


# SPORTS IDENTITY IN CHILE: A SOCIOCULTURAL AND MATERIAL PROCESS INFLUENCED BY THE STATE AND NEOLIBERALISM


*IDENTIDADE ESPORTIVA NO CHILE: UM PROCESSO SOCIOCULTURAL E MATERIAL MARCADO PELO ESTADO E PELO NEOLIBERALISMO* 

*IDENTIDAD DEPORTIVA EN CHILE: UN PROCESO SOCIOCULTURAL Y MATERIAL MARCADO POR EL ESTADO Y EL NEOLIBERALISMO* 

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**Abstract:** Construction of sports identity is an interesting topic in the field of sociocultural studies of sport. This study analysed identity construction in Chilean athletes in order to gain a deeper understanding on the topic and its associated issues. Our qualitative study involved 17 semi-structured interviews with high-performance and recreational athletes who practise conventional and adaptive sports. The results reveal that there are two categories of conditions involved in the construction of Chilean sports identity – sociocultural conditions and material conditions – and that these are influenced by neoliberal logics and values. We conclude that gender is one dimension that can potentially generate alternatives to individualism and competition discourses present in current Chilean sports identity.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Sport plays an important role in identity construction and can boost or restrict its development (VISSOCI *et al.*, 2017). Sport also has a political dimension, working as a means for reproducing and reinforcing national imaginaries to strengthen a nation's identity (TÁBOAS-PAIS *et al.*, 2015).

As such, the State has historically played an important role in identity construction by promoting sports (ALABARCÉS, 2002). However, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2003) propose that, in modern capitalist societies, globalisation has softened and indeed removed many borders – a new reality that has led to a decline in the nation-state's influence in shaping national identities. The same authors suggest that categories and patterns of meaning by which the people of a given country and culture define themselves have been broadened. This is the result of greater market influence (ALABARCÉS, 2017), and of international organisations and large multinationals (GOMES; PUIG, 2009).

Larraín (2003) claims that identity is formed through a variety of processes. It is a cultural process in that people define themselves in terms of certain shared categories whose meanings are culturally defined. It is a material process given that people project themselves and their qualities symbolically through material artefacts. It is a social process because identity implies a reference to 'others' about whom we internalise opinions and expectations in order to define and therefore differentiate ourselves. The historical dimension of collective memory can be added to these three aspects. Iñiguez (2001) describes collective memory as being in a state of constant creation and re-creation, leading to a situation in which certain aspects of identities are simultaneously maintained and altered.

Cabrita *et al.* (2014) suggest that identity is the result of a set of social roles played by individuals over the course of their lives and by which they define themselves. These roles are intimately related to the four dimensions mentioned above and to the different social contexts and groups within which a person positions and defines him- or herself.

Practising a sport may be one of the roles that assist people in identity construction. In fact, given athletes' level of engagement and commitment as well as the tremendous significance that sport holds for them, Tusak, Faganel and Bednarik (2005) propose the notion of sports identity. According to Koeneke (2018), this comprises a combination of personal and social identity. However, in the present study, we focus on the proposals of Soto-Lagos, Pozo and Romero (*in press*)<sup>1</sup> who do not distinguish personal from social with regard to sports identity.

A number of studies suggest that the perspective of social identity (HOGG *et al.*, 2004) may help to shed light on the different factors that influence the development of sports identity over the course of an athlete's life (TASIEMSKI *et al.*, 2004). Therefore, personal and contextual variables have a strong impact on athletes' vocational, personal and professional identities (LÓPEZ-AGUILAR; ÁLVAREZ-PÉREZ, 2019). Similarly, social

1 SOTO-LAGOS, Rodrigo; POZO, Luis; ROMERO, Pablo. Hacia una Psicología Social y Crítica del deporte (Towards a social and critical psychology of sport). *Quaderns de Psicologia*, Barcelona, Spain. *In press*.

sports projects also influence the configuration of national identities (GUEDES, 2018) as do issues of motherhood (McGANNON; McMAHON; GONSALVES, 2018), gender (TRALCI; RUBIO, 2012; McGANNON *et al.*, 2018), race (LACERDA; BRUM; SOARES, 2011; MARCHETTI; GOMES, 2018), disability (SMITH; BUNDON; BEST, 2016) and professional and commercial sports models (FERNANDES; SANFELICE, 2019).

In the context of this relationship between identity and sport, it is worth emphasising that the present study adopts an anti-essentialist perspective that sees identity, rather than being inherent to a person, as a culturally, materially, socially and historically situated construct. This view also contributes to the discussion posed by Ronkainen, Kavoura and Ryba (2016) regarding the need for epistemological transparency in order to achieve more meaningful research contributions in the field of sports identity.

For this reason, in the present article we analyse the phenomenon of sports identity construction from the point of view of its main actors: athletes themselves. In doing so, we seek to provide a platform for those who are so often in charge of representing their nations and projecting sets of values that the countries wish to promote among their citizens.

## 2 METHODOLOGY

Considering the aim of the study and the theoretical references that guide it, we adopted a comprehensive critical epistemological approach (IBAÑEZ; IÑIGUEZ, 1997; IÑIGUEZ; ANTAKI, 1994). We conducted a qualitative study (MORENO-DOÑA; RIVERA-GARCÍA; TRIGUEROSCERVANTES, 2014) based on the premises of Grounded Theory (GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967), which provides an understanding of the phenomena based directly on the contributions of the athletes themselves (FULLAGAR, 2017; SMITH; MCGANNON, 2018).

Participants were selected by means of theoretical sampling (GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967) within four categories: (1) Conventional High Performance Sport (DARC, from Spanish *Deporte de Alto Rendimiento Convencional*: athletes who compete at national and international levels in Olympic and non-Olympic sports); (2) Adaptive High Performance Sport (DARA, *Deporte de Alto Rendimiento Adaptado*: athletes who compete at national and international levels in adaptive or Paralympic sports); (3) Conventional Social/Recreational Sport (DSC, *Deporte Social/Recreativo Convencional*: athletes who practise sports for recreation); and (4) Adaptive Social/Recreational Sport (DSCA, *Deporte Social/Recreativo Adaptado*: athletes who practise adaptive sports for recreation). In order to protect the identities of our interviewees and to ensure that their accounts would not put them at risk in any way, each has been assigned a pseudonym and no mention is made of the sport in which they participate. The sample includes conventional and adaptive high-performance athletes who are well known to the general public and have made significant achievements when representing Chile internationally, and social/recreational athletes who have been practising their sport for more than two years and have thus acquired experience and knowledge of the discipline.

Data were collected by means of active, semi-structured interviews (SISTO; FARDELLA, 2008) conducted between July 1 and December 31, 2018. Seventeen interviewees (nine males, eight females) were selected from different individual and collective sporting disciplines and categories. (Figure 1).

**Figure 1** – Overview of interviewees

Name	Category	Sex
Camilo	DARC	Male
Gonzalo		Male
Javiera		Female
Camila		Female
Ximena		Female
Carlos		Male
Gustavo		Man
Gabriel	DARA	Male
Diego		Male
Jenny		Female
Fernanda		Female
Jaime		Male
Katherine	DSC	Female
Daniel		Male
Martín		Male
Ema		Female
Carolina	DSA	Female

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Each interview lasted 40-60 minutes and was recorded by a digital voice recorder. At the beginning of each interview, participants were told about the objective of the study and were asked to read and sign an informed consent form covering anonymity and data protection.

Each interview was transcribed literally and in full while certain informal expressions used exclusively in Chile were converted into neutral Spanish for the purposes of analysis. The translations presented here are a true reflection of the original statements. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Andrés Bello University.

### 3 ANALYSIS

We used the ATLAS.ti 7.5 software package to construct a hermeneutic unit upon which to base our analysis, and all of the interviews were read multiple times. We then coded the interviews according to athletes' arguments defining their identities, before conducting open coding using the categories that emerged in accordance with Grounded Theory (GIBBS, 2012; GLASER; STRAUSS, 1967; STRAUSS; CORBIN, 2002). We then performed axial coding in order to group these categories into families.

The next step was to conduct selective coding (MORENO-DOÑA; RIVERA-GARCÍA; TRIGUEROS-CERVANTES, 2014). This step yielded six codes, from which

two categories were established to explain the way Chilean athletes construct their sports identities. The names assigned to each category were devised by the research team in order to ensure clarity of results.

The study was validated according to transferability and representativeness criteria proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and reworked by Sisto (2008). The notion of transferability expresses the degree to which the results can be extrapolated to other contexts. Representativeness refers to the extent to which our interviewees' accounts represent the experiences, feelings, emotions and opinions of other Chilean athletes given potential similarities in terms of their everyday experiences.

## 4 RESULTS

An analysis of the points raised by the athletes enabled us to identify two categories of conditions involved in the construction of sports identity: sociocultural conditions and material conditions. (Figure 2)

**Figure 2** – Sports identity of Chilean athletes

<b>Sociocultural conditions</b>	Role of the State
	Sacrifice
	Individualism
	Gender
<b>Material conditions</b>	Discipline (sport practised)
	Socio-economic situation

Source: Compiled by the authors.

### 4.1 SOCIOCULTURAL CONDITIONS

The athletes interviewed reported general lack of support from the State as well as lack of an overarching sporting profile that could be applied to all disciplines and would foster a collective 'us' at national level. The data reveal that athletes see the State as responsible for constructing a national sports identity. However, as one interviewee puts it:

I see no attempt by the State to create a sports profile; the effort made by people who achieve that status – it's not the same. I mean, in Chile you have people like Chino Ríos and Fernando González, both are elite athletes, but [...] they have no profile. You can't say "ah yes, they play like this, or they are like that." That comes from the support of their families. (Daniel, DSC)

According to Daniel, the lack of a Chilean sports identity is due to the absence of an attempt by the State to promote a national profile. His references to 'effort' and 'families' illustrate imbalance between the State and individuals and imply that success is the result of families' work rather than State action. This can be interpreted as an expression of the neoliberal logic in sports because, while there is a degree of State interaction, it is secondary to individual and family endeavour.

The interviewees also suggest that the State should promote unity among athletes through the creation of a national sports identity, but that athletes currently

operate as individuals rather than a collective. In the words of one interviewee: “I think we don’t have... I think that athletes need to be brought together by the State. The State needs to unite us, but it doesn’t. I feel like each athlete is out there on his or her own, although there is never enmity.” (Martín, DSC)

Martín’s assertion that “each athlete is out there on his or her own” points to the State’s lack of inclination to create a narrative for uniting athletes. As with the previous point, the individual rather than the collective logic prevails, and this again reinforces the neoliberal position adopted by the Chilean State.

However, although Martín’s account is slightly different from that provided by Daniel, the message remains the same: while the State fails in its role of creating a collective discourse, athletes themselves identify with values which go beyond the individual.

I think it’s all about the fighting spirit: that drive to love sports and your country. Even if your country doesn’t support you, you still love it and want to represent it to the highest level abroad. People who get no support from the State still give their best and feel nothing but pride about Chile. (Gabriel, DARA)

In his account, Gabriel indicates that while athletes do not receive all the support they need from the State, they identify as a group with a strong fighting spirit and love of their sport and country. Although this argument could be interpreted as an allusion to the construction of a collective narrative as opposed to an individual one, in reality – and from a pragmatic perspective – it reveals the normalisation of athletes’ precarious position. In other words, acknowledging the fighting spirit and love of country as positive qualities also means accepting the possibility that no support or recognition will be offered by the State: “People who get no support from the State still wear the shirt and feel nothing but pride about Chile.”

Another sociocultural condition that can shed light on the construction of Chilean sports identity is sacrifice. This quality reveals a sense of otherness with which athletes can identify in sports, as expressed by one interviewee:

I think that right now in Chile there is nothing that says “Ah, he or she is Chilean,” but [...] we’ve begun to see the emergence of a kind of Chilean resolve. Ask athletes from any other country and they’ll tell you that Chile... that sport in Chile is not the same as it used to be five years ago, and generally, when you speak to these people, they say: “No, in Chile [...] perseverance has advanced a long way in a short time” [...] So, I don’t think we have some hallmark that distinguishes us as Chilean sportspeople [...] but I think that it will come with time. The thing is, that hallmark [...] – for example, the Argentinian *canchero* [showman], the Uruguayan *garra charrúa* [the indomitable spirit of the pre-columbian *charrúa* people], and the joy of Brazilians – are things that you see at the cultural level as well, not just in sports. (Ema, DSC)

Here, Ema expresses that although there is no Chilean sports identity as yet, the perseverance of Chilean athletes has led to expectations of strong performance from other national teams and delegations: the achievements of Chilean sport in recent years has produced an image that is widely recognised abroad. This image involves and promotes certain practices associated with effort or sacrifice, and thus a recognisable sports identity begins to take shape.



Following on from the above, Paralympic athletes who practise high performance adaptive sports point to certain aspects in which there are no differences between themselves and their Olympic counterparts, specifically in terms of the kind of life they would face if they decided to dedicate themselves completely to their sport.

We're a different breed [...] there is something that ties us together, both Paralympic and Olympic athletes. Regardless of the sport, regardless of the movement, I think that there is something which identifies all of us [...] Somebody who is an athlete today... it's because they want to do it: they know it'll be tough, they know it's not an easy decision. (Diego, DARA)

Diego asserts that dedication to sport is a decision that will demand sacrifices, and he uses the 'breed' metaphor to suggest that athletes as a group recognise each other as possessing a certain quality. As such, he describes sacrifice as typical of sportspeople and sees it as a quality with which they are able to define themselves. In fact, a Chilean athlete is recognisable for his or her values: "Perseverance, discipline, capability, motivation [...]" (Jaime, DARA).

As such, while effort is the basis of a potential Chilean sports identity, it also serves to raise the profile of the individual above that of the group. This is an illustration of the expectations of some athletes with regard to the collective: expectations which, if not met, may result in frustration.

No, the truth is that athletes are highly individualistic. They look out for themselves, they do things for themselves, they worry about themselves [...] I thought that Paralympic athletes – or, as you call them, adaptive – would be more human because we are starting from a point of disadvantage, whatever it is that you are lacking in your body or your senses. So, one would have thought there would be more generosity, more empathy; but I'm not sure that's really the case. I actually feel that we Paralympic athletes are highly divided, that we struggle to unite behind a single cause to achieve an objective. (Fernanda, DARA)

Fernanda expresses that her physical disadvantage led her to expect greater unity, empathy and generosity among her Paralympic peers, but that this turned out not to be the case as "athletes are highly individualistic." The excerpt contributes to the narrative in two ways: it offers criticism of the group's failure to meet the expectations of some athletes but also raises the possibility of creating a shared narrative of unity and defining common objectives.

This could not be achieved by means of a simple declaration. The inclination to generate a common discourse and to appeal to the State to help bring it about would not be sufficient given the individualistic culture that has taken root not only among sportspeople but throughout Chilean society as a whole. The following excerpt provides an example of that:

[...] if we arrive at an event and you see me wearing a Chilean shirt, [you should say] "Hello, how are you?" [...] even if you don't know me, it doesn't matter because I can see you're wearing a Chilean shirt [...] I'll greet you even though I don't know you. But they're not like that [...] although [they see you wearing the same colours] they don't greet you. (Camilo, DARC)

For Camilo, the national colours should trigger acknowledgement of belonging to the same group. However, when coming across other Chilean sportspeople in

public, some athletes will not greet each other, and this can be interpreted as an indication of the individualism identified above.

These difficulties associated with the formulation of a Chilean sports identity lead athletes themselves to construct models upon which to base an identity that is independent from the State. One example is women's football, which has become established all over the country and which, culturally, has proven that women can play it too.

Yes, I think that an identity does exist. I think that with all we've been through, a certain feeling of "I'm a female footballer" and "I play football and I have my female teammates" is inevitable. It's inevitable. There's an organisation – I don't know whether you've heard of ANJUFF? [...] I think that's also part of the identity: generating those spaces, fighting for the rights that we need. I think that it has also been a product of the establishment of that identity, of making progress in our field. (Camila, DARC)

According to Camila, the very facts of being a woman and playing football facilitate the construction of a sports identity for this group. She also emphasises that creating spaces and fighting for their rights are important elements in the construction of a collective 'we.' Specifically, she mentions ANJUFF (*Asociación Nacional de Jugadoras de Fútbol Femenino*, or the Chilean Association of Women Footballers) as an entity with the potential to strengthen collective identity.

## 4.2 MATERIAL CONDITIONS

Our analysis revealed that, for all athletes, material conditions play an important role in sports identity construction. In other words, the degree of access that an athlete has to certain material goods and patterns of consumption may determine their potential to participate in certain groups or practice certain sports. At the same time, practising a sport could lead to recognition both on an individual basis and in relation to others, as one interviewee points out:

[...] generally speaking, certain sports have been associated with certain sociocultural and economic groups, you know? So, unfortunately, a sport like hockey, for instance, will be taken up by a certain socio-economic group, football by another, and table tennis by another [...]. The groups are so cliquey, so detached, so... so distant that they have very little in common. This makes it difficult to establish an all-encompassing image of the Chilean athlete. (Carlos, DARC)

Carlos highlights three material conditions that contribute to the construction of sports identity. The first is belonging to a certain "sociocultural and economic group," and he points out that, in Chile, there is a marked relationship between socio-economic background and sporting discipline, asserting that each group takes up a different sport. The second is the difference between these groups: the distribution of sports according to socio-economic strata or social class results in separation and distance between those who practise, for example, hockey, table tennis and football. The third is the difficulty of establishing a shared narrative among people and groups of distinct economic status: according to Carlos, "they have very little in common" that could provide the basis of "an all-encompassing image of the Chilean athlete." These three points illustrate the inequality that exists in terms of access to different sporting



disciplines in Chile, dictated as it is by the individual's economic background and access to economic goods and resources.

There is also evidence of unequal access according to sports category (conventional or adaptive) in terms of the material conditions that contribute to the construction of sports identity. Athletes who practise high performance adaptive sports indicate that the category's profile could be improved if opportunities available to its members were similar to those of their peers in other countries across the continent.

Everybody wants the same thing: for Chile to have a culture of sport. For example, we have always compared ourselves to Brazil, but in Brazil they're paid, they earn a living; the same in Argentina: Paralympic athletes make a living from [the sport] [...] their job is [adaptive sport]. So [...] we want the same thing for Chile. We want to grow, and we believe that in order for that to happen, we need the same opportunities, we need to be paid, we need to be able to concentrate on it entirely. (Jenny, DARA)

In this excerpt, Jenny points out that there are sportspeople in other countries who are able to make a living out of sport because it is their job. The fact that this is not the case in Chile hinders the growth of the adaptive sport category, as athletes are unable to dedicate themselves exclusively to their sport. By saying "we need the same opportunities as them," she is appealing to some institution or authority to provide the funding that would enable athletes such as herself to focus on their sports.

Following on from this, the athletes interviewed mention that the lack of funding for training and competition affects their socio-economic situation. Given that sponsorship generally comes from private individuals or entities, there is intense competition among athletes to secure these resources, and this constitutes a major obstacle to the formation of a collective spirit. As one athlete puts it:

[...] I feel like each athlete is out there on his or her own, although there is never enmity [...] The majority of sponsors are private, so there is competition: the brand might choose to sponsor me or him. So, sponsorship involves rivalry which destroys any feeling of being part of the same thing. (Martín, DSC)

Martín's words expose the fact that although Chilean sports identity is materially conditioned by sponsorship available to athletes, competition for these resources pervades the situation. Rather than promoting unity or security, it generates fractures in the ties that would otherwise make athletes feel "part of the same thing." However, this fracture does not imply "enmity": instead, it means that each athlete must overcome their challenges on their own, a pattern which is consistent with the neoliberal culture that prevails in Chile.

## 5 FINAL THOUGHTS

Analysis of the accounts provided by our interviewees led us to the conclusion that the State's contribution to construct sports identity in Chile is minimal. This situation is consistent with the neoliberal culture that reigns in the country as revealed by analysis of sociocultural and material conditions.

In terms of sociocultural conditions, our interviewees expressed that, while the State has made no attempt to foster a sports identity in Chile, athletes as a collective

hold certain values: effort, perseverance, fighting spirit and passion. These values are viewed as the resources needed for continued engagement with sport in the face of adversity and as the key to continued individual and collective faith in an eventual positive outcome. Although they are not promoted by any public sports projects, they do contribute to the configuration of national identities (GUEDES, 2018).

Despite their potential for collective expression, these values sometimes serve to conceal vulnerability, inequality and injustice in the lives of athletes and in access to the goods that they require in order to go about their task with dignity. Regardless of their essential positivity, such values should not be considered as an entirely good thing.

According to our interviewees, relationships between athletes are often affected by individualism, which is viewed negatively for its effect of restricting collective development. This, in turn, hinders affiliation and the creation of spaces in which to formulate, maintain and promote a sports identity that encompasses all of the country's athletes.

In terms of material conditions, we can confirm that the socio-economic divide between disciplines – illustrated by the existence of groups that consider themselves different from one another based on their cultural background – hinders the creation of a collective sports identity. As such, the present study sheds light on the fact that sport in Chile is stratified according to social class and the social and cultural dimensions associated with different socio-economic realities.

Another dimension revealed by the present study is that gender, particularly in women's football, plays an important role in the construction of a Chilean sports identity, boosting the visibility of a "*nosotras*" (or female "we") with which female players identify having fought for self-assertion and social recognition. This experience reveals stances of resistance and opposition to individualism and competition promoted by neoliberal culture – a finding which is consistent with other research studies (OLIVEIRA; MENDES; SILVA, 2017).

Furthermore, although our analysis included a reference to 'breed' (LACERDA; BRUM; SOARES, 2011; MARCHETTI; GOMES, 2018) – a notion which could be interpreted as possible disregard for bodies and colours other than those that are Chilean and white – this does not appear to play an important role in the construction of Chilean sports identity. However, the data provided by the present study are insufficient to confirm this, and we therefore propose that future research should explore this issue in greater depth.

In conclusion, we agree with Tralci and Rubio (2012) that if athletes do not succeed in establishing a collective movement, it is likely that the position that they eventually achieve in the public arena will be the result of individual action rather than collective stances. As such, we invite coaches, athletes, families, managers and club members to establish positions from which to dispute the neoliberal spirit that has been imposed upon sport.

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**Resumo:** A construção da identidade dos atletas é um tema de interesse no campo dos estudos socioculturais do esporte. O objetivo deste estudo foi analisar a identidade esportiva do atleta chileno para compreender melhor este tópico. O tipo de estudo foi qualitativo, por meio de 17 entrevistas semiestruturadas com atletas de alto desempenho e recreativos nas modalidades convencional e adaptada. Os resultados mostram que existem duas categorias para construir a identidade esportiva chilena: condições socioculturais e condições materiais, marcadas por construir histórias alternativas para contestar o individualismo e a competição como valores presentes no esporte chileno.

**Palavras chave:** Identificação social. Esportes. Atletas. Estado.

**Resumen:** La construcción de la identidad de los y las deportistas es un tema de interés en el campo de estudios socioculturales del deporte. El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar la construcción de la identidad deportiva en Chile para comprender mejor este tema. El tipo de estudio realizado fue de carácter cualitativo, a través de 17 entrevistas semiestructuradas a deportistas recreativos y de alto rendimiento de modalidad convencional y adaptado. Los resultados demuestran que existen dos categorías para construir la identidad deportiva chilena: condiciones socioculturales y las condiciones materiales, las cuales están marcadas por lógicas y valores neoliberales. Se concluye expresando que el género es una dimensión que genera relatos alternativos para disputar el individualismo y la competencia en tanto valores presentes en la identidad deportiva chilena.

**Palabras clave:** Identificación social. Deportes. Atletas. Estado.