 1985). The participants’ experiences of indirect aggression from teammates also provides context for an important critique of the sport environment. According to Danish, Forneris, Hodge and Heke (2004), sport does not always provide the “magic ingredient” for the positive personal growth of children and adolescents, as this environment can often have both positive and negative influences on a young athlete. Overall, this particular finding requires further scholarly inquiry, as the majority of studies related to indirect aggression have been conducted in school settings. Despite the few instances of negative interaction between teammates, there is evidence that sport has the potential to provide female adolescents an opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with their teammates.

Developing meaningful relationships with peers is critical for identity development as girls tend to define themselves through their relationships with others (Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Harter, 2006; Josselson, 1987). In the adolescent stage, the influences from peers in close relationships are believed to be more frequent, strong, and enduring than the influence of others (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2006). The athletes in this study often described sharing some of their closest friendships with peers in sport. Therefore, it is appropriate that participants were able to identify several important aspects of the self that were influenced by these peers. Interestingly, in relation to psychosocial development, previous research suggests that positive peer relationships in sport tend to facilitate higher sport enjoyment, increased self-worth, greater commitment to the team and allow for decreased sport-stress (McDonough & Crocker, 2005; Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Smith, 2002). The current study complements this previous research and also advances scholarly inquiry regarding peers and identity development.
by suggesting the ways in which these athletes discovered particular aspects of the self through interactions with their peer groups.

For some participants, personal characteristics were influenced by the perceived expectations of their teammates. This supports previous literature which suggests adolescents have reached a developmental time frame in which they “conceptualize themselves as objects of expectations” (Newman & Newman, 1995, p.452). Personal characteristics such as commitment, categorized by being punctual and attending all practices and games, was highly influenced by the expectations of others on the team. In addition, the expectations of teammates often encouraged the adolescents to develop characteristics that were not always perceived as inherent to their personal identities but were common within the group. Particular characteristics common to a peer group in which adolescents belong tend to provide additional substance to their self-perceptions (Erikson, 1968). For example, an athlete described her ability to overcome shyness – a self-described prominent aspect of her identity – through interactions with her loud and outgoing teammates.

This notion of personal development is also consistent with Erikson’s (1968) central process of peer pressure during adolescence. As previously mentioned, the central process in each developmental stage serves as the interaction between the psychosocial needs of the individual and the cultural challenges she faces. In this particular stage, the central process revolves around adolescents’ social interactions with peers. Peer pressure acts as an important aspect of the adolescent stage because adolescents often adopt the common values and beliefs of the group with which they have chosen to identify (Newman & Newman, 1995). As a result, peers often encourage adolescents to act in a particular way (Newman & Newman, 1995). As cited in the existing literature, peer pressure is often viewed as a negative influence on the
developing adolescent. More specifically, researchers have found that peer influence often leads to unhealthy behaviours in adolescence such as smoking, disordered eating and substance abuse (Andrews, Tildesley, Hops & Li, 2002; Dishion & Owen, 2002; Gritz et al., 2003; Kiesner, Poulin, & Dishion, 2010; Wouters, Larsen, Kremers, Dagnelie & Geenen, 2010; Zalta & Keel, 2006). However, Erikson (1968) encourages researchers to also view peer pressure as a positive influence on psychosocial development in adolescence. For example, adolescents might interpret the expectations of peers as pressure to be greater than they believe themselves to be. The results of this study suggest this may be particularly true for peers in sport, as participants provided several different examples of personal development in this context (e.g. confidence, good-humour, and outgoingness). Furthermore, the results of this study suggest that peer pressure from teammates in sport typically yields positive personal development, as the majority of characteristics influenced by teammates were desirable identity traits (e.g. drive, perseverance or positive body-image).

Participants also discovered personal characteristics through the perceived similarities and differences between themselves and peers on their team. According to Erikson (1968), peer groups do not require complete conformity of all the members involved. In fact, diversity in personal characteristics between members facilitates the emergence of particular roles within each peer group (Erikson, 1968). Moreover, Josselson (1987) describes identity development as the process by which adolescents recognize the traits that distinguish themselves from those whom they feel most like (e.g. parents, friends, or siblings). This is consistent with the current study, as athletes identified learning about their unique characteristics by discovering how they differed from their teammates. For example, an athlete discussed feelings of introversion and a desire to be a follower within her peer group as a result of interactions with her extroverted
peers. Conversely, several participants also recognized similarities they possessed with teammates (e.g. enjoying math problems or athletic prowess) which influenced the emergence of personal characteristics such as intelligence and competitiveness. Overall, most participants were able to identify personal characteristics they learned from peers as a result of both the similarities and differences between themselves and their peers in sport. In this light, it is suggested that peer groups in sport encourage adolescents to develop personal characteristics which tend to be of particular significance to an athletic environment (e.g. commitment or drive) but also encourage individuals to be confident in the traits that make them unique (e.g. intelligence or good-humour).

Finally, in some instances, the adolescents discussed their aspirations to develop particular characteristics that they admired in their fellow peers. A study by Weiss, Smith and Theeboom (1996) found that attractive personal qualities (e.g. psychological or physical) were an important aspect of friendship in sport. The findings from the current study advance this research by making a critical connection between the recognition of a peer’s desirable personal characteristic and developing this characteristic as part of one’s personal identity. Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) support this notion by stating that sport tends to provide numerous opportunities for role modeling among teammates. Athletes most commonly reported this type of learning when discussing the development of drive and perseverance. One potential explanation for this is that the nature of the sport environment provides ample opportunities for an athlete to witness a fellow teammate demonstrate a personal characteristic. More specifically, athletes are frequently confronted with sport-specific situations (e.g. responding to defeat or pressure to take a game-winning shot) which allow personal characteristics such as drive, perseverance or confidence to be displayed. This notion is supported by Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007) who suggest that sport
programs tend to be optimal environments for personal growth when they provide frequent opportunities to experience challenges. It must be noted however, that psychosocial development through participation in optimal sport environments is highly dependent on the adults (e.g. coaches or parents) who facilitate these sport experiences (Côté & Fraser-Thomas, 2007). More specifically, coaches and significant adults are responsible for ensuring sport environments are supportive for athletes when they experience failure. As stated by Côté and Fraser-Thomas (2007), sport can be an intimidating or threatening environment for young athletes if it is not implemented in a developmentally appropriate manner. It is suggested that the participants in the current study experienced challenges and failure in a supportive environment, which allowed for positive developmental outcomes (e.g. perseverance, drive and confidence).

Despite the participants’ ability to articulate specific instances when their peers influenced their development of identity related characteristics, the nature of the sport environment must be recognized in this learning as well. More specifically, it’s important to question whether it is the culture of sport itself, in which athletes are required to work together, demonstrate discipline and overcome frequent challenges, that influences the development of particular identity related skills, rather than the specific influence of peers within this environment. This remains an important question for future research.

Given the results of the current study and the support from the existing literature, it is apparent that sport provides a unique environment for identity development. Though comparisons with other environments in which the adolescents were a part of (e.g. school) were not fully explored in this study, there is evidence to support that the athletes in this study discovered many aspects of the self through their interactions with peers in sport. Furthermore, it
is suggested that perhaps this environment allows for peer dynamics that are unique from other adolescent-populated domains.

The role of peers in female adolescent identity development is well-established through the existing literature and the results of this study. In order to understand how particular peer groups facilitate identity development, it is important to understand the social process that encourages learning about oneself. Festinger’s (1954, p.117) theory of social comparison states that every individual possesses a drive to evaluate her opinions and abilities in comparison with others. Harter (2006) supports this idea by stating that peer comparison provides an adolescent with an opportunity to evaluate her personal competence in a given domain. An individual’s perception of the environment in which she is involved and her evaluation of her abilities in that setting, influence her to behave in a particular manner (Festinger, 1954). For example, if a female adolescent values her membership on a sport team and perceives her athletic talent as high, she might work harder to reach a goal within that environment. However, in order to evaluate her opinion or ability, she must have a reference point with which to compare. Festinger (1954) believes that this evaluation can only be possible between individuals who possess similar capabilities in a particular context. Therefore, individuals are often drawn to peer groups which share similar values and possess similar abilities (Festinger, 1954). As stated by Smith (2003), sport environments provide important opportunities for youth athletes to interact with their teammates which, in turn, allows for social comparison amongst peers. This is consistent with the results of this study as all participants identified their role as an athlete and their particular abilities in this context as significant aspects of their identities. Further, most athletes identified the opinions of peers in sport as most influential on their perception of the self.
Interestingly, research by Harter (2006) contrasts this idea of positive social comparison by suggesting that comparison among peers in a given context (e.g. sport) for the purpose of evaluating the self often leads adolescents to disappointment in their self-evaluation. Harter (2006) suggests that social comparison amongst peers in a given context tends to be beneficial only for the adolescents who possess the highest level of competency in that context. Furthermore, Harter (2006) suggests that comparison amongst peers in a context highly valued by an adolescent tends to make her vulnerable to negative self-evaluation. Harter’s (2006) suggestions are particularly interesting with relation to the findings of this study as most participants identified the substantial significance of sport in their lives, yet described peers in sport as having a positive impact on their identity development. Possible explanations for these positive influences include: shared common interests and goals in a sport environment which emphasizes cohesion between teammates; characteristics developed through sport such as perseverance and drive which allow athletes to overcome challenges; and/or the nature of the sport environment which requires these athletes to work together as a group and recognize each others’ individual strengths.

Festinger (1954) also claims that perceived accuracy in evaluations is enhanced when group members are close in opinions and abilities. This idea of evaluating the self provides interesting insight into potential reasoning as to why adolescents in sport learn a great deal about themselves from their teammates. It is argued that in an environment such as school, peers often have a wide range of different interests, abilities and opinions. This range may account for an individual’s difficulty in finding a particular group with which to socially compare. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that adolescent athletes might share similarities predominantly
with their peers in the sport environment which allows for increased social evaluation. In turn, this may provide an optimal environment for identity development.

As mentioned previously, an individual’s perception of her abilities and opinions in a particular setting influence her behaviour (Festinger, 1954). When an adolescent finds a group which meets her needs, she will behave in a way that reduces the potential discrepancies that exist between her and the members of the group (Festinger, 1954). The results of this study suggest that traits such as commitment, drive, perseverance and outgoingness are examples of the personal characteristics that are valued by adolescents involved in sport. As a result, the athletes tend to act to reduce the level of discrepancy between themselves and teammates with regards to these traits. Therefore, Festinger (1954) would suggest that adolescents will be inclined to be increasingly committed to the team, possess stronger drive and perseverance and act in a more outgoing manner during interactions with teammates. This notion of discrepancy reduction was evident in the results of this study. It is argued that the nature of the sport environment (e.g. overcoming obstacles or working together as a team) allows for important sport-specific traits, such as perseverance, to be developed in this manner. Research by Fraser-Thomas and Côté (2009) indicate that the development of characteristics such as commitment, discipline and perseverance are essential to participation in sport. Further, it is evident that these characteristics are also integral to adolescents’ everyday life. Interestingly, several participants in this study made the critical connection between the personal characteristics learned through teammates in sport and their importance to life outside of sport. It’s important to note that discrepancy reduction may be harmful to adolescents when it involves characteristics or qualities that cannot necessarily be changed or altered. For example, research by Jones (2001) highlighted the potential threat for adolescents who engage in social comparison and discrepancy reduction
with regards to body-image. Jones (2001) suggested that body dissatisfaction might be related to adolescents’ focus on discrepancies that exist between themselves and their peers. In this context, adolescents do not necessarily have the ability to change their biological appearance which can have a negative impact on their self-evaluation.

The findings suggest that the sport environment provides a unique setting for peer interactions. Festinger’s (1954) framework of social comparison suggests that adolescents often gravitate towards groups which possess similar abilities and opinions in order to evaluate the self. The results of this study support this notion and advance the research in this area by suggesting that sport may provide an optimal environment for social comparison processes as athletes in sport often share similar sport-specific talents, as well as similar values (e.g. commitment to the team). Therefore, sport may provide a valuable opportunity for identity development for female adolescent athletes.

As mentioned previously, Pipher (1995) believes females experience a uniquely challenging transition into adolescence, categorized by developmental (e.g. physical or psychological changes), cultural (e.g. interest in mass media) and social (peer and parental relationships) challenges (Pipher, 1995). As a result of these challenges, the adolescents may experience a confusion of the self. In order to facilitate healthy identity development, Pipher (1995) suggests ways in which adolescents can navigate through this stage. Interestingly, several of her suggestions were represented in the results of the current study.

From a broad standpoint, Pipher (1995) suggests that identification with a particular peer group that provides adolescents with enjoyment, focus, and a sense of belonging can often influence them to be more confident in their personal identity. Further, Pipher (1995) indicates
that possessing particular talents often allow girls continuity between their childhood self and their developing adolescent self. Consistent with this suggestion, most adolescents in this study indicated that they had been involved with sport since a young age. The results of this study advance Pipher’s (1995) ideas by suggesting that possessing talent, such as athleticism in a particular sport, allows for an increased likelihood of continuity with a peer group through this transition phase, too. More specifically, individuals who participate on sports teams in their childhood often develop friendships with teammates who are present throughout participation. Therefore, if an individual continues with participation in a sport into adolescence, it is likely that they will share friendships with some of the same peers from childhood. Continuity with teammates through this stage may also allow for increased support through this phase of identity development.

Pipher (1995) also indicates that female adolescents often flourish when they discover a protected space which is welcoming to personal growth. Interestingly, Pipher’s (1995) primary recommendation for belonging to an environment that’s conducive to this growth is through participation in sport. Pipher (1995) also suggests that female adolescents who are involved in sport are typically emotionally healthy. This is consistent with the findings of this study as many of the girls indicated the influence of teammates on their feelings of confidence (e.g. perceived support or verbal encouragement), their resilience when faced with a difficulty (e.g. interpersonal conflict) and their ability to be competitive with teammates, yet work together as a team. In contrast, it is possible that individuals with a positive developing identity are also those who gravitate to sport environments, enjoy their sport participation, and share positive relationships with their peers. Stated differently, perhaps female adolescents who are attracted to the sport
environment are the female adolescents who are typically emotionally healthy. It may, in fact, be that both explanations have merit; this warrants future research.

Second, Pipher (1995) suggests that adolescents who participate in sport often view their bodies as functional as opposed to decorative. The results of this study were certainly consistent with this notion, as the majority of participants discussed their physical characteristics in ways that were advantageous to their particular sport (e.g. importance of height in rowing). These results also advance the research in this area, as many of the girls indicated that the physical characteristics they felt most vulnerable about in everyday life, were often the characteristics most beneficial for their particular sport. Furthermore, it is argued that peers had a substantial influence on the acceptance of these physical characteristics, as most participants discussed the verbal encouragement they received regarding their physical characteristics from peers on their team. It is apparent that positive feedback from peers in sport regarding appearance has an integral role in helping adolescents recognize their uniqueness and abandon of their physical insecurities. In addition, related research in sport psychology has demonstrated that positive peer interactions have also been associated with a perception of increased physical competence (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2006; Weiss & Duncan, 1992).

Third, Pipher (1995) describes sport as an environment in which adolescents learn to cope with defeat, cooperate with teammates, deal with pressure and work together in the pursuit of common goals. In her opinion, adolescents who possess interests that are greater than themselves (e.g. membership on a sport team) are often able to rely on those special interests to provide perspective when faced with an interpersonal conflict at school.
Overall, female adolescents must create an identity that is founded on talents and interests as opposed to appearance or popularity within a particular group (Pipher, 1995). It is argued that sport provides an excellent environment for identity development, as it involves the development of athletic talent and the nurturing of personal characteristics simultaneously. Furthermore, as evidenced by the results of this study, peers in sport also encourage fellow athletes to recognize personal interests that may differ from the norm of the group.

**Challenges and Limitations**

Despite the psychosocial focus of this study, it is important to recognize other areas of scholarship that have contributed to our understanding of identity development. Of particular interest is the sociocultural literature which provides important critiques of the psychosocial perspectives regarding identity. Earlier sociocultural literature by Stryker (1968; 1987) suggests that psychological perspectives of identity research have raised concerns for quite some time. Stryker (1968, 1987) emphasizes the difficulty in removing individual identity from the social structure in which it was formed. More specifically, this perspective suggests that the self is a result of the social process, values, and structure, to which an individual is a part of (Côté & Levine, 2002). This social process tends to limit the resources available to most girls, which in turn, has an effect on their identity development (Phillips, 1998). For example, gender, race or class may prevent adolescent girls from having meaningful opportunities for identity development, such as participation in organized sport (Phillips, 1998). In this light, sociologists would recommend that researchers focus attention on the process (e.g. societal barriers) of identity development as opposed to the content (e.g. personal characteristics or self-esteem) of an individual’s identity (Harstock, 1998). Since every individual will face different societal barriers, it is important to understand that identity development cannot be oversimplified (Phillips, 1998).
More specifically, sociologists critique the perspectives of Erikson and other notable psychosocial theorists by suggesting that their theories fail to recognize the complexity and diversity of the human experience; instead, it is suggested that these theories focus on creating general principles for all human experiences across the lifespan (Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001). Finally, more recent literature in the sociocultural context suggests that identity is more relational and contingent than it is stable (Côté & Levine, 2002). As a result, it is suggested that individual identities are subject to change in different contexts. Finally, the sociocultural perspective contributes to the explanation that it is only those who already have well-developed positive identities that have access to sport and therefore, access to a conducive environment for further identity development.

While these perspectives are critical to the field of identity development, I adopted a psychosocial perspective for this study. The research question emerged from the perspectives of Erikson (1968), Pipher (1995) and the related psychological literature. However, this research could be strengthened in the future by incorporating sociocultural perspectives of identity development research. This interdisciplinary approach may help to broaden the scope of this research by considering identity development through physical activity and organized sport across various contexts (e.g. ethnic background, socioeconomic status, sexuality or culture). As a result, an interdisciplinary approach would inform researchers of appropriate environments for optimal identity development (e.g. sport environment) but also create awareness of the societal barriers that exist (e.g. cultural, ethnic or socioeconomic) that prevent some adolescents from reaping the benefits of these environments. In addition, an interdisciplinary approach would allow for an enhanced understanding of the ways in which adolescent identities may be altered in different contexts.
The involvement of adolescents in this study presented numerous benefits as well as challenges with respect to the research process. It’s important to bring awareness to these challenges for future researchers who hope to engage in scholarly inquiry with this population.

The first challenge that occurred revolved around receiving consent and assent from participants in the study. Due to their age, I was required to obtain consent from the parents and adolescent participants separately. Since initial correspondence with the potential participants often originated with their parents via e-mail, I sometimes questioned the adolescents’ interest in the study prior to meeting them in person. In addition, I had to consider the extent to which each participant understood the goals of the study and the nature of their participation within it. Therefore, each time I met with a participant for the first time, I ensured that they were familiar with the study, encouraged them to ask questions and addressed the content found on the assent form. In some instances, parents of an athlete were very interested in the study, but the athlete did not appear to share the same interest in participating; or, the athlete was very interested and the parents did not feel comfortable having their adolescent participate in the study. In these instances, it was difficult to know how to proceed with recruitment for this study, as the rights of both individuals had to be respected. As a result, these participants often dropped out of the study after the initial meeting, as one of the consenting individuals was not comfortable with participation. This particular challenge is unique to this age group, as consent to participate depends on both the parent and the athlete. As a researcher, obtaining consent from both parties can be discouraging, especially when the athlete is very interested in participating and it is the parents who are unwilling to provide consent.

The second challenge involved correspondence with the participants. The five participants who did correspond with myself directly often waited longer than anticipated to
respond to requests to meet for the initial meeting and/or the interview. At times, it would take several weeks to receive a response and arrange a mutually convenient meeting. In addition, most athletes in my study also participated in extra-curricular activities at school which further compromised their availability to meet. Though this did not present a major challenge, it is one that must be acknowledged for future research in this area. It is recommended that researchers who wish to engage in scholarly inquiry with this population plan ahead. The athletes in this study seemed to appreciate my patience with and accommodation of their individual schedules. I believe this was an important aspect of developing a good rapport with this population.

The final challenge encountered when working with this population involved the location of meetings. My preferred location for the initial meeting and interview was at the university or at a neutral location chosen by the participant (e.g. local community centres or the location of their practices). However, when I met with the four participants from my hometown (110 kilometres outside of the city), often the participants lived in my area and would have to travel outside of town to meet in a neutral location (e.g. coffee shop or location of sport event). In addition, many of the participants did not have a driver’s license or access to transportation due to their age. Therefore, for convenience, participants often chose to meet at their own home or my home to conduct the interview. In these particular cases, interviews were conducted in an open area (e.g. office, kitchen, living room) and a parent was always home. To maintain confidentiality of the participants’ narratives, parents were not present in the room at the time of the interview.

Despite my preference for a neutral location, the four interviews conducted at my or the participants’ homes were unique in that the participant seemed to be more comfortable with the interview process. Meeting in public places, such as an athletic centre, was at times distracting.
for the participant and in some instances, other individuals were present in the surrounding area during the interview. Meeting at homes of the participants also allowed parents an opportunity for additional questions about the study, if they wished. For myself personally, meeting at the homes of participants was somewhat intimidating and threatening at first, especially if I had not met the parents or participants yet. However, I was able to adapt given the circumstances and I did recognize a few advantages to meeting in these locations (e.g. increased comfort level and minimal distractions). In this light, it’s important to maintain a balance between accessibility and rapport with reducing my own vulnerability and that of the participants in the study.

In addition to the challenges, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study in order to strengthen future studies in this area of research. The concerns were primarily methodological including limitations with the sample and the theoretical framework selected for this study. I will address each of these limitations in the following section.

In many respects, the sample chosen for this study was fairly homogeneous. The adolescents who participated in this study were Caucasian and likely middle class, as they were financially able to participate in organized sport and dedicate several hours per week to training. Furthermore, all participants in this study had experience competing in their respective sports which required additional financial commitments. In addition, this study was limited to athletes who participated in organized sport outside of their school environment. It would be interesting to involve adolescent girls who enjoy sport but were forced to drop out of sport due to financial reasons or other commitments (e.g. school, employment or other clubs).

In addition to the homogeneity of this sample, several limitations arose due to the participants’ ages. First, participants were often volunteered for this study through their parents.
As a result, my first interaction with each participant was during the initial step of data collection. Therefore, it was important that I provided a summary of the study during the initial meeting with participants, in which I discussed the goals of the study and the nature of participation in the study. Second, due to the age of the participants, there is a potential for self-selection bias. More specifically, parents may have only volunteered their daughters for this study if their daughters had positive relationships with their peer groups in sport.

The final limitation for this study involved the theoretical framework that I selected for this study. Due to personal research interests, this study was conceptualized from a psychosocial perspective, primarily influenced by the work of Erikson (1968) and Pipher (1995). However, it is important to recognize that there are other disciplines of scholarship that study identity (e.g. sociocultural or biological). Each of these disciplines are valued in their own right and contribute important research which enables us to formulate an overall concept of identity development in adolescence.

Many future research questions regarding identity development must be considered. Given the participants’ frequency of comparison between peer groups in sport and school, it would be interesting to complete a comparison study which focused on the influence of peers on identity development in different environments. More specifically, it would be interesting to explore peer influence on identity development in sport, followed by peer influence on identity development in school, using the same participants, interactive activities (e.g. identity diagrams), and interview guides. This line of research would provide insight into the similarities and differences of peer influence on identity development in various contexts. If, upon comparison, sport appeared to be an environment which provides the optimal opportunity for personal identity development, it would be a very substantial contribution to the existing literature. More
specifically, empirical evidence in this area of scholarship would complement the known positive developmental outcomes for youth who participate in sport (e.g. healthy eating, fewer mental health issues and reduced likelihood of substance abuse) (Harrison & Narayan, 2003; Pate, Trost, Levin & Dowda, 2000; Steiner, McQuivey, Pavelski, Pitts & Kraemer, 2000). This may be of particular significance for adolescent females, as it may serve as motivation to remain involved in sport at a time when drop-out rates are high (Fraser-Thomas, Côté & Deakin, 2008; Wankel & Mummery, 1996). Furthermore, previous research has suggested that positive friendships in sport act as a support for youth athletes, which in turn may facilitate continued sport participation (Ullrich-French & Smith, 2009).

Although the results of this study indicate that peer interactions in sport are typically characterized as positive, there were two instances when participants cited peers having a negative influence on their overall confidence. The nature of these negative interactions was consistent with previous literature regarding indirect aggression in female peer groups. Since the majority of research regarding indirect aggression has been conducted within school settings, it would be interesting to explore the prevalence of this type of interaction within peer groups in sport. In addition, future inquiry might examine the ways in which indirect aggression from peers in various settings (e.g. sport, school or clubs) positively or negatively affect identity development in adolescent girls.

Often participants in the current study described their identity being most influenced by peers in sport. This suggests that their personal identities are best represented in the sport environment. As a result, an interesting area of future inquiry would be to explore if and how an individual’s identity is sustained when she is in social situations (e.g. school environment) where her values, beliefs and goals differ from the dominant peer group.
As the current study focused solely on the influence of female peers in sport on identity development, an investigation of the influence of male and female peers on co-educational sport teams (e.g. swimming, track and field, martial arts or gymnastics) is warranted. It is anticipated that this area of inquiry would have particular significance on feelings toward the physical self. In this light, it would be interesting to explore whether sport remains a “judgment-free” environment – as the participants in this study described it – when the environment includes male athletes. In addition, it would be interesting to compare the influence of male and female peers on the identity development of adolescent girls on these teams. For instance, do male or female peers provide the most messages to female adolescent girls about their personal characteristics, self-esteem and body-image? And, of those peers, whose opinion has the most influence?

For the athletes in the current study, sport was a significant aspect of their lives. All athletes involved spent a substantial amount of their spare time training for their particular sport and indicated that some of their closest peer relationships were with teammates. As a result, many of the athletes believed that their friends in sport influenced their identity development positively in a number of important ways (e.g. verbal encouragement regarding physical appearance or demonstrating work ethic). In addition, peer groups in sport provided most participants with a strong sense of belonging as they shared several common interests and goals with their teammates. Unfortunately, due to various obligations (e.g. part-time employment, financial difficulty or academics), not all adolescents can continue participation in organized sport through adolescence, even if they wish to remain involved. Future research should explore the impact of sport drop-out on a female adolescent’s identity development. More specifically, it would be interesting to examine whether female adolescents who drop out of sport for
unavoidable reasons (e.g. cost of participation) remain connected to peers from sport. If so, do peers from sport remain influential in developing their identity? Or, do adolescent females have difficulty sustaining friendships with teammates following sport drop-out? And, if so, does this have an influence on identity development?

As previous literature has indicated, identity development is also facilitated by role experimentation and continuous self-evaluation (Barber et al., 2005; Harter, 2006; Josselson, 1987; Santrock et al., 2003). Future research that examines athletes’ opportunities for role experimentation within their sport environment and the ways in which experiences in sport influence self-evaluation would be interesting to explore. In addition, research on who (e.g. coaches or teammates) influences the fulfillment of particular roles on a team would be interesting to examine.

Finally, further research must recognize the role of significant adults in influencing identity development of young athletes. Parental influences on body-image and the development of psychological skills (e.g. confidence) must be examined. In addition, the role of coaches in creating a supportive sport environment where young athletes feel comfortable confronting challenges and interacting positively with peers must be explored. Scholarly inquiry of this nature would provide a more complete picture of the social influences individuals experience throughout the adolescent stage.

In summary, the findings of this study suggest that female adolescent athletes tend to learn about themselves through their peer interactions in the sport environment. In the early stages of this research endeavour, I engaged in a personal project to better understand the photo-voice method and facilitate my own thinking on identity development. Since I wasn’t familiar
with photo-voice, I believed that this project would assist my understanding of this research method and also assist in the ways I would frame this method to my participants to facilitate photo-taking. After careful consideration and attention to detail, the photograph I took included pencil crayons, a pencil sharpener and pencil crayon shavings (photograph seen on the following page). To me, this photograph depicted something much more than it would have to someone else who came across it. This idea seemed to be true for all of my participants who engaged in photo-voice, as often the images represented simple objects (e.g. a gym mat hanging on the wall) which had a much deeper personal meaning. When I took this photograph, I envisioned each pencil crayon in the set as a particular peer in a given environment. Similar to possessing different colours in each set, each peer group is composed of individuals who possess various characteristics, roles and values that make them unique. When peers come together in a particular environment such as sport – the pencil sharpener, in this case – individual identities may be positively or negatively influenced. The resulting pencil shavings – the individual’s identity – represent the characteristics or values learned from a peer that is now a part of the individual’s personal identity. For each individual, the compilation of colours will always be different. Furthermore, the findings of this study provide enhanced meaning to this photograph, as they contribute to our understanding of the various personal qualities (e.g. confidence, outgoingness, good-humour) female adolescents learn through their peers in sport which contribute to an increasingly positive sense of self.
Identity development through peer interactions in sport. Photographed by: Ellen MacPherson
Conclusions

Erik Erikson (1968) was the first theorist to acknowledge identity development as the most influential milestone of adolescence. Identity is referred to as “a well-organized conception of the self, consisting of values and beliefs to which the individual is solidly committed” (Berk, 2010, p.314). Adolescence is an important stage for identity development, as this marks the developmental time frame in which individuals are encouraged to gain autonomy from the family, experiment with new roles, and test their capacities within these various roles to discover which characteristics and values personify the self (Josselson, 1987).

According to Pipher (1995), this stage of development can be particularly challenging and unique for young females as they tend to be faced with developmental (e.g. early physical maturation or psychological changes), cultural (e.g. increased interest in mass media) and social (e.g. increased reliance on peer approval and support) which may lead to a confusion or loss of self (Berk, 2010; Chen et al., 2009; Harter, 2006; Josselson, 1987; Peterson et al., 2007; Pipher, 1995; Shafii & Shafii, 1992).

In support of the work of Erikson (1968) and Pipher (1995), the broader developmental psychology literature suggested role experimentation, self-evaluation and peer groups as integral aspects of identity development. Since females tend to derive their identities through relationships, peer groups were chosen as the focus (Josselson, 1987).

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the potential influence of peer groups in sport on the identity development of female adolescents.

Data were gathered through two phases of data collection. This included photo-voice and individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. In total, 8 female athletes between the ages of 13 and 17 years participated in the study. All participants were involved in sport at
the time of the interview and had experience competing in their sport. The level of competition ranged from recreational to international among the athletes who participated.

The findings of this study demonstrate that female adolescent athletes learn about themselves through their peers in three major ways: psychologically, socially and physically. Though the particular characteristics that athletes learned from their peers were categorized into an aspect of the self (i.e. psychological self, social self, or physical self), these categories were not mutually exclusive and often characteristics could belong in more than one category. Examples of characteristics learned by athletes included: competitiveness, drive, confidence and outgoingness. In addition, peers in sport appeared to positively impact the girls’ body-image through verbal encouragement and support.

Several questions were posed for future research. These include comparing different environments (e.g. sport and school) in which adolescents learn about themselves from peers; examining the influence of indirect aggression from peers on identity development; peer influence on identity development on co-educational teams; effect of sport drop-out on identity development; the role of significant others including coaches and parents in fostering identity development; and the influence of role experimentation and self-evaluation in sport environments on identity development. In addition, since this study focused on peers’ influence on identity development in the sport environment, it is also important to explore other extra-curricular activities in which an adolescent may be involved (e.g. music lessons or a membership in a band).

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that sport provides a valuable environment that tends to foster positive peer interactions which is important for identity development. Research of this nature gives critical attention to sport as a potential avenue for
fostering healthy identity development while bridging a gap between the fields of developmental and sport psychology. Though many paths of future research remain, the findings of this study may be used to inform the design and delivery of developmentally appropriate sport for female adolescents. Only when sport is developmentally appropriate will we be able to retain female participation in sport and see them reap the potential benefits that the sport environment has to offer.
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Appendix A: Parental/Guardian Letter of Information and Consent Form

Dear Parent/Guardian,

Your daughter is invited to participate in a research study about their experiences as an adolescent female in organized sport. The goal of this research study is to gain an understanding of how individual identities are influenced by peer groups in organized sport. In other words, I am interested about how adolescent females learn about themselves through their participation in sport.

There are two parts to this study should you and your daughter consent to participate. Your daughter will first be asked to take photographs of her sport setting and peer group with a camera provided by the researcher. There will be set parameters and restrictions provided to participants about the kinds of pictures they can and cannot take (please see attached guidelines). The pictures will tell us something about what is important and meaningful to your daughter. Your daughter will then meet with the researcher to talk about why she chose the pictures she did and what they mean to her. In addition, questions will be asked about overall identity (e.g. what are some of your unique characteristics?) and how interactions with their peers in sport may influence the way in which girls learn about their unique traits (e.g. what have you learned about yourself through your friends?). The interview will occur one-on-one with the researcher and the interview will take place at a mutually convenient location. The interview is expected to last approximately 30-45 minutes. The interview will be digitally recorded and audio files will be stored on the researcher’s password protected computer. All information provided by the participant will remain confidential. All data collected will be destroyed in June 2013 when the study has finished.

The study will be conducted by Ellen MacPherson, a master’s student in the Graduate Department of Exercise Sciences at the University of Toronto. This study will be conducted under the supervision of Dr. Gretchen Kerr, Professor and Associate Dean of Undergraduate Education in the Faculty of Kinesiology and Physical Education.

Should you consent to your daughter’s participation in the study, your daughter will subsequently be given the opportunity to consent or decline participation in this study. An initial meeting will be scheduled with your daughter to explain the study, what her involvement would look like, and to give her an opportunity to ask questions and to consent or decline participation in the study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. If your daughter chooses to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. Any information disclosed by participants up to that point will remain confidential and will not be included in the researcher’s data analysis. Your daughter will also have the right to pass on any questions she does not feel comfortable answering. If your daughter does not agree to participate, even if you have consented, the study will not proceed.
Your daughter’s identity will remain anonymous throughout the study and in any publications that may stem from this study. All data provided by your daughter will remain confidential; it is only when disclosures of maltreatment occur that confidentiality cannot be protected, as required by law. There is a chance that some of the experiences recounted by your daughter may arouse feelings of distress. Should this occur, I will ask her if she wishes to take a break, reschedule or terminate the interview. I will remind her that there is no penalty for withdrawal from the study.

Participation in this study benefits young female athletes by ensuring that sport is facilitated in a developmentally-appropriate manner in the future. A developmentally-appropriate sport programme gives special attention to the developmental milestones of each individual age group and nurtures social relationships amongst teammates to foster a positive sense of self.

If, at any time, you have any questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

If you have any questions or concerns about the study, please do not hesitate to contact Ellen MacPherson at e.macpherson@utoronto.ca or Gretchen Kerr, Ph.D. at gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Please provide your consent to participate in the study and return the form to the researcher either in person or via e-mail. Please keep a separate copy for your records, in case you wish to refer to it at a later date.

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understand the information above and have had the opportunity to ask any questions. My daughter has my permission to participate in this study.

____________________________________________________________________________

Parent or Guardian’s Name

____________________________________________________________________________

Parent or Guardian’s Signature

____________________________________________________________________________

Date
Appendix B: Letter of Assent and Consent Form for Adolescent Participants

Dear Athlete,

You are invited to participate in a research study about your experiences as an adolescent girl in organized sport. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how girls your age learn about themselves through organized sport. You will be asked to meet the researcher for an informal meeting to discuss participation in the study. The researcher will explain the different methods and allow you to ask any questions you may have. If you agree to participate, the first part of the study involves taking photographs of your peer groups in sport following the guidelines set by the researcher. This provides you with an opportunity to show the researcher what is important to you and what has meaning for you. Then, you will meet with the researcher again to discuss your photographs. In this meeting, you will be asked a few open-ended questions, which means that there are no right or wrong answers. Your job is to answer the questions as best as you can based on your experiences. The questions will be about your friend groups from sport and what you have learned about yourself through your relationships with these friends (e.g. values, personal characteristics, beliefs). Your answers are important because as a female athlete, you are an expert on the topics of interest.

You will be interviewed by Ellen MacPherson, a student in the Graduate Department of Exercise Sciences at University of Toronto. If at any time you have a question and would like to contact Ellen, please feel free to e-mail her at e.macpherson@utoronto.ca. You may also contact Ellen’s supervisor, Dr. Gretchen Kerr, at gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca.

If you agree to participate, you will be interviewed one-on-one with Ellen and the interview will take place at a location agreed upon by both of you. The interview is expected to last about 30-45 minutes. The interview will be recorded with an audio device and the recordings will be kept on Ellen’s password protected computer. The stories you share in the interview will not be shared with anyone else, and your name will not be used. At any time, if you don’t feel comfortable answering a question, or don’t want to answer, that’s okay. You are also free to leave the study, at any time, without penalty. Participation in this study is completely voluntary, meaning that you can choose to participate or not. Even if you agree to participate, you can change your mind at any time and there won’t be any consequences for you.

If you do wish to participate in the study, please sign below and return to the Ellen. Please keep a second copy of this letter, in case you want to read it again at a later date. Thanks for your time.

Sincerely,

[Signature]
I have read and understand the information above and have had the opportunity to ask any questions. I agree to be a participant in this study.

Participant’s Name (print name)

Participant’s Signature (sign your name)  Date
Appendix C: Photograph Waiver and Parameters for Photo-taking

Photo-voice is a method of research which allows research participants to take photographs of their personal experiences as they happen. This particular research method provides youth with an opportunity to show their voice by taking pictures of the people and places that are important to them.

For this particular study, photo-voice will allow the researcher the opportunity to see interactions within peer groups in sport from the perspective of each participant. These photographs will significantly enhance each participant’s contribution to the study by providing a backdrop for each personal story. The photographs may also assist in making the participant feel comfortable during the interview, as she will be invited to informally chat about the contents within each photograph.

All photographs taken for this research study will only be used for the purposes of this project. Photographs will be stored in the researcher’s office for the duration of the study. The researcher will be the only person who has access to these photographs. Following completion of this study (June 2013), all photographs will be destroyed.

Please be reminded that participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you wish to withdraw participation at any time, you are free to do so.

If, at any time, you have any questions about your child’s rights as a participant in this study, please contact the Office of Research Ethics at ethics.review@utoronto.ca or 416-946-3273.

Please see the attached form detailing the parameters in which the photographs must be taken. If you have any questions, please contact Ellen MacPherson (Researcher) at e.macpherson@utoronto.ca or Dr. Gretchen Kerr (Graduate Supervisor) at gretchen.kerr@utoronto.ca.

CONSENT OF PHOTOGRAPHY WAIVER

I have read and understand the information above and have had the opportunity to ask any questions. I hereby waive the right to inspect or approve the photographs that are taken by participants in this study. I acknowledge the photographs are taken for research purposes only and will allow my child to be included in the photographs.

Name: ______________________________________________________________

Child’s Name: _________________________________________________________

Parent or Guardian Signature: ___________________________________________

Date: __________________________________________________________________
Parameters for Photographing

- All photographs must be taken in the sport environment. No photographs taken outside of this environment will be considered for this study.

- Photographs are to be taken at scheduled practices or competitions.

- Taking photographs of other athletes is not permitted.

- Photographs should not be taken in the change-room or other areas of privacy.

- Be respectful of the sport environment.

- All participants are encouraged to be as creative as they wish to represent their personal perspective.
Appendix D: Interview Guide

Informal Questions Regarding Photos:

1. Why have you chosen this photo?
   a. What is the significance of it?
   b. Who is in it?

2. Where was this photo taken?
   a. Is this location important to you?
   b. Does it have any significance to you and your peers?

Semi-structured Guide

1. I’d like you to make a diagram of the characteristics, roles, values and beliefs you have that make you unique.
   - Characteristics (e.g. hard working, organized, focused)
   - Roles (sister, friend, athlete, daughter)
   - Values (honesty, commitment, dedication)

2. Using those characteristics, can you make a pie graph with the different people who influence the way you learn about yourself?
   - Examples: parents, friends, coaches
     o Who has the largest piece of this pie? Who has the smallest?
     o In other words, who has influenced what you’ve learned about yourself most?

   - Now, using another pie graph, can you identify your friend groups? This time, I want you to think about the quality of friendships you have and give the biggest piece of the pie to those friends.
     o In other words, which friend group do you think has the highest quality of friendships? (i.e. best friends)
     o Which friend group gives you the most messages about yourself?
     o Whose opinion carries the most weight?

**Make clear distinction between friend and peer**
**Remind participants in co-ed sports that we are talking only about female peers**

3. What have you learned about yourself from your peers?
   - What have you learned about your personal characteristics from your peers?
     o For example, hard-working, funny, outgoing
     o Probes:
       - Can you think of any examples?
- Are those traits important to you? (why/why not?)
- Do your peers say anything about those traits?
- Do your peers comment on each others personal characteristics?

- What have you learned about your talents from your peers?
  - Do you have any specific talents?
    - If so, what kind of messages do you receive about those talents?
    - What do your peers think about those talents?

- In what ways have your peers influenced the way you look at yourself?
  - Do you receive any messages from your peers about your appearance?
  - Do your peers say or do anything that influences the way you feel about your body?
  - Where do you receive the most messages about your appearance?
  - Do your peers comment on each others appearance?
  - Whose opinion carries the most weight?

- In what ways have your peers influenced the way you feel about yourself?
  - Can you think of any times when your peers have made you feel really great (or not so great) about yourself?
  - In what ways do your peers influence your self-esteem?
  - How do your peers make you feel about yourself as a whole?

4. If I asked your peers to describe you, what would they say?
   - Would different peers say different things? If so, why?

5. Would your peers describe you differently than you would describe yourself?
   - Are there characteristics or traits are your peers less aware that you have?
   - Are there any feelings about yourself that your peers are less aware that you feel?

6. Have you changed the way you think about yourself from what you learn from your peers?
   - Changes for the positive?
   - Changes for the negative?

**General Probes:**
- It seems like there is a lot more to be said about that – can you tell me more?
- When you look back on that situation now, how does it make you feel? Does it still upset you?
- Is this something you talk about a lot?
- Whose opinion carries more weight?
Examples:

Diagram

Pie Graph