



## (De)Constructing Paula Radcliffe: Exploring media representations of elite running, pregnancy and motherhood through cultural sport psychology

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Little is known about elite athletes who are mothers within the context of sociocultural expectations concerning motherhood and sport. The aim of this study was to extend such understanding by examining how the media manages and constructs one elite athlete's (Paula Radcliffe) identities within the context of motherhood and sport.

**Design:** A qualitative approach grounded in cultural sport psychology was used to explore motherhood and athletic identity as socio-cultural creations shaped by cultural narratives (i.e., media). The psychological and behavioural implications were of interest.

**Method:** A textual analysis (see [McKee, 2003](#)) of two issues of *Runner's World* magazine (March 2008, October, 2010) surrounding elite British marathon runner Paula Radcliffe's pregnancies was conducted. Visual data analysis of 37 images (see [Griffin, 2010](#)) further contextualized textual meaning(s).

**Results:** Radcliffe's identities were constructed within a higher order narrative: pregnancy and motherhood as redemption. This narrative had fluid meanings depending on how it framed two contrasting identities: 1. athlete and mother as one and 2. primarily a mother; athlete as secondary. An athlete and mother as one identity reinforced an elite athlete identity and high performance narrative. A primarily mother, athlete as secondary identity was linked to athletic accomplishments being downplayed and/or sacrificed in favour of motherhood.

**Conclusions:** This study opens a new window of cultural understanding and possibility for research and application concerning motherhood and athletic identities. These findings add to the cultural sport psychology and qualitative literature exploring elite mothering athletes.

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### Introduction

Pregnancy and motherhood have been highlighted as reasons why female athletes may end their sport careers or fail to reach their full potential in sport ([Nash, 2011](#); [Palmer & Leberman, 2009](#); [Spowart, Burrows, & Shaw, 2010](#)). The time required for training and competing may leave little time for motherhood, which is often positioned as unacceptable or something to be delayed until sport retirement ([Appleby & Fisher, 2009](#); [Currie, 2004](#); [Freeman, 2008](#); [Nash, 2011](#); [Spowart, Hughson, & Shaw, 2008](#)). Additionally, medical narratives that position exercise and/or sport training during pregnancy as incompatible or dangerous may also prevail to keep women from sport pursuits ([Jette, 2006, 2011](#); [Kardel, 2005](#); [Spowart et al., 2008](#); [Vertinsky, 1994](#)). However, recent media

interest in women pursuing athletics during pregnancy and beyond (e.g., British marathoner Paula Radcliffe, American marathoner Kara Goucher) suggests that pregnancy, motherhood and sport are not mutually exclusive. While "official" statistics on how many elite athletes are mothers are scant, one article (see [Farber, 2008](#)) reported that 20 of the 286 females on the USA team in the 2008 summer Olympics were mothers). The recent recognition that elite athlete mothers may have in promoting women's sport participation also places them in the global spotlight ([Nash, 2011](#)).

Only one study in sport psychology has explored elite athletes, motherhood and associated with the merging of these factors, the psychological implications ([Appleby & Fisher, 2009](#)). Results revealed that elite distance runners experienced an integration of their identities through the negotiation of socio-cultural stereotypes concerning motherhood vs. competitive athletics. Those who accepted such stereotypes adopted a *good mother identity* involving selfless care which led to psychological distress (see [Currie, 2004](#); [Miller & Brown, 2005](#)). Some athletes resisted the *good mother* ideal by viewing sport as pleasure and a way to enhance mental health,

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and thus did more sport training and experienced less psychological distress. This new perspective on *sport as pleasure and health* is a novel narrative that holds potential for resisting dominant cultural ideals concerning athletics and motherhood that create psychological distress and constrain performance and/or sport participation (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Spowart et al., 2010, 2008).

Studies outside of sport psychology (e.g., sport sociology, sport management, leisure studies) have echoed these findings, positing that pregnancy and/or motherhood give athletes an additional perspective on sport, decreasing pressure to perform and provide fulfilment in another sphere (Nash, 2011; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Spowart et al., 2010). Qualitative research on athlete-mothers has found that these women position themselves as positive role models for others (e.g., children, other women) (Freeman, 2008; Leberman & Palmer, 2009; Palmer & Leberman, 2009; Spowart et al., 2008). At the same time, the notion of guilt, motherhood and athletics is complex, with time away from children identified as a cause of guilt despite a sense of control and well-being gained through athletics (Appleby & Fisher, 2009; Freeman, 2008).

There is clearly a complicated interplay of social and cultural narratives concerning athletics, pregnancy, and motherhood influencing the psychological experiences and athletic pursuits of athletes who are mothers, which warrant further attention. Mothers' voices, nonetheless, are largely silent in sport research and little is known about how athletes manage multiple identities and the psychological implications of these identities, within the context of sociocultural expectations concerning motherhood and sport. Additionally, media representations of elite athlete's identities have not yet been explored by sport psychology researchers within the context of motherhood and the implications of these identities for sport psychology.

#### *Cultural sport psychology: contextualizing athlete and mother identities*

One way to extend understandings of athlete and mother identities in sport within a sociocultural context is to use a cultural sport psychology (CSP) lens. The contributions of CSP towards advancing understandings of marginalized identities have been outlined elsewhere in-depth (see Ryba, Schinke & Tenenbaum, 2010 for CSP research; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009 for CSP practice). As the genre of CSP is broad (Ryba et al., 2010), we highlight three central ideas within the CSP genre, relevant for understanding motherhood and sport within a sociocultural context. These ideas stem from a cultural studies approach (see Birrell & McDonald, 2000; McGannon, Hoffman, Metz & Schinke, 2012). The first of these points is that CSP perspectives highlight self-identity as *simultaneously* social and cultural, rather than reducing them to decontextualized mechanisms within the mind, as with mainstream sport psychology (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith, 2010). Following from this point, motherhood and athletic identities are viewed as the product of individual, social and cultural narratives which interact to create particular meanings concerning these cultural identities (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; Smith & Sparkes, 2009).

Because self-identities are the product of cultural narratives, the third and final point is that an understanding of such identities necessitates a focus on cultural narratives/discourses that (re) produce them (McGannon & Mauws, 2000; McGannon & Spence, 2010; Smith, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2009). Central to this final point is the concept of a subject position (see Davies & Harré, 1990; McGannon & Mauws, 2000). People acquire a sense of self and identity and interpret the world from a particular perspective (i.e. subject position) by participating in narrative practices that allocate

meanings to particular categories and images (e.g. mother, female athlete, pregnant athlete). Identities are then positioned in relation to particular storylines articulated around categories and images and people may have particular psychological experiences associated with that world view (Davies & Harré, 1990; McGannon & Mauws, 2000). Research in exercise psychology exploring self-identity from this perspective is indicative that there are psychological (e.g., enjoyment, distress) and behavioural implications (e.g., exercise participation, withdrawal from exercise) linked to the subject positions women take up within particular cultural narratives/discourses (McGannon & Spence, 2010). Recent media work in exercise psychology exploring dominant discourses and subject positions within a women's health section of a Midwestern newspaper further revealed the media as a narrative practice that creates particular identities (i.e., subject positions) with potential psychological and behavioural implications (McGannon & Spence, 2012).

#### *Sport media: extending understanding of athlete and motherhood portrayals*

One way to explore and further identities and the implications from a CSP perspective is to focus on sport media representations of elite athlete mothers, specifically, the March 2008 and October 2010, issues of the popular magazine *Runner's World*, which featured British marathon runner Paula Radcliffe's two pregnancies. Cultural narratives within sport media such as this have received little attention in sport psychology, particularly in terms of the implications such narratives have for identity construction and psychological outcomes (McGannon et al., 2012). Despite a lack of emphasis on media portrayals of elite athlete mothers, studies on women and sport media suggest that there are compelling reasons to explore celebrity athletes in the context of pregnancy, motherhood and the associated psychological and behavioural implications. The media is a powerful source of representation and construction of meaning and ideology concerning athletes' identities (Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003; McGannon et al., 2012). The ideologies (i.e., expected behaviours based on cultural values and norms) surrounding women and sport create certain identities or subject positions with associated meanings. These identities impact the way(s) in which athletes may be perceived by society and by the athletes themselves as they navigate identity constructions and perceptions (Birrell & McDonald, 2000; Heywood & Dworkin, 2003).

In Walton's (2010) examination of UK print media surrounding three major events in Radcliffe's career, her pregnancy was mentioned only in a postscript which stated "not surprisingly, injury and motherhood have been the focus of [Paula's] mediation since 2006" (p. 296). In her exploration of body projects in pregnancy through interviews with non-athlete mothers after birth, Nash (2011) called Radcliffe the ideal model for fit pregnancy because she embodied the "strong" pregnancy due to training throughout her pregnancy. Due to the publicity Paula and other athletes in similar positions have received, Nash (2011) asserted that in order to gain cultural power all mothers needed to exercise and follow Radcliffe's example. Within the context of pregnancy and dominant cultural ideals concerning motherhood and physical activity, such statements are loaded with meaning and have implications for how, or even if, women continue with physical training during pregnancy and beyond (Jette, 2011; Kardel, 2005; Nash, 2011; Spowart et al., 2008). Regardless, Radcliffe has become a symbol of elite athletics and motherhood, and her embodiment of both roles creates a complex interplay of mediated narratives surrounding motherhood and athletics worth exploring. However, other than briefly mentioning Paula's pregnancies in athletics, no

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