**Shaping Social Identity in National Teams: Key Psychological and Contextual Determinants**

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**Running Head:** Factors impacting Social Identity in Elite Team Sport

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**Abstract**

Group dynamics are fundamental to performance in elite team sports, yet the mechanisms underpinning social identity formation in such contexts remain insufficiently understood. This qualitative study examines the key determinants shaping super elite athletes’ self-categorization as team members or individuals. Uniquely, this research draws on an unprecedented sample of super-elite athletes from multiple national teams across all major team sports, potentially making it the largest qualitative study of its kind in this domain. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 152 athletes from 10 French national teams in rugby union and seven, basketball 5×5 and 3×3, handball and volleyball. Data were analysed using inductive content analysis. We found that social identity in elite team sports is dynamically shaped by interpersonal bonds, intraindividual psychological dynamics, and situational influences, including competitive and training contexts. Shared emotional experiences, collective achievements, and visible commitment to team life emerged as key mechanisms fostering a strong sense of belonging and reinforcing team identification. Conversely, perceived intra-group distinctions, specialized roles, and individualized responsibilities heightened self-categorization as an autonomous entity, potentially undermining group cohesion. These findings emphasize the necessity of strategically designing team environments to cultivate a robust social identity, which can be compromised by individual priorities such as media exposure, career ambitions, and financial incentives. Furthermore, they highlight the critical need to develop identity competencies, enabling athletes to effectively navigate the tension between individual aspirations and collective belonging in high-performance settings.

*Keywords*: Social identity, individual level, social categorization, elite sport, team sport.

**Shaping Social Identity in National Teams: Key Psychological and Contextual Determinants**

It is now well established that group dynamics is key factor in in team sports performance (Carron et al., 2005; Eys et al., 2020). Over the past decade, a growing body of research has highlighted the relevance of the Social Identity Approach (SIA; Haslam, 2004) for understanding and optimizing group dynamics, particularly in sports (Haslam, Fransen, et al., 2020). However, to the best of our knowledge, no study has systematically identified the most influential or prevalent factors shaping social identity in elite team sports. This need becomes even more critical in national teams, where limited preparation time, the high-stakes nature of elite sports, and the composition of squads with players from rival clubs—accustomed to competing against each other—create a uniquely complex and demanding context. This qualitative study thus aims to identify the specific factors shaping national team athletes’ perception of themselves as part of the team or as individuals, while assessing the alignment of these factors with existing literature.

The SIA suggests that individuals' self-concept encompasses various levels of abstraction (identity levels), referring either to the individual themselves (*I*) or to the group to which they perceive they belong (*We*; Turner et al., 1987). Individuals can thus self-categorize at either of both levels. When the I is salient, matters concerning the individual will be prioritized. On the contrary, when a specific We is salient, matters concerning the group will be a primary focus. Thus, categorizing at either of these levels has consequences for performance and group functioning (Haslam, Fransen, et al., 2020). For example, athletes who perceive themselves as members of a group tend to exhibit enhanced communication skills (Greenaway et al., 2015; Peters, 2020), group functioning (Evans et al., 2023; Slater et al., 2020), leadership (Fransen, Boen, et al., 2022; Fransen, Cruwys, et al., 2022), motivation (Greenaway et al., 2020), social support (Hartley et al., 2020), or specific emotions (Campo, Mackie, et al., 2019). Accordingly, social identity is now recognized as a contributing factor to both performance and well-being in team sports (Stephen et al., 2023). While exploring the mechanisms underlying athletes’ sense of group membership advances theoretical understanding and contributes to the existing body of knowledge, these insights also have practical implications, as they can help coaches cultivate an environment that fosters a cohesive and functional social identity within their teams.

The theoretical hypothesis retained by Turner (1982; Turner et al., 1987) to explain why people (e.g., team sport players) self-categorize as group members or individuals is the pursuit of a positive self-esteem (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). A specific group (e.g., team) that is perceived as valuable (e.g., a team) should encourage players to identify themselves as members of that group. Conversely, if a group is perceived as having little value, players are likely to distance themselves from it and instead focus on another group or on their individual identity. Thus, various factors have been identified as antecedents of social identity, such as leadership (Fransen et al., 2020; Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2020), moral behaviour (Bruner, Boardley, Allan, Forrest, et al., 2017; Bruner, Boardley, Allan, Root, et al., 2017), comparative fit (Fransen et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2017), performance (Cialdini et al., 1976; Slater et al., 2020), social support (Bruner et al., 2018), mastery-oriented goals (De Backer et al., 2015), team-oriented goals (Campo, Champely, et al., 2019; Fransen et al., 2020), or personal disclosure mutual sharing (Warburton & Slater, 2023).

While these factors have been identified as key antecedents of social identity, their influence may be challenged in elite sports, where the environment is complex and constantly changing (Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Taylor et al., 2024; Wagstaff, 2016). Indeed, personal interests, such as achieving success by being part of the national team to advance a sports career or obtaining significant financial gains, intermingle with other obligations, such as the need to perform collectively. In addition, national training camps bring together players who are usually engaged in intergroup competition throughout the regular season, representing rival clubs. Despite the short duration of these gatherings, athletes are expected to quickly build a cohesive collective performance project. This highlights a core challenge for national teams: to elevate the level of abstraction so that personal affiliations or club loyalties do not interfere with the dynamics of the national squad. As a result, applying these antecedents in high level team sports becomes more difficult and unpredictable. In this sense, it is currently challenging to determine how these antecedents manifest in the everyday life of national teams’ players. Therefore, this exploratory qualitative study aims to identify the specific factors shaping national team athletes’ perception of themselves as part of the team or as individuals.

**Method**

**Philosophical Assumption**

We used a qualitative approach to explore the research question of this study. Scholars have highlighted the need to clarify the ontological and epistemological standpoints of authors designing qualitative inquiries in sport and exercise psychology (Poucher et al., 2020; Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). For this study, the standpoint is post-positivism, implying a critical-realist ontological standpoint and a modified dualist/objectivist epistemological standpoint (for more details, see Tamminen & Poucher, 2020). Consequently, we aimed to capture the experiences of elite athletes while acknowledging the influence that research team members have on data generation, and simultaneously striving to minimize this impact.

**Research Team**

All four authors are social psychologists specializing in group dynamics and the SIA. First author played volleyball for 15 years, at the highest in fifth French division. He also managed volleyball teams at this same level for three years. Second author played basketball for six years, at the highest in ninth French division. He also played table tennis for 20 years, at the highest in fifth French division. Third author competed in international Tunisian’s team of Pétanque (French boules) for 10 years. Finally, the fourth author played rugby for 24 years, reaching the highest level in the French third division, and has coached for 13 years, with the elite U21 category as the highest level. Additionally, he is the head of the sport psychology department at the French Rugby Federation and is still currently as a sport psychology consultant for all French national rugby teams for eight years.

**Participants**

A total of 152 players selected for French national teams in team sports (*M* = 19.63 years, *SD* = 3.32; 63 women) volunteered for this study and participated in semi-structured interviews. At the time of this study, participants were part of the women (*n* =18 ; Mage = 19.61; *SD* = 1.69) and men under 20 years old (U20) basketball teams (*n* = 16; *Mage* = 16.5; *SD* = 0.97); the female (*n* = 16; *Mage* = 16.63; *SD* = 1.45) and men U20 volleyball teams (*n* = 9; *Mage* = 17.67; *SD* = 1); the women XV de France rugby team (*n* = 20; *Mage* = 22.7; *SD* = 3.42), the U20 men rugby union team (*n* = 16; *Mage* = 18.25; *SD* = 0.77); the women (*n* = 17; *Mage* = 26.24; *SD* = 10.68) and men Olympic seven rugby teams (*n* = 12; *Mage* = 23.5; *SD* = 2.5); and the women (*n* = 18; *Mage* = 17.83; *SD* = 0.71) and men U20 handball team (*n* = 10; *Mage* = 18.1; *SD* = 0.74).

Initial contact was established with the head coaches of the participants’ teams. They then provided lists of potential players’ contacts details, which the first three authors used to present the study’s details and inquire about their willingness to participate.

**Procedure**

Two main types of interviews were conducted. First, to identify the specific factors influencing elite-level team sport players’ self-categorization, we investigated the players' lives into three distinct contexts: competition, training, and personal life. Secondly, we conducted interviews that did not emphasize any specific context, allowing us to capture content that might have been overlooked in the more structured first type of interview.

Before starting, identity levels were explained to participants as follows:

“I will regularly ask you if what you told me made you more as individual or as member of the French national team. To explain to what the two refer, imagine you're on the field. On the opposite side, in a play you're not even involved in, one of your teammates gets a red card. If you feel more as We, you're likely to experience and react as if you were the one who got the red card. Do you see that feeling? On the other hand, if you feel more as I, you're less likely to feel involved. You might be a little disappointed or annoyed for your teammate, but not much more than that”. Following that, the introduction question for both type of interviews referred to a specific moment that has been one of the most significant events since they joined the French national team. For the first type of interviews, this as a question was adapted to each of the three moments: “What has been the most significant event [in competition / in training session or competition preparation / in your personal life] since you joined the French national team?”.

For the second type of interview, the question was the same, without focusing on any time specific period: “What has been the most significant events since you joined the French national team?”. This approach allowed participants to begin with impactful moments filled with vivid memories, making it easier for them to explain the identity level it was associated with and why.

Follow-up questions were “Is there other event of anything that makes you feel more as a I or more as a We” (for the first type of interview, it was specified if it was for the three distinct contexts). Each material was discussed with the participants, and the interviewer encouraged them to elaborate their responses, providing additional details and examples to illustrate how and why they perceived themselves more as individual or as group members. As a result, and due to ecological constrains, some participants participated at both type of interviews (*n* = 30), and others at only one (*n* = 122). This resulted in 180 interviews (first type = 81, second type = 99), as the data from two interviews were excluded for not addressing the research question due to a lack of specific experiences. Each interview (*M* = 38:44 minutes; *SD* = 9:42) was recorded and transcribed verbatim which was subsequently analysed using Nvivo (Version 11.4.1.1064; 2017). The transcripts represent a total of 6571 pages (Times 12pts, double-spaced). An inductive content analysis (Kyngäs 2020; Tesch 1990) was used.

**Data Analysis**

An inductive content analysis (Kyngäs, 2020) was performed to develop and refine a structured hierarchical system of thematic levels, which included meaning units (Mus; see Tesch 1990). This hierarchical framework aimed to organize themes and subthemes, ultimately incorporating nodes (Gould et al., 2008; Kyngäs, 2020).

In line with Braun and Clarke’s (2021) recommendations for transparency, we provide details about the processes used to encode and organize the data. Specifically, each MU was coded independently, whether it consisted of an entire paragraph or a single clause within a sentence. Consequently, multiple MUs could be encoded from the same specific group of words. Furthermore, we only coded MUs that were directly relevant to our research question, such as what makes participants feel like an individual, or a member of the French national team. The research question was solely focused on team membership and did not address other forms of group belonginess. As a result, when participants shared experiences that were not related to the specific aspect of social identity targeted in this study, no coding was applied. An example of a MU would be a participant recounting that competition makes them feel as a member of the French national team. The structured hierarchical system of thematic levels initially allowed for differentiation between French national team self-categorization and individual level self-categorization. Furthermore, the inductive content analysis conducted allowed for the association of any Meaning Unit (MU) with overlapping identity levels (e.g., simultaneous “I” and “We”), providing insights into the complex dynamics of social identity (Campo, 2020; Roccas & Brewer, 2002).

However, with this architecture, and despite extensive debates between the team, the research team struggled to differentiate between the placement of each MU in the system. Consequently, the team agreed instead to code MUs referring to an identity level as provoking national team membership. If these MUs also referred to the individual level, they were coded a second time as provoking the individual level.

***Data Quality***

In line with our post-positivist stance, half of the interviews were conducted by the first author, coded by the second and third author, and the coding was reviewed by the first author. The other half were conducted by the second and third author, coded by the first author, and the coding was reviewed by the second and third author. The structured hierarchical system of thematic levels was thus constantly evolving: as soon as MUs were created, they were integrated into the system. Then, each disagreement regarding the coding of MUs, their meaning, and their placement was thoroughly discussed until an agreement was reached. The goal of this method was to minimize interpretation bias. Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously, and regular meetings with the research team were held to propose adjustments for subsequent data collection.

***Quality Standards***

We propose to evaluate the quality of this research through *substantive contribution*, *width*, *coherence, fit,* and *transparency* (Alexander-Urquhart et al., 2024; Braun & Clarke, 2013; Smith & McGannon, 2018; Smith & Sparkes, 2017). The aim of this exploratory study is to identify the specific factors shaping national team athletes’ perception of themselves as part of the team or as individuals. This study thus provides a *substantive contribution* to the field. Indeed, with a large sample size (*N* = 152) and a total of 180 interviews conducted with French national team sport players, each lasting approximately 38:44 minutes (*SD* = 9:42) and resulting in 6571 pages of transcription, this study provides a unique and robust dataset directly involving the target population. This approach allowed us to gather a broad range of perspectives. In addition to the two types of interviews, which enabled us to target specific moments in the experiences of French national team athletes, this dataset increased our chances of capturing a maximum of relevant information. These precautions enhance the comprehensiveness of the evidence (Burke, 2016), thus demonstrating *width*. *Coherence* was demonstrated by explicitly presenting the aim that guided the methodological process, along with the aligned methodological steps that followed. In addition, we outlined our post-positivist epistemological and ontological standpoint, which informed both the aim and the method. We also contextualized this study’s results within the existing literature. Given the study’s aim—to explore the events or feelings that French national team athletes perceive as shaping their sense of membership within their team or as individuals—our epistemological standpoint and research design demonstrate a strong *fit* (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Finally, by highlighting the research team’s background as well as the generation of the findings of this study, notably how we explained the concepts of identity to participants, we have provided *transparency*.

**Results**

Two complementary patterns of results were identified: one delineating the factors that promote self-categorization at the group level (i.e., identification with the French national team) and the other highlighting the factors that foster self-categorization at the individual level[[1]](#footnote-2). Figures 1 and 2 illustrate both sets and their theme’s variations. For both sets, themes are consistently organized along a gradient of relational proximity—beginning with the self, extending to teammates, staff, opponent team, other sport stakeholders and eventually to individuals outside of the sport world. In addition, this structure could also contain themes that did not fit with the aforementioned gradient, such as contexts or desire. Finally, figure 3 propose a comparative overview of both sets. Letters after the participant number indicates the team sport played[[2]](#footnote-3)

**Drivers of French National Team Self-Categorization (170 – 2685)**

--Insert Figure 1 near here--

***Intrapersonal Relationship (72 – 140)***

This theme refers to all aspects related to the individual as such, leading to group level self-categorization to the French national team. Predominantly, it encompasses participants' personal characteristics, performances, or failure. In this sense, P15VM illustrates how individual character traits can either facilitate or hinder the feeling of belongness: “The jokers, for example, are the ones who entertain the group and will typically integrate more easily than the shy individuals”. Regarding performance, P124HW illustrates as such: “I think that being on the field, it helps to integrate into the group. Because we’re still part of a national team selection, so I think the better you are on the field, the more the group will integrate you”. In addition, P83R7M illustrates how making a mistake remind them that they are part of the team as follows: “It's like, 'I made a mistake,' and well, the team conceded a try because of it.”

***Individual-to-Teammates or the Team Relationship (169 – 1776)***

This theme pertains to bonds with teammates, particularly the shared experiences of common events. It also encompasses interpersonal relationships and previous knowledge of, and familiarity with, teammates. Finally, it includes being in situations inherent to group or those specific to the identity of the French national team. The shared experience concerns the experience of the same events, as P100BM relates:

The restrictions were the same for everyone. […] It really made you feel like a member of the group, because it’s… it wasn’t a personal constraint, […]. It was a moment when, in fact, you felt even more like a member of the group because, once again, we were all in the same struggle, that’s it.

But it also concerns the simple fact of experiencing group times, as P42BM relates:

It’s the fact that we do all these activities together since we’re really together 24/7. And the fact that we see each other every day, getting to know each other more and more every day, because we’re always changing, and learning a little more about each other every day.

Another aspect of this theme is the good relationships between teammates built beforehand, or when arriving in the group. P52R7M illustrates as follows: “But even just knowing one or two people really helps with integration. So yeah, knowing a few guys beforehand makes things a lot easier”.

Finally, the last aspect of this theme relates both to the inherent nature of playing team sports and to elements specific to the French national team context. The former can be illustrated by P107VW when reflecting about their sport: “Because our performance also depends on the outcome afterward, since it’s a highly team-oriented game, and we need everyone. You can’t play individually”, and the later with P51R7M recalling chanting the French national anthem: “No, I think that, on the contrary, it really made me feel very… yeah, like I belonged to the French national team, yeah.”.

***Individual-to-Staff Relationship (67 – 108)***

This theme concerns the quality of the relationship with the staff, regarding the individuals and the performance. In this way, P76HM supported their statement about the staff taking the time to listen and engage with the players: “The fact that you can talk to them without any problem, that they listen to you, and that they also tell you things, makes you feel like a member of the French national team at that moment”. Differently, P62RXVM described the effect of the relationship with the staff regarding performance: “Well, the coaches actually integrate you into their project. After all, it is fundamentally their project […]. By being part of their project, it inevitably influences how you feel about being a member of the team”.

***Individual-to-Opposing Team Relationship (55 – 88)***

This theme concerns the perception of the opponent teams before interacting with them, and the very interactions. P70R7W recalls: “And when I talk with other nations. We’re always staying in the same hotels, always seeing each other at meals. So in that context, yeah… that’s when I really feel like a member of the French national team.”

***Individual-to-Sport Environment Individuals Relationships, Excluding Teams and Staffs***

***(32 – 54)***

This theme encompasses relationships with sport stakeholders who are neither players nor staff members. The primary aspect highlighted in this theme is the presence of fans, which some participants feel fosters group level self-categorization. P54RXVW recalls the first game after COVID: “However, with the return of the crowd in the stadiums during the autumn tour, you truly feel like a member of the French national team. With that crowd”.

***Individual-to-Outsiders Relationship (25 – 33)***

This theme concerns the relationship with all the non-sport stakeholders. P114HW talked about how closed ones and strangers remind them that they are from the French national team :

It’s others who remind us. For us, we're just living it—yeah, it's the French national team, sure, but I see it more as experiences, that's just how it is. And it’s people outside of it—like parents, friends, people we run into, people we don’t even know but who know us (laughs) who say things like, 'Yeah, but you're on the French national team'.

***Context (148 – 477)***

This final theme addresses the various neutral contexts in which players can find themselves — contexts that are not influenced by specific relationships, either at the individual or collective level. These contexts are characterized purely by space and time. It mainly concerns competition, training, and selection. Indeed, participation of the game and playing time seem to foster group level self-categorization. P92VM explains how they feel when playing as follow: “As soon as we actually play a match with the team, even if we’ve just met or whatever, we start feeling more like a group than as individuals”. In addition, P105RXVM recalled how it felt to be on the field: “Like I said, when I’m on the field, I don’t think about myself. I think about the French national team—as a member of the French national team.”

**Drivers of Individual Level Self-Categorization**

The names of the themes are similar to the names of the theme pertaining to the last set of results. It is due to their very same nature. Nonetheless, their content, the number of participants citing them, or the number of MUs included, are different, as depicted in figure 2.

--Insert Figure 2 near here—

***Intrapersonal Relationship (150 – 649)***

This theme refers to all aspects related to the individual as such, leading to individual level self-categorization. Predominantly, it encompasses pleasant and unpleasant feelings, participants' personal characteristics such as their goals or journey, and their very performances or failure. Regarding feelings, P125HF illustrates how pleasant affects can reinforce the salience of the individual level. In this quote, P125HF refer to ILSC when saying “on the individual level”: “On an individual level, well, being called back was a source of pride — it was validating, recognizing my hard work”. On the contrary, P126HW discussed the effect of anxiety in favouring ILSC when, after the opposing team had widened the gap, a decisive final phase offered an opportunity to recover: “Me, personally, I was scared of messing up that important moment—of scoring when I had to”. The impact of personal successes of failures on ILSC is also illustrated with P37VF and P42BM, respectively: “More individual because I know that, personally, I was able to contribute what was needed for the group”, and “Being in difficulty feels more like an individual experience because it is me who is in a negative state”.

***Individual-to-Teammates or the Team Relationship (149 – 580)***

While this theme concerns the relationship between players or with the team, the content is different from the themes of the same name from the last set. This one concerns the differences with teammates, the experience of collective events (mainly failure), or not knowing the French national team. The first aspect was described as follow by P115HW: “Well, since I don’t eat the same things as the others… that’s why I say it’s more about me. In addition, P37VF describes the feeling of being different endorsing a leadership role: “Well, as an individual, because in terms of my position, there were greater responsibilities during the match. I had many more responsibilities, and I didn’t necessarily manage to handle them all well”. The shared experience of collective failure is illustrated as follow by P38BW: “Well, I think it’s… actually, when there’s a defeat, we often have the reflex to say, ‘It’s someone else’s fault, it’s so-and-so,’ and at that point, the sense of group fades away”. Finally, P133RXVM explained how arriving in the in the French national team favoured ILSC, in recalling the very first time: “As an individual. Especially because it was my first time, so it was more of an experience that I was living… Since I was discovering everything, I took it all in as much as I could”.

***Individual-to-Staff (48 – 95)***

This theme concerns the relationship between the participants and the staff which provokes ILSC. Regarding the valence of the relationship P129RXVW illustrates as follows: “Meanwhile [the teammates play a game], you stay on the side, doing aerobic drills, running… you’re just doing exercises. It’s almost like you’re with the old-timers and the coaches who… well, they couldn’t care less about you”. In addition, P152HM illustrates the relationship with staff members as follows: “Well, I think it affects me… it affects me individually to know that people like me, and that makes me feel good personally”.

***Individual-to-Opposing Team Relationship (32 – 49)***

This theme, similar to its counterpart in the first set, describes the interactions with, and the perception of, opponents, that foster ILSC. P81R7M recalled his first game against South Africa, which is a famous opponent in rugby. The mere presence of this team drove P81R7M to feel ILSC, as they recalled: “South Africa—well, for me personally, it was my first time. It was the first time I played against them, so it was an honor”.

***Individual-to-Sport Environment Individuals Relationships, Excluding Teams and Staffs***

***(24 – 35)***

Also similar to its counterpart, this theme mainly reflects the fan presence. Indeed, P117BM explains as follow: “When you, personally, for example, are on the free-throw line, you’re all alone. You’re the only one holding the ball, and when you hear everyone booing you, you take it personally”. In addition, P75HM illustrates as follows:

Yeah, it motivates me. Playing away games is sometimes better than playing at home, especially when the crowd is hostile. I’m used to having hostile crowds. And I don’t know, it fires you up. You’re determined to do well, to prove them wrong, or to make them shut their mouths. So, in that sense, it’s more of an individual thing.

***Individual-to-Outside Sport Individuals Relationship (31 – 49)***

This theme concerns the relationship with all the non-sport stakeholders. P56RXVW explained what they felt during their first selection in the French national team when their closed ones saw them: “And above all, you want your loved ones — who are seeing you for the first time wearing the French national team jersey — to be proud of you”.

***Contexts (149 – 550)***

The last similar theme simply concerns space and time contexts, not defined by social characteristics. Again, it mainly concerns competition, training, and selection. However, this one also concerns injuries. The same way of its counterpart, participation of the game and playing time seem to foster individual level self-categorization in some players, as well as not playing. indeed, P54RXVW illustrates as follows: “In the moment, when you’re told you’re starting, it feels more individual because you’re really happy about the trust that’s being placed in you”. On the contrary, P55RXVW explains as follow:

Yes, because obviously, when you’re not part of the squad listed on the team sheet for a match, or when you’re not starting, it’s definitely hard to feel like a member of the French national team. In those moments, you quickly feel like an individual, just a rugby player, and not part of the national team.

Regarding selection, the process of selection can provoke individual level self-categorization, as P107VW, a member of the French volleyball national team recalls :

No, at that point, I was more focused on myself, because, well, at some point, everyone progresses at their own pace. I don’t know how to put it, but when you’re young, you’re all together, etc. Some will go much further than others, and maybe only two or three will make it to the senior national team, while others won’t. So, I’d say it’s more on a personal level.

But on the contrary, failing the selection process can also lead to individual level self-categorization, as P54RXVW explained:

Not great. It’s never easy, and that’s really from an individual perspective, because it’s a disappointment—you don’t want to let down the people around you. And well, being told they’d rather pick someone else because she’s better than you, yeah, that’s not pleasant either. And that, for sure, hits you as an individual

In addition, injury seems to drawn away the players from their teams. P93BW illustrates as follows: “Well, yes, because you don’t experience the training sessions — you’re always on the sidelines. I’d say it feels more individual”.

***Prove One’s Skill Level (48 – 77)***

This theme concerns the constant need for players to prove that they are the best choice for the staff, in order to stay in the French national team. P60RXVM illustrates as follows:

Because there’s competition, you have to be the best. As a result, there will always be an individual aspect to my training. Yes, there’s the individual part, but there’s also the collective. However, for me, the individual part is very important: personal work after training, stretching, all of that. It remains individual.

**Discussion**

Elite team sport offers a uniquely fertile context for examining identity processes, as it often requires athletes to negotiate personal aspirations within deeply collective environments. Within this context, the Social Identity Approach (Haslam, 2004; Haslam, Reicher, et al., 2020) provides a valuable conceptual framework. It emphasises identity as context-dependent and socially constructed, rather than static or inherent. At the core of this perspective lies the notion of identity salience—the fluctuating prominence of specific self-definitions (e.g., individual or group-based) in response to situational, relational, and affective cues (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Turner et al., 1987).

In high-level sport, where athletes must constantly adapt to selection processes, role expectations, and team dynamics, such fluctuations are not only common—they are integral to the lived experience of performance. Yet, despite increasing theoretical attention to social identity in sport psychology, empirical work addressing how elite athletes actually experience and regulate these identity shifts remains limited. Most studies continue to emphasise group-based belonging, often assuming that social identification is straightforward once athletes enter the national team. However, this assumption neglects the complexity of identity navigation in environments marked by both cooperation and competition—especially when athletes come from rival clubs and must compete for selection and status within the same team.

Our study was designed to address this empirical gap. Drawing on qualitative data from a large and diverse cohort of French national team athletes, we aimed to identify the conditions under which players self-categorize at either the group or individual level. In doing so, we build on earlier theoretical developments in identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002) and integrate more recent conceptual propositions (Campo, 2020), which suggest that identity levels may not simply alternate in salience but can coexist, overlap, or even conflict. The focus here is not only on identifying which factors provoke one form of identification over another, but also on beginning to understand how these identity levels interact, and what consequences such interactions might have for athletes’ psychological functioning and group dynamics.

We found in the analysis a structured duality in the ways elite athletes construct and experience self-categorization. Two principal identity configurations were found: one aligned with the collective (i.e., Group-Level Self-Categorization, or GLSC), and the other grounded in the individual (i.e., Individual-Level Self-Categorization, or ILSC). These identity modes were not arbitrary; rather, they were consistently organized along a gradient of relational proximity—beginning with the self, extending to teammates and staff, and eventually encompassing broader sport-related and non-sport-related social actors. Notably, while both identity levels were shaped by the same overarching domains (e.g., interpersonal relationships, staff interactions, performance contexts), their subjective interpretation by athletes led to different salience outcomes.

Group related matters, specifically, close interactions with teammates, for instance, were found to foster GLSC when they involved shared rituals, collective goals, or emotionally significant group experiences (spending time together, in quantity and in quality). These findings align with previous research that has highlighted the role of social cohesion and group-based affective ties in reinforcing team identity (Fransen et al., 2016; Rees et al., 2015). At the same time, the very same interactions could foster ILSC when marked by perceived interpersonal distance, differentiated responsibilities, or a sense of dissimilarity within the team. This mirrors earlier findings in organizational psychology suggesting that identification processes are deeply shaped by how individuals appraise their position and role within social structures (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

Performance-related events also demonstrated this dual potential. Situations such as selection, training, or match participation could either reinforce a sense of personal achievement (ILSC) or be experienced as symbolic inclusion within a collective endeavour (GLSC), depending on how they were interpreted. These results support the view that identity salience is not merely driven by structural cues but is instead filtered through athletes’ personal histories, goal orientations, and perceived status (Rees et al., 2015; Turner et al., 1987). Such findings underscore the need to conceptualize identity work in sport as fluid, context-sensitive, and deeply embedded in meaning-making processes.

One of the most striking observations to emerge from this study is that personal and group identities are not necessarily in competition. While classic self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987) posits that identity levels function in mutual exclusion—where highlighting the individual suppresses the group, and vice versa—our findings offer a more flexible view. In several cases, athletes described experiences where both personal pride and group affiliation were active at the same time. Being selected, for example, was sometimes seen not only as recognition of individual effort but also as a moment of symbolic entry into the collective. In such instances, one’s sense of self and sense of belonging seemed to strengthen each other.

This supports earlier findings in cross-categorisation research (Crisp & Hewstone, 2006), which argue that people can hold several identities without necessarily creating internal conflict. Applied to our context, it suggests that athletes can engage both the “I” and the “We” in ways that are complementary, rather than competing. Our results also extend the idea of identity complexity beyond social categories like gender or nationality (Roccas & Brewer, 2002), by showing how different levels of self—personal and collective—can be activated together, depending on how the athlete makes sense of the moment. This proposition, also present in recent conceptual discussions (Campo, 2020), finds here a first empirical grounding in elite sport.

At the same time, this coactivation was not always described as smooth or effortless. Some athletes felt divided—pulled between their own ambitions and the collective expectations of the team. These moments hint at the dynamic interplay between identity layers, where one may dominate, or where the two coexist in tension. Such variability suggests that it is not only the salience of each identity that matters, but also the nature of their relationship—whether they align, reinforce, or potentially clash. Exploring this dynamic further could offer a more nuanced understanding of how identity operates in high-performance environments, particularly when individual goals and team pressures collide.

How athletes relate to those around them seems to play a critical, though often subtle, role in how they define themselves. In previous studies, strong social ties have been linked to team cohesion and a stronger sense of “we” (e.g., Bruner et al., 2014; Fransen et al., 2016). In our data, that pattern was present—but not systematic. The same kinds of relationships could pull athletes in different directions, depending on how they interpreted what was happening.

For instance, several participants described a growing sense of group identity when they shared meaningful experiences with teammates—especially when those moments involved emotional intensity or mutual trust. But others, in similar situations, reported feeling like outsiders or exceptions. A few mentioned their role being different, or not feeling understood, which seemed to pull their focus inward. So rather than proximity automatically producing group affiliation, it seemed more about how that proximity was experienced.

This was especially true in the coach-athlete relationship. Some athletes felt supported and genuinely involved in a shared process, which helped them identify with the team. Others described something quite different—being reduced to their performance, or left out of key decisions. Even when the structure of the relationship looked the same, the meaning attached to it varied a great deal. This complexity aligns with earlier work on relational identity (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007) and suggests we need to think less in terms of fixed relational effects, and more in terms of how athletes read and feel those connections.

Interestingly, some of the identity dynamics described by athletes were triggered by people outside of their immediate sport context. Opponents, fans, even family members were sometimes mentioned as key figures in shaping how athletes saw themselves—often in moments that weren’t necessarily central to competition or performance. These interactions didn’t just confirm identity; they provoked it. And more often than not, they strengthened a sense of individuality.

Athletes spoke, for example, about wanting to make family members proud, or feeling pressure when performing in front of a hostile crowd. In those moments, identity seemed to shift inward—not necessarily against the team, but toward the self. This kind of identity activation doesn’t appear often in sport psychology literature, which tends to focus on internal team dynamics. Yet it may be just as important, especially at the highest level, where external eyes are constantly present, and symbolic validation—positive or negative—can resonate deeply.

These moments also highlight something essential: even if group related matters seem to make the most important contribution to GLSC, identity work in elite sport isn’t confined to the boundaries of the team. It’s embedded in a broader socio-emotional field. Athletes don’t leave their personal narratives at the door when they enter the stadium. They carry them through every interaction, whether it’s with a teammate, a coach, or someone in the stands. This reinforces the need to look beyond immediate group structures when thinking about how identity is formed, maintained, or challenged in elite performance environments.

Another domain that stood out in athletes’ accounts was the set of contexts tied directly to performance—competing, training, being selected, or left out. These experiences, often treated as routine in high-level sport, were described as carrying intense identity weight. They didn’t just mark career progress or athletic status. They shaped how athletes saw themselves in relation to the team and to their own goals.

Interestingly, these moments weren’t experienced uniformly. For some athletes, being named in the starting lineup reinforced a sense of belonging—it meant they were truly part of the group. For others, the exact same moment was about personal pride, a confirmation that their work had paid off. On the flip side, not being selected—or being sidelined by injury—often disrupted that sense of inclusion. Athletes in these situations spoke of feeling distanced, not only physically but psychologically, from the team. This echoes work on identity loss during career transitions (Park et al., 2013; Stambulova et al., 2012), but also suggests that such identity ruptures can occur within active careers, not only at their endpoints.

What became clear is that these contexts—training, selection, matches—don’t function only as performance markers. They also operate as symbolic thresholds. Athletes interpret them as signs of where they stand, who they are, and whether they matter. And those interpretations vary widely. In many cases, the same structural event could either strengthen individual identity, collective identity, or both. It depended on the personal story each athlete was telling at that moment.

That narrative dimension seems particularly important. Athletes don’t just react to these events—they make sense of them, integrating them into a larger understanding of their career, their worth, and their place in the system. This aligns with narrative approaches to identity (Carless & Douglas, 2013), where meaning is not given by the event itself, but by how it fits into the broader story the athlete is constructing over time.

One of the more applied contributions of this study concerns the difference between social categories (Turner et al., 1987)—purely cognitive constructs that do not require individuals to know other members of the category to feel a sense of belonging—and task groups. Indeed, multiple studies consider that both collective structures work the same (e.g., Campo et al., 2018; Pellet et al., 2024; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). However, the participants in this study emphasize the importance of shared experiences, which is not a social category’s characteristic. This appears to be a key element that differentiates social categories from task groups in high level sport, whose members interact daily and whose bonds are primarily strengthened through the quantity and quality of shared experiences.

A second applied contribution of this study concerns what we refer to as identity competence—a concept that captures the ability to detect, interpret, and respond to changes in identity positioning, both at the individual and group level. Although not yet established in the literature, this notion builds on existing models of emotional competence (Mikolajczak et al., 2023; Saarni, 1999), where adaptation relies on the recognition of internal states in interaction with social cues.

For coaches, developing such competence may involve noticing whether athletes lean more strongly toward a personal sense of self or a collective one, and responding in ways that help restore balance. This could mean adapting communication, clarifying roles, or acknowledging an athlete's position during emotionally significant phases of the season. None of these actions are neutral; each carries implication for how inclusion, belonging, or value are perceived. In this respect, recent work on identity leadership offers a useful parallel, portraying coaches as builders of shared meaning within teams (Fransen et al., 2020).

Athletes, too, engage in this identity work. They may shift between "I" and "we" depending on the task at hand, the environment, or the relationships that surround them. Some navigate these transitions with ease, particularly when moving between club and national teams, or stepping into new roles. Others describe more difficulty adjusting. That variation suggests that identity competence is not a fixed capacity, but something that evolves—through reflection, experience, and exposure to different team cultures.

It would be misleading to treat identity as a skill in the strict sense. But our findings suggest that identity navigation can be supported and refined. In performance environments where both individual initiative and collective unity matter, the ability to move between identity levels, and to recognise their interplay, may be central to sustained adaptation and success.

**Limitations and Perspectives**

A distinctive feature of this study lies in the scale and composition of its sample. To our knowledge, this may be one of the largest—if not the largest—qualitative cohorts ever analysed in the field of sport psychology. The study drew on interviews with 152 athletes from French national teams, covering all major Olympic team sports. This included both men’s and women’s squads, and spanned a wide range of disciplines. Such scale is rare in qualitative work in sport psychology, especially when involving super-elite athletes, and constitutes a major strength of this study. It enabled a rich and ecologically grounded exploration of how identity is constructed and regulated in high-performance settings.

This study was embedded within the broader TEAMSPORTS project, funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR), which supported the scientific preparation of national teams ahead of the Paris 2024 Olympic Games. Over the past two Olympic cycles, French teams in handball, basketball, football (soccer), rugby sevens, and volleyball—across both men’s and women’s competitions—have achieved consistent international success. This sustained performance suggested the emergence of a shared high-performance culture, and the TEAMSPORTS project aimed to identify psychological and organisational mechanisms that might characterise this “French model” of collective excellence.

Against this backdrop, the aim was not to compare disciplines or gender categories, but to explore transversal patterns that underpin identity dynamics across national team environments. The analytical strategy was thus deliberately cross-cutting, focused on uncovering shared structural and relational processes. That said, the richness of the data collected opens the door to further research that could investigate sport-specific or gender-specific nuances. These lines of inquiry are promising, but they fall beyond the scope of a single article, particularly given the space constraints typical of journal formats.

Still, the study’s cultural specificity must be acknowledged. All participants came from French national teams, and their identity experiences likely reflect the particular configurations of selection systems, coaching practices, and institutional values within the French sport system. Comparative studies conducted in other national contexts—with different governance models or competitive traditions—would be valuable in extending or contrasting these findings.

Moreover, the use of retrospective interviews presents familiar methodological limitations. Athletes reconstructed their experiences after the fact, and while their accounts were detailed and often emotionally grounded, they remained subject to memory biases, narrative reconstruction, and social desirability. These are common in qualitative work and do not undermine the value of the insights, but suggest the value of complementary methods—such as longitudinal interviews, in situ observation, or ethnographic immersion—to track identity dynamics as they unfold in real time.

Finally, the concept of identity competence, introduced here, remains at an early theoretical stage. Its further development will require empirical operationalization—whether through psychometric validation, intervention-based studies, or experimental research. The construct shares affinities with emotional and social competence frameworks (Mikolajczak et al., 2023; Saarni, 1999), which could offer a useful base for elaboration and applied translation.

Taken together, these limitations do not detract from the study’s contribution. Rather, they delineate a forward-looking research agenda—one that treats identity as a dynamic, socially situated, and contextually modulated phenomenon, central not only to athlete development but also to the symbolic and functional coherence of elite teams.

**Conclusion**

This study provides an in-depth look at how athletes in elite national teams experience and regulate their sense of identity. Drawing on one of the most extensive qualitative samples in the field, it sheds light on how players shift between personal and group-level self-categorisation—sometimes separately, sometimes in tandem—depending on the relationships, roles, and moments they encounter. Thus, rather than confirming a fixed divide between “I” and “We,” the findings suggest that both levels of identity can coexist, reinforce each other, or—at times—compete. This supports a more layered and flexible understanding of the self in high-performance sport, one that echoes ideas from identity complexity and cross-categorisation research, while extending them to encompass different levels of psychological abstraction.

In this sense, the study introduces the idea of identity competence: a capacity—on the part of both athletes and coaches—to read, adapt to, and work with the identity demands of a given context. Far from being a stable trait, identity appears as something dynamic, situated, and trainable—something that can be shaped to support both individual goals and collective functioning.

By focusing on athletes from a wide range of sports, all within the French national team system, the study also offers insight into what might constitute shared features of the French approach to elite team sport. At the same time, it opens the door to future work examining differences across sports, gender, and national systems—questions best addressed in follow-up studies.

Overall, the findings make a case for treating identity not just as a psychological concept, but as a central part of how teams perform, connect, and sustain themselves over time. They also offer a reminder that behind every jersey is a layered sense of self, shaped as much by the group as by the individual who wears it.

**Credit Author Statement**

**Julien PELLET (1st author)**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Resources, Analysis, Data Curation, Writing - Original Draft, Writing - Review & Editing. **Pierre GERAT (2nd author)**: Investigation, Resources, Analysis, Data Curation, Writing - Review & Editing. **Sofiene HARABI (3rd author)**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Analysis. **Mickaël CAMPO (4th author)**: Conceptualization, Methodology, Analysis, Writing - Original Draft., Writing - Review & Editing.

**Data Availability Statement**

Due to the nature of the research and ethical considerations, supporting data is not available.

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1. Each theme is followed by two numbers: the number of participants who mentioned a MU associated with this theme, and the total number of MUs contained within it [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. P = participant, R7 = rugby 7, RXV = rugby union, V = volleyball, H = handball, B = basketball, M = men, W = women [↑](#footnote-ref-3)