RESEARCH REPORTS

One Role or Two? The Function of Psychological Separation in Role Conflict

Isis H. Settles and Robert M. Sellers
University of Michigan

Alphonse Damas Jr.
University of Virginia

Student athletes vary in how much they view their academic and athletic role identities as separate from and interfering with each other. The authors investigated the relationship of these perceptions to psychological well-being in 200 intercollegiate athletes. Measures included role separation, interference, identity, and well-being. Correlations indicated that interference related negatively to well-being, whereas viewing the roles as distinct related positively to well-being. Regression analyses of demographic and role identity variables also showed a positive association between role separation and well-being, and a significant Separation × Interference interaction. Specifically, role interference was negatively related to well-being for those who viewed the two roles as distinct but unrelated for those who did not. The buffering effects of role separation are discussed.

Most individuals perform and maintain many different role identities in their everyday lives. Whether the role identity is mother or wife or professor, there are certain demands and expectations that accompany the role. These roles may or may not be compatible with each other. Researchers have spent the last 50 years investigating the ways individuals negotiate various roles in their lives (Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, & Rosenthal, 1964; Merton, 1957; Parsons, 1951; Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970; Van Sell, Brief, & Schuler, 1981). Most of the more recent research has been on the consequences of role conflict—that is, when the demands of a particular role make it difficult for the individual to perform or meet the demands of another role. Although the definition of role conflict implies that individuals must hold at least two roles for role conflict to be experienced, often individuals differ in the extent to which they experience the roles as distinct. For example, one married woman with a child may perceive her role identities as mother and wife as separate roles, whereas another married woman with a child may instead think of her parenting and spousal duties as part of her family role. These individual differences in how multiple roles are perceived may have significant implications for how difficulties in enacting the roles are related to psychological well-being.

In much of the previous research on role conflict, investigators have examined role identities that they assumed to be separate and distinct from each other. Rarely have the participants’ perceptions of the distinctiveness of the role identities been directly assessed. This oversight is most likely a by-product of the types of role combinations that have traditionally been studied. Much of the research on role conflict has focused on the potential incongruence between work and family roles, especially for women (e.g., Helson, Elliott, & Leigh, 1990; Pietromonaco, Manis, & Frohardt-Lane, 1986; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994), and the possible conflict experienced by women in nontraditional fields (Anthrop & Allison, 1983). The premise underlying much of this early work was that women would experience negative outcomes if they added employment to their role as primary caregiver. When that hypothesis was not supported consistently, researchers began investigating whether women would suffer psychologically if they were employed in male-dominated areas. Implicit in this debate about what happens when women combine work and family roles was the assumption that because the two domains have different goals and rules for behavior, they are perceived as distinct and conflictual by all women holding that pair of roles. By examining role combinations that the broader society views as incompatible, researchers have failed to recognize that the individuals who negotiate these role combinations may not perceive them as distinct from each other or conflictual (Allison, 1991).

Despite the surprising dearth of research directly examining the issue, social cognition research has shown that individuals differ in the degree to which they prefer to temporally separate or combine positive and negative events (Linville & Fischer, 1991) and whether they tend to compartmentalize or mix positive and negative self-knowledge (Showers, 1992). In fact, Linville (1985) noted that “two persons with similar actual roles may differ in the way they cognitively organize the relationship among roles, thus processing the same self-relevant information in different ways” (p. 98). It is an easy next step to conceptualize role separation as a form of self-knowledge organization that individuals may com-

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Isis H. Settles and Robert M. Sellers, Department of Psychology, University of Michigan; Alphonse Damas Jr., Department of Psychology, University of Virginia.

We thank Alyssa Zucker for helpful comments on drafts of this article. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Isis H. Settles, who is now at the Department of Psychology, Michigan State University, 129 Psychology Research Building, East Lansing, Michigan 48824. E-mail: settles@msu.edu

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partmentalize or connect cognitively, thinking of them in terms of a single, larger self-schema.

Previous research has suggested that the way individuals compartmentalize the self has implications for their psychological functioning. Showers (1992) found that when positive aspects of the self were rated as more important than were negative aspects, those who separated their self-knowledge (i.e., each self-schema tended to contain mostly positive or mostly negative characteristics) had higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of depression than did those who mixed their self-knowledge (i.e., self-schemas were defined by a combination of positive and negative characteristics). Linville (1985) found that those who were higher in self-complexity, that is, those who defined themselves in terms of a larger number of independent self-schemas, were less variable in their day-to-day affect. She theorized that this was because positive or negative experiences in one self-aspect were less likely to contaminate other self-aspects for those who were more complex because of the cognitive independence of self-knowledge.

Linville (1985) suggested that high self-complexity might serve as a buffer by containing the effects of negative (or positive) experiences to the self-aspect in which they occur. Similarly, those who separate their social role identities may be thought of as more complex in terms of their self-organization than are those who combine their role identities. Given these results, we predict that, to the extent that roles are considered to be important and positive aspects of the self, separating them cognitively should be associated with positive well-being. As with self-complexity, the individual’s perceptions of the distinctiveness of two roles, or what we call role separation, may act as a buffer by preventing the negative experiences of one role from polluting other roles. Further, for the individual who views the two roles as very distinct (i.e., high role separation), positive experiences in one role may counterbalance the negative experiences of another role. For instance, a student athlete who is struggling on the athletic field may be buffered by receiving good grades in the classroom if he or she sees the athletic and student roles as distinct.

Determining whether someone separates or combines his or her roles psychologically may have important implications for understanding the relationship between role conflict and well-being. Most individuals at some point experience some difficulty in performing one or more of their roles as a result of the responsibilities of another role (Van Sell et al., 1981). When the individual views the roles as distinct and one role as interfering with the other, then the person is likely to experience role conflict. On the other hand, another individual who does not perceive two distinct roles but instead one unified role with demands that are conflictual is not experiencing role conflict. This experience may be closer to what has been described as role overload (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Duxbury, Higgins, & Lee, 1994; Van Sell et al., 1981). In both role conflict and role overload, the individual feels that there are certain demands associated with his or her role or roles that interfere with each other. We define this experience of difficulty negotiating multiple role demands as role interference.

Consider two student athletes who are experiencing high role interference—that is, their student role is preventing them from adequately performing their athlete role or vice versa. Student Athlete 1 views her student and athlete roles as distinct. Thus, she perceives the interference she experiences as occurring between her two roles. We define this experience of high role interference paired with high role separation as role conflict. In contrast, Student Athlete 2 views his student and athlete roles as part of a larger metarole. He perceives his interference as occurring within that single role. We define high role interference paired with low role separation as role overload. Thus, the interaction between role interference and role separation is how we distinguish between role conflict (i.e., high role interference and high role separation) and role overload (i.e., high role interference and low role separation).

Much of the previous research found that role conflict was associated with negative psychological and physical outcomes (e.g., Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Gerson, 1985). For instance, O’Driscoll, Ilgen, and Hildreth (1992) found that work–nonwork role interference was negatively related to role satisfaction, which in turn was negatively related to psychological strain. Similarly, Coverman (1989) found that work–family role conflict was related to decreased job satisfaction, decreased marital satisfaction in men, and increased physical symptoms in women. Other researchers have found evidence of a link between role conflict and depressive symptoms (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1997; Tiedje et al., 1990). Finally, a recent meta-analysis indicated that work–family role conflict is negatively related to both work and life satisfaction (Kossek & Ozeki, 1998).

The conclusion regarding the research linking role conflict with well-being must be considered with caution. Because much of the research examining the relationship between role conflict and psychological well-being did not assess the participants’ perceptions of role separation, the experiences of role conflict and role overload were confounded. Explicitly operationalizing role separation and role interference as distinct constructs may provide a clearer picture regarding the relationship between role conflict and psychological well-being.

Other factors related to the way individuals perceive their role or roles may also influence the relationship between role conflict and psychological well-being. Barnett and Baruch (1985) have suggested that some role combinations may be associated with conflict more than are others. Role combinations that afford more opportunities may produce less conflict than do those that require a greater level of obligation. In addition, some role combinations create a greater time struggle than do others, either because one or more of the roles demand a great deal of time or because the two roles must necessarily be performed at separate times. For example, a man who is both a father and a husband may provide both his wife and his children companionship when he takes them out for dinner or organizes board games at home. Further, the expectations and value systems associated with some role combinations are more compatible than are others. The greater the difference is in the culture of each role within a role combination, the greater the possibility is that the individual will perceive his or her various roles as distinct and conflictual.

Another major factor in whether individuals experience role conflict is the degree to which their role combinations are central and important to their sense of self. The more important a role identity is considered to be (by the individual occupying it), the more likely it is that it will have a psychological effect (Stryker & Serpe, 1994; Thoits, 1992). Further, the amount of distress caused by role interference should vary positively as a function of the importance of the role or roles. If two roles are perceived as being
distinct and one role is considered much more personally relevant than the other is, the individual is likely to resolve the conflict rather quickly by reducing his or her involvement in the less important role. However, if both roles are important, then the individual may attempt to negotiate the competing roles, which may be difficult and lead to distress. Previous research suggests that the importance an individual places on a role identity may influence the impact of other experiences or attitudes on an individual’s well-being (Frone, Russell, & Cooper, 1995; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998).

In the present study, we explicitly measure individuals’ perceptions of role separation and role interference as factors in the relationship between role conflict and three indicators of psychological well-being in a sample of college student athletes. We believe, in light of the above considerations, that student athletes provide an excellent population in which to investigate our hypotheses. It is likely that some student athletes view their role combination as two distinct roles, whereas others view it as a single role. Further, the role combination of college student and athlete is one in which, though many of the demands are complementary, many others are contradictory. The tasks associated with athletics and academics are quite different. For many student athletes, the opportunity for higher education is provided by their athletic ability. At the same time, their ability to continue to compete in intercollegiate athletics is determined in part by their academic standing. Research suggests that, for the overwhelming majority of college student athletes, doing well in both academics and athletics is very important to them (e.g., Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Center for the Study of Athletics, 1988; Edwards, 1984; Lance, 1987; Sellers, 1992; Sellers & Kuperminc, 1997; Snyder, 1985). Therefore, we are examining a role combination that the student athletes themselves view as relevant to their lives, thereby increasing the ecological validity of our study.

On the basis of the literature, we made the following hypotheses:

1. Consistent with findings by previous researchers (Frone et al., 1997; Kossek & Ozeki, 1998; Tiedje et al., 1990), we hypothesized that individuals who experience greater role interference would report lower levels of psychological well-being.

2. Also consistent with the research on self-complexity (Lindle & Fischer, 1991; Showers, 1992), we hypothesized that those individuals who view the athlete and student roles as more distinct would report higher levels of psychological well-being.

3. Finally, we hypothesized that student athletes’ perceptions of role separation would significantly moderate the relationship between role interference and their psychological well-being. Those with high role separation may be more able to focus on the tasks of each role, whereas those with low role separation may be more distracted and preoccupied by the varied tasks associated with the different facets of their role. Thus, we predicted that the relationship between role interference and well-being would differ depending on the level of role separation. Specifically, we hypothesized that for those who see their athlete and student roles as distinct, more interference between their roles would be related to lower well-being. However, for those who see their student and athlete roles as a single role identity, we hypothesized that greater role interference would be less strongly related to well-being.

Method

Participants and Procedures

The participants consisted of intercollegiate student athletes from a medium-sized university in the Southern United States. They participated in a varsity sport at a university that competed in the most competitive division (Division I) within the National Collegiate Athletic Association. In the spring of 1994, 256 students were administered a questionnaire with a number of measures of personality, well-being, and identity following a mandatory orientation session for student athletes. Two hundred (78%) of the student athletes at the meeting returned their questionnaire. Each of the school’s intercollegiate athletic teams was at the meeting, with the exception of the football team and the men’s and women’s soccer teams (these teams were competing in games at the time of the meeting). Table 1 provides a breakdown by team of the 200 participants who completed the surveys. Consistent with the American Psychological Association’s guidelines for ethical research, participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary, that they could skip any questions they felt uncomfortable answering, and that their responses would be kept confidential. To guard against possible order effects, we administered different versions of the questionnaire in which the order of the measures was varied. In each version, demographic information was assessed first.

Participants ranged in age from 17 to 23, with a mean age of 19 years. One hundred thirteen participants were female. Approximately 73% of the student athletes self-reported that they were Caucasian, 20% were African American, and the remaining 7% classified themselves as Asian, Latino/Hispanic, or other. The median self-reported yearly family income for the sample was between $80,000 and $89,999. Thirty-nine percent of the participants were in their 1st year of school, 24% were in their 2nd year, 23% were in their 3rd year, 13% were in their 4th year, and 1% were in their 5th year of school. Fourteen percent of the student athletes were receiving a full athletic scholarship, 40% were receiving a partial athletic scholarship, 42% were receiving no athletic aid, and 4% did not respond. Finally, the mean college cumulative grade point average (GPA) was 2.44 of a possible 4.00.

Measures

Demographic Measures

Five demographic measures relevant to the study were assessed by self-report. Participants indicated their gender (1 = female, 2 = male), their current year in school, their combined annual family income, whether they were currently receiving athletic aid (1 = no athletic scholarship, 2 = partial athletic scholarship, 3 = full athletic scholarship), and their present cumulative college GPA on the traditional 4-point grading scale.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Sport</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n</td>
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<tr>
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<td>12</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>9</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>113</td>
<td>56.5</td>
<td>87</td>
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Role Importance Measures

Athletic identity. We assessed student athletes’ athletic identity using the 10-item Athletic Identity Measure (AIM) created by Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder (1993). It examined the extent to which being an athlete was a central identity to the individual. Sample items include “Sport is the most important part of my life” and “I need to participate in sport to feel good about myself.” Participants rated each item on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Appropriate items were reverse scored, and a mean score was computed across all items, so that higher scores indicated a stronger athletic identity. The present sample yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .86 for the AIM.

Academic importance. The importance of academics was assessed with a single item. Participants used a 7-point rating scale from 1 (very unimportant) to 7 (very important) to respond to the item “How important is it to you personally that you perform well in academics?”

Role Conflict Measures

Robert M. Sellers and Alphonse Damas Jr. developed a 16-item measure of academic–athletic role conflict. The academic–athletic role conflict measure consists of two scales: a role interference scale and a role separation scale. We performed a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) in which we had two uncorrelated latent factors (Interference and Separation). In the model, the 12 interference items were allowed to load onto the Interference factor, and the four separation items were allowed to load onto the Separation factor. Further, we allowed the errors of variables on the same scale to correlate (e.g., the errors of interference items could correlate with each other); however, we did not allow the errors of items from one scale to correlate with the errors of items on the other scale (i.e., the errors of interference and separation items were not allowed to correlate). Our results suggest that our two-factor model adequately fits the data, root mean square residual (RMR) = .059, goodness of fit index (GFI) = .94. Further, the two-factor model also fit the data better than did a single-factor comparative model, \( \Delta \chi^2(5, N = 161) = 41.92, p < .005 \). Thus, we are confident in the validity of the internal structure of the Student Athlete Role Conflict Scale as whole and the Role Interference and Role Separation subscales.

Student athlete role interference. The Interference subscale of the Student Athlete Role Conflict Scale assessed the degree to which student athletes perceive that the demands of being an athlete and the demands of being a student interfere with each other. The scale consisted of 12 specific instances in which some student athletes find that the demands of being an athlete and the demands of being a student interfere with each other. Participants used a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not really true of me) to 7 (really true of me) to indicate the degree to which each statement was true of them (see Appendix A). The average of all items was computed such that higher scores indicated a greater level of role interference. The scale yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .84.

Student athlete role separation. The four-item Role Separation subscale of the Student Athlete Role Conflict Scale assessed the extent to which the participants perceived being an athlete and a student as separate and distinct role identities. Participants indicated the degree to which each statement applied to them using a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (not really true of me) to 7 (really true of me; see Appendix B). We developed a composite score by reverse coding appropriate items and averaging across all items. Higher scores on the scale indicated a greater perception that being an athlete and being a student were separate roles, whereas lower scores indicated that athlete and student were viewed as a single role. The Student Athlete Role Separation subscale yielded a Cronbach’s alpha of .54.

Well-Being Measures

Self-esteem. The Rosenberg (1979) Self-Esteem Scale was used to assess participants’ level of self-esteem. The scale uses a 4-point response scale in which participants rate the extent to which they agree or disagree (disagree strongly = 1; agree strongly = 4) with 10 statements about themselves. A mean score was computed so that higher scores represented higher levels of self-esteem. The internal consistency of the scale within this sample was .86.

Perceived stress. The Perceived Stress Scale (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983) was used to determine the level of stress experienced in the past month. Participants rated the frequency (0 = never; 4 = very often) with which they had experienced 14 items in the past month. Items in the scale assess both emotional distress (e.g., “Been upset because of something that happened unexpectedly”) and coping with stressors (e.g., “Felt that you were effectively coping with important changes that were occurring in your life”). Appropriate items were reverse scored, and all items were averaged to create a composite score in which higher scores indicated greater levels of stress. The internal consistency of the scale within this sample was .83.

Depressive symptoms. The Center for Epidemiological Studies—Depression Scale (CES–D; Radloff, 1977) was used to assess symptoms associated with depression. Participants rated 20 items on how often they had felt or behaved in that manner during the past week (e.g., “I had trouble keeping my mind on what I was doing”; “I felt sad”) on a 4-point response scale that ranged from 1 (rarely or none of the time) to 4 (most or all of the time). Appropriate items were reverse scored, and we averaged all items together to compute a composite score in which higher scores represented the more frequent experience of depressive symptoms. The internal consistency of this scale in the sample was .89.

Results

The mean scores, standard deviations, and Pearson product correlations for all measures are presented in Table 2. Although there was some variance, in general, student athletes reported relatively low levels of role interference (\( M = 3.18 \)) and saw the athlete and student roles as distinct (\( M = 4.74 \)). On average, student athletes tended to strongly identify with being a student; they reported that it was very important to them personally to perform well academically (\( M = 6.58 \)). There was some variance in the centrality of their athlete role, and the mean for the sample was near the midpoint of the scale (\( M = 4.28, SD = 1.15 \)). Although there were some individual differences, overall, the student athletes in this sample appear to be relatively well-adjusted psychologically. Specifically, the mean score on the Self-Esteem Scale was 3.48 out of 4.00, and the mean scores on the Perceived Stress and depression scales were 1.61 and 1.73 respectively (both out of 4.00).

Bivariate Relationships

Pearson correlations were used to examine bivariate relationships among the measures in the study (see Table 2). With respect to the demographic variables, a significant gender difference was found in GPA and two of the well-being indicators. Specifically, women reported higher grades and higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms. Students who had been in school longer reported having higher GPAs, receiving more athletic aid, having higher levels of self-esteem, and having lower levels of stress and depression. In addition, upper class students experienced more student-athlete role interference but were also more likely to see their two roles as separate. Higher family income was associated with receiving less athletic aid and with a greater likelihood of viewing the athletic and academic roles as separate. Finally, re-
Median income was $80,000

Note.

Pearson Product Correlations and Descriptive Statistics

Table 2

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<td>Grade point average</td>
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<td>−.06</td>
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<td>.38**</td>
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</table>

Note. Median income was $80,000–89,999.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Receiving more athletic aid was related to greater identification with being an athlete, placing less importance on doing well academically, experiencing more role interference, and reporting more depressive symptoms.

With respect to the bivariate relationships among the two role importance variables, a more central athletic identity was associated with placing less importance on doing well academically, more role interference, a tendency to view athlete and student as a single role, lower levels of self-esteem, and higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms. In addition, student athletes who placed greater importance on doing well academically were more likely to view the athletic and the academic roles as separate.

An examination of the bivariate relationships among our primary predictor and outcome variables suggests that individuals who experience greater role interference report higher levels of stress and more depressive symptoms. Student athletes who view the roles of student and athlete as distinct reported more positive self-esteem and lower levels of stress and depression. It is interesting that no significant association was found between student athletes’ perceptions of role interference and role separation.

All of the well-being measures were intercorrelated. In particular, self-esteem was negatively correlated with both stress and depression. The stress and depression scales were positively correlated with each other.

Multivariate Relationships

We examined three multiple regression models to assess the direct multivariate associations among role interference, role separation, and the psychological well-being indicators (i.e., self-esteem, stress, and depression). In each model presented in Table 3, student athletes’ demographic information (i.e., gender, year in school, family income, scholarship level, and cumulative GPA) and measures of role importance (i.e., athletic identity and academic importance) were entered as predictor variables along with student athletes’ scores on the two Student Athlete Role Conflict subscales (Role Interference and Role Separation).

With respect to our model predicting self-esteem, it did not account for a significant amount of the variance. However, the model yielded a significant coefficient for student athletes’ scores on the role separation measure, such that individuals with greater levels of role separation had higher levels of self-esteem. The role interference coefficient was not significant.

The independent variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance (10%) in student athletes’ scores on the Perceived Stress Scale. Role separation was negatively related to perceived stress such that individuals who saw being an athlete and being a student more as a single role reported perceiving greater levels of stress. The significant bivariate association between role interference and perceived stress became nonsignificant when we accounted for the influence of the demographic variables, role importance variables, and role separation on perceived stress. In contrast, the gender difference that we found at the bivariate level remained significant in our model such that women reported higher levels of stress than did men.

Table 3

| Well-Being Predicted by Demographics, Role Importance, and Role Conflict |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
|                             | Self-esteem                 | Stress                      | Depression                  |
| Variable                    | B   | β   | B   | β   | B   | β   |
| Constant                    | 2.80**|     | 2.69**|     | 1.97**|     |
| Gender                      | 0.03 | .03 | −0.31 | −.26*| −0.30 | −.35**|
| Year in school              | 0.11 | .25*| −0.09| −.17| −0.10 | −.24*|
| Income                      | −0.01| −.06| −0.01| −.05| −0.01 | −.04|
| Grade point average         | 0.01| .03 | −0.08| −.15| −0.01 | −.04|
| Athletic aid                | −0.05| −.08| 0.02 | −.03| −0.03 | −.05|
| Athletic identity           | −0.02| −.04| 0.04 | 0.07| 0.12 | .31*|
| Importance of academics     | −0.02|      | 0.03 | 0.04| 0.00 | 0.01|
| Student-athlete role         | −0.02| −.04| 0.04 | 0.08| 0.02 | 0.05|
| separation                  |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Student-athlete role         | 0.12| .28*| −0.18| −.23*| −0.03 | −.07|
| separation                  |     |     |     |     |     |     |
| Adjusted R²                 | 1.87|     | 2.04*|     | 3.05**|     |

*a dfs for self-esteem, stress, and depression are 87, 82, and 87, respectively. **p < .05. *p < .01.
With respect to depression, the overall model was significant and accounted for 17% of the variance. However, neither of the role conflict variables had a significant multivariate relationship with depression, despite the fact that both role interference and role separation were significantly correlated with depressive symptoms in our bivariate analysis. Most of the variance in depression was explained by a negative relationship to year in school, a positive relationship to athletic identity, and a significant gender difference in which women reported higher depressive scores than did men.

**Moderating Relationships**

We used hierarchical regression techniques to determine whether role separation moderated the relationship between role interference and well-being. We centered student athletes’ scores on the Role Interference and Separation subscales and then multiplied the centered scores together, creating an interaction term representing the multiplicative relationship between role interference and role separation (Aiken & West, 1991). Next we entered the demographic measures, the role importance indicators, and the two Student Athlete Role Conflict subscales together as the first block of variables in our equation. Finally, we entered the interaction term as the second variable block. We repeated this procedure for three models, with each of our well-being measures serving as the dependent variable.

As can be seen in Table 4, each of the models explained a significant portion of the variance, ranging from $R^2 = .13$ to $R^2 = .20$. In addition, the role interference–role separation interaction terms explained a significant amount of variance beyond that explained in the earlier model for self-esteem and perceived stress (change in $R^2$ for self-esteem and stress, $p < .05$). The role interference–role separation interaction term failed to explain an additional portion of the variance in depression.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Well-Being Predicted by Demographics, Role Importance, Role Conflict, and the Role Separation–Role Interference Interaction</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Variable</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>$B$</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
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<tr>
<td>Year in school</td>
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<td>Importance of academics</td>
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<td>Student–athlete role separation</td>
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<td>Student–athlete role separation</td>
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<td>Student–Athlete Interference $\times$ Separation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adjusted $R^2$</td>
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<tr>
<td>Change in adjusted $R$</td>
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<td>$F^*$</td>
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* $df$s for self-esteem, stress, and depression are 87, 82, and 87, respectively.
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

The nature of the significant interactions was similar across the two models, with significant interaction terms (see Figures 1 and 2). The association between role interference and well-being was different for those who saw the roles of student and athlete as distinct compared with those who viewed them as being the same role. For student athletes who viewed the two roles as distinct, higher role interference was associated with more negative well-being (lower self-esteem and higher depressive scores). However, no association was found between role interference and our indicators of well-being for those individuals who viewed being an athlete and a student as composing a single role. Considering that greater role separation was associated with positive well-being across all three measures, the significant interaction terms suggest that the positive influence on well-being provided by viewing the roles as distinct diminishes as the level of role interference experienced by student athletes increases.

**Discussion**

The current study finds partial support for our hypotheses. In our bivariate analysis, we found that role interference and well-being were negatively related, as predicted. We do note that the individuals who reported lower levels of self-esteem and higher levels of depression and stress were still well within the range of the normal population with respect to their levels of psychological well-being.
Despite the correlation we found between role interference and well-being, much of that relationship could be explained by other demographic and role importance factors, as witnessed by the nonsignificant coefficients for role interference in the multivariate analyses.

In general, both the academic and the athletic roles appeared to be highly central identities for the student athletes in this sample. Thus, it is not surprising that interference between the demands of being an athlete and the demands of being a student was associated with some level of distress. However, role interference may be due to increased involvement in one or both roles. It is likely that students who have been in school longer become more involved in their sport as they become better athletes. This increased involvement may produce a greater level of role interference as both academics and athletics demand more time and energy. Future studies might look further at the topics of role involvement and role importance as predictors of role interference.

In accord with our second hypothesis, we found that student athletes who viewed being an athlete and being a student as separate roles reported higher levels of psychological well-being in both bivariate and multivariate analyses. This finding contributes to the existing literature on self-complexity (Linville & Fischer, 1991; Showers, 1992) by noting that social role identities are another type of self-knowledge that can be compartmentalized, that individuals vary in the degree to which they do so, and that the extent of separation has well-being consequences.

There are several reasons why separating roles may be associated with positive well-being. By separating two roles, people may feel positive experiences in two aspects rather than one aspect of life when both roles are going well. When the experiences of one role are poor, well-being may be shared up by the more positive experiences of the second role. When both roles' experiences are negative, we expect well-being to decrease. However, the student athletes in this sample appear to be having fairly positive experiences in their roles.

Separating roles may allow the student athlete to better focus on the demands and tasks of each role, allowing him or her to perform better in each role. When roles are separated, the individual may use all available cognitive resources to perform the requirements of the role he or she is in at that time, undergoing a cognitive shift when switching resources to the other role. In contrast, when roles are not separated, there may be a much less clear boundary that helps the individual negotiate the role tasks; this student athlete is always multitasking, thinking about homework during practice and thinking about the upcoming game during class time. This processing may prohibit the student athlete from fully focusing on each of the very different tasks related to his or her single role of student athlete, thereby making it more difficult for him or her to meet goals, which may, in turn, produce a drop in well-being. Future research might examine the mediating processes between the impact of role separation and well-being.

Another potential explanation is that student athletes who view athlete and student as distinct roles may be more likely to identify with the student role. Those who identify with the student role and view their two roles as distinct may be better able to avoid the negative consequences that beset many college athletes who are not able to integrate academically, such as the low expectations of nonathlete peers and instructors (Adler & Adler, 1987, 1991; Pascarella & Smart, 1991; Stoecker, Pascarella, & Wolfe, 1988). Alternatively, positive well-being may allow the student athlete to separate his or her roles. Role separation may be a sophisticated ability that requires more cognitive and affective resources than does role integration. When well-being is low, the individual may devote his or her resources to increasing well-being rather than to psychologically separating roles. Future longitudinal studies are needed to determine the causal direction of the relationship between well-being and role separation. Such a longitudinal study could also investigate the degree to which role separation is a stable attribute or a more flexible coping mechanism.

Future researchers must continue to refine the measurement of both role separation and role interference. In this study, our measure of role separation had a relatively low level of internal consistency. A more reliable measure of role separation is surely needed. However, because we found significant and theoretically consistent relationships between role separation and other variables in our study, we feel that the construct of role separation is conceptually meaningful.

We found support for our moderation question. As mentioned above, in general, student athletes who experienced less role interference reported more positive levels of well-being. However, this only appears to be the case for those student athletes who view the two roles as distinct. No relationship between level of interference and well-being was found for student athletes who view being a student and an athlete as being a single role.

An interpretation of the interaction suggests that individuals who are reporting experiences consistent with role conflict (i.e., two roles and high role interference) and individuals who are reporting experiences consistent with role overload (i.e., one role and high role interference) are both experiencing lower levels of well-being than are those individuals who perceive the student athlete role as two distinct roles and are experiencing little interference. However, individuals who perceive being a student and an athlete as a single role and experience relatively less role interference report levels of well-being similar to the levels reported by those who experience role conflict and role overload. This finding seems to reinforce the benefit of viewing the two roles as separate and distinct regardless of the level of interference that the individual experiences.

In our multivariate analyses, the variables accounted for a significant but moderate amount of the variance in two of our well-being measures (i.e., 10% and 17%). Because we view global depression and global stress as constructs with multiple causes, we would not expect one factor or even a few factors to account for a large portion of their variance (Rowley et al., 1998; Wegner, 1979). We argue that researchers should consider the magnitude of the variance accounted for in the dependent variables in relative terms (relative to what should be expected, given what is being measured) rather than in absolute terms (the size of the results compared with their possible maximum size). Further, we feel that the fact that we find a complex pattern of relationships (i.e., the interactions) enhances the value of our findings.

Along with providing evidence for investigating our primary research questions, the present study also yields some other interesting findings. For instance, it appears that student athletes’ conceptualization of the distinctiveness of the role combination was unrelated to whether they found the demands of the role identities to be interfering with one another. This suggests that student athletes’ experiences of role interference and role separa-
tion are independent, which reinforces our belief that researchers studying role conflict cannot assume that because they perceive two distinct roles, their participants do as well. We did not find gender differences in the importance that student athletes placed on the roles, in levels of role interference, or in the degree to which student athletes separated their roles. However, student athletes for whom being an athlete was a more important identity experienced lower well-being.

In conclusion, we believe that the present study makes an important contribution to the role conflict literature. Our results highlight the importance of individuals’ perceptions of their role combinations and the value of directly assessing these perceptions. Further, the delineation of role separation and role interference as separate constructs helps to clarify the distinction between role conflict and role overload by more accurately modeling differences in the way that individuals perceive various role combinations. Our results also suggest that delineating these constructs helps to explain levels of psychological well-being in college student athletes. Clearly, further research is needed that uses samples with different role combinations to determine the generalizability of our findings. Nonetheless, we believe that the present study provides a solid foundation on which to build and points to a new direction for future research on role conflict.

References


Appendix A

Student-Athlete Role Interference Scale

Participants were instructed to read a number of statements that student athletes have used to describe themselves and rate how true for them each statement was, on a scale ranging from not really true of me (1) to really true of me (7).

1. Some student-athletes feel that if it were not for the demands associated with being an athlete, courses that were once difficult would be easier.
2. Some student-athletes feel that the responsibilities related to their sport have forced them to drop a course at one time or another that they wanted or needed.
3. Some student-athletes worry that their non-athlete peers do not take them seriously as students.
4. Some student-athletes are concerned that they would have chosen a different major if they were not athletes.
5. Some student-athletes feel that their instructors discriminate against them because they are athletes.
6. Some student-athletes feel that their families are more supportive of their athletic efforts than their academic performance.
7. Some student-athletes feel that the responsibilities associated with their sport make it difficult to keep up with their coursework.
8. Some student-athletes feel that their coaches are not supportive of their efforts to perform well academically.
9. Some student-athletes feel that sports limit their academic performance.
10. Some student-athletes worry that their non-athlete peers may feel that student-athletes are admitted into the university only because they are athletes.
11. Some student-athletes feel pressured to place emphasis on their sport at the expense of their academics.
12. Some student-athletes feel that they would perform better academically if they were not an athlete.

Appendix B

Student-Athlete Role Separation Scale

Participants were instructed to read a number of statements that student athletes have used to describe themselves and rate how true for them each statement was, on a scale ranging from not really true of me (1) to really true of me (7).

1. Some student-athletes feel that the roles of a student and the roles of an athlete are similar and compatible. (R)
2. Some student-athletes see themselves as a student when in a classroom setting and see themselves as an athlete during competition.
3. Some student-athletes view themselves more as a student than an athlete.
4. Some student-athletes feel that they can be both a student and an athlete at the same time. (R)
(R) = item was reverse scored.