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# 'Strong and courageous' but 'constantly insecure': dialogical self theory, intersecting identities, and Christian mixed martial arts

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## ABSTRACT

Being a mixed martial arts fighter and a devout Christian seems to present an apparent contradiction that requires identity work to bring these identities into unity. We used Dialogical Self Theory and explored the autobiography of Ron 'H2O' Waterman, a professional fighter turned evangelist, to understand how the tensions between the different identities or I-positions were negotiated. We identified two I-positions, 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias', which related differently to religion, sport, and masculinity. Importantly, the negotiations were not between MMA and faith, but between these two I-positions that served the different needs for self-enhancement and union with somebody else. The findings illustrate that some degree of narrative coherence is needed for maintaining psychological well-being, which in Waterman's case was established by finding a third position that incorporated parts of both I-positions. We suggest that Dialogical Self Theory provides a promising perspective for understanding identity intersectionality in sport and how healthy and problematic stories are developed. Practical applications include supporting athletes in developing 'meta-positions' that can articulate the conflicts between incompatible I-positions and help identify ways to move forward.

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## Introduction

In the Sermon of the Mount, Jesus is quoted as saying 'if anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also'. The profession of a mixed martial arts (MMA) fighter, however, requires one to respond to violence with violence. Scholars (Borer and Schafer 2011; Greve 2014; Watson and Brock 2015), journalists, and church leaders have all been intrigued by this apparent contradiction and tried to make sense of it from their respective point of view. In this paper, we tackle this contradiction with the tools of narrative psychology. By applying Dialogical Self Theory (DST; Hermans 1999, 2001) to the autobiography of the MMA fighter Ron Waterman, we seek to understand how a Christian mixed martial artist integrates the message of Jesus with the brutal reality of the Octagon.

In this paper, we aim to increase scholarly awareness of potential conflicts between athletic and other social identities and to propose DST as a fruitful approach for analysing such conflicts. Despite being well-established in the psychology of religion, DST has so far received less attention in the psychology of sport. Accordingly, our aim here is to extend the methodological landscape of the narrative study of sporting lives. Our research questions are as follows: (1) What conflicts and

tensions, if any, exist between the identities of a professional MMA fighter and a devout Christian? (2) How are the potential conflicts negotiated in narrative identity work?

By background, the first author is a psychologist of religion and a long-time practitioner of martial arts. He has previously studied identity negotiation and conflict among young European Muslims. The second author is a researcher in human and social sciences of sport who also holds a Master's degree in theology, and has previously published on sport and religion. She is also a practitioner of martial arts. Based on our shared interest in identity, religion, spirituality, and martial arts, we developed this collaborative project believing that our different academic backgrounds can provide a platform for exchanging ideas across disciplines and different lenses for interpreting the data of this research.

### *Identity and narrative*

According to the grand old man of the psychological study of identity, Erik H. Erikson (1975, 18), identity can be defined as 'a subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image'. Erikson's theory has received criticisms, sometimes unfairly due to frequent misuses of his work (Hoare 2013), but continues to form an important foundation for many contemporary strands of identity research. Dan McAdams and Kate McLean (2013, 233) used Erikson's work in developing a theory of narrative identity which they defined as 'a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose.' A view shared by many narrative scholars is that people achieve a degree of subjective self-continuity by crafting life stories that bind together the various aspects of one's life and the various roles that one plays in social relationships (for an overview of different perspectives on narrative identity, see Smith and Sparkes 2008 and Thorne 2004). However, there are on-going debates concerning the importance of, and the degree of coherence needed for 'a good' life story (McAdams 2006; Neimeyer 2006). As Linde (1993) noted, the very notion of a life story requires a sequence, and a temporal ordering of events is a crucial device for achieving coherence. She also observed that coherence is a social obligation that is required from storytellers for them to appear as competent members of their cultures. However, she stressed that stories are performed in a social context and many people are satisfied to live with many partially contradictory stories that they tell in appropriate situations to particular audiences.

Hermans (1999, 2001) theorised 'a dialogical' self and emphasised that narrative identities tend to be constructed through several narrative voices rather than through one unified and coherent storyline. From this perspective, the self is defined as 'as a dynamic multiplicity of relatively autonomous *I positions*', where 'the I has the ability to move, as in a space, from one position to the other in accordance with changes in situation and time' (Hermans 1999, 1197). Several theorists have also noted that the different narrative voices, or I-positions, through which the identity is narrated tend to reflect different basic needs or motives. Particularly important needs in this regard are needs for agency and communion (cf. Bakan 1966) – or in the words of McAdams (1993), 'power' and 'love'. Similarly, Hermans (1999) argued that self-narration is motivated, on one hand, by self-enhancement (S-motives) and, on the other hand, by contact and union with somebody else (O-motives). Thorne (2004) noted that Herman's concept of the dialogical self is more 'decentralised' than McAdams's life story approach, but both emphasise inner dialogue and self-reflection, rather than performative and situational elements of identity work emphasised in more socially situated perspectives on narrative identity.

Several studies have explored the narrative structures and resources that athletes' self-narratives rely on, as well as the psychological implications that particular narrative identities have for individual athletes (for a review, see Ronkainen, Kavoura, and Ryba 2016). The study by Douglas and Carless (2006) on professional women golfers provided a foundation for much of narrative research that followed in sport psychology by outlining three narrative types that elite athletes'

stories relied on. Briefly, (1) the performance narrative was the dominant narrative type where achievement and winning are centralised over any other concerns and dimensions of life; (2) the discovery narrative was a storyline where athletes experienced their sporting life as one affording possibilities for rich life experiences and exploration of the world and self; and (3) the relational narrative was a storyline where priority is given to connectedness with other(s) and not on the individualistic pursuit of achievement. Later work has added evidence on the dominance of the performance narrative plot in the elite sport culture and how athletes may limit other dimensions of their life and self to 'live up' to the narrative of what it means to be an athlete (Carless and Douglas 2013; Cavallerio, Wadey, and Wagstaff 2017).

Although the life story has featured in a prominent role in the narrative study of identity, many scholars have also noted that a life story represents a somewhat artificial accomplishment that we are rarely required to construct in our daily lives. In the words of Gergen and Gergen (1988, 33; italics in the original): 'Even though it is common practice to speak as if each individual possesses "a life story," in fact there would appear to be no *one* story to tell.' Following developments in narrative inquiry more broadly, sport studies scholars have increasingly placed analytic focus on situated, performative and sometimes contradictory identity constructions (e.g., Kilger 2017; Ronkainen and Ryba 2020). As Kilger (2017) noted, a criticism of research that focuses on identifying culturally shared narratives (such as performance or discovery) has been that these narratives have been sometimes approached as being monolithic and static, while even these fairly established narratives have their contradictions and contextually specific manifestations. Recent scholarship has also highlighted the importance of athletes' various other identities in shaping their athletic identities and sporting experiences (Blodgett et al. 2017; Kavoura et al. 2018). The diversity of cultural identities in sport has been especially emphasised in cultural sport psychology (CSP) scholarship (Blodgett et al. 2017; Schinke et al. 2019).

As Schinke et al. (2019) noted, a key term for conceptualising identity multiplicity is intersectionality. Shields (2008, 301–302) has defined intersectionality as 'the mutually constitutive relations among social identities', by which she means that 'one category of identity, such as gender, takes its meaning as a category in relation to another category'. In other words, there is no 'athlete' in abstract, but an athlete is always a Black female athlete, a heterosexual male athlete, a working-class Muslim athlete, a disabled athlete, etc. Social identities do not exist in isolation but only as parts of complex and embodied identity constellations. The number of intersecting identities in every person's life is too vast to be accounted for in a single study. Therefore, a scholar needs to make choices about the identity categories taken into account. In this study, we are focusing on how an athletic identity intersects with (male) gender and (Christian) religiosity.

Researchers have demonstrated diverse ways that religious and athletic identities intersect. Studies exemplify how religion shapes meaning that athletes bring to their sporting experiences (e.g., Blodgett et al. 2017) and that some athletes conceive their athletic talent as a gift from God (Mosley et al. 2015), but also that some athletes at least partly segregate these two identities and are resistant to 'mixing God with sport' (Ronkainen, Ryba, and Tod 2020; Stevenson 1991). Stevenson's (1991) study into Christian athletes illustrated three different ways that athletic and Christian identities interacted: (1) in the segregated type, sport and religion were kept separate; (2) in the selective type, religion intersected with sport in some occasions; and (3) in the committed type, Christian identity and values were at the forefront in all sporting situations. However, the 'committed' athletes often experienced dissonant goals and values to the extent that some decided to withdraw from sport. In reflecting on these findings, Stevenson (1991) suggested that 'it certainly does not appear to be a simple task for these elite athletes to be true to their faith and true to their sport' (376).

## *Christian mixed martial arts*

MMA – or what is sometimes known as cage fighting – is a combat sport that combines striking, grappling, and ground fighting. In the 2000s, MMA has become increasingly popular, especially through the success of the key promotion UFC.

Unlike aikido, shorinji kempo, and other martial arts that have a historical association with East Asian spiritual traditions such as Shinto and Zen Buddhism, MMA is not linked with any established belief system. Based on ethnographic fieldwork at several MMA gyms in the US, Green (2016, 435) described their general spiritual ethos as a ‘potpourri of traditional Eastern teachings, Western science, pop-philosophy, and pop-psychology coalescing around the individualist focus on “living in the moment”’. However, there are also examples of MMA clubs with a more distinct religious profile. According to some estimates, approximately 700 evangelical churches in the United States have in some way included MMA into their activities (Greve 2014). One example is the Xtreme Ministries that used to operate in Clarksville, Tennessee, under the motto: ‘Where Feet, Fist, and Faith Collide’. The church also used to organise Vacation Fight Schools in which children could learn Christian morals and fighting arts.

The few scholars who have touched upon Christian MMA (CMMA) disagree among themselves on how best to conceptualise the phenomenon (Greve 2014). Some have perceived it as a theologically thin and opportunistic attempt of churches to court a population group that is otherwise hard to reach – that is, young men. Others, in turn, have conceived of CMMA as a theologically consistent heir to the Muscular Christianity movement.

Even a cursory look at how CMMA is discussed in the media reveals the deep disagreement surrounding it (see, for example, Watson 2016). For every commentator who finds CMMA theologically justified, there is another one who finds it in complete contradiction to the most basic of Christian doctrines. Watson and Brock (2015) have outlined various Christian positions to MMA and assessed their theological justification. Theological arguments against MMA include a view of the body as a gift from God and therefore as warranting special respect and protection. According to Christian theologians such as Augustine, violence is justified only if it is deployed by a rightful ruler in protection of the weak. However, Christian practitioners of MMA have defended themselves by claiming MMA to be their God-given vocation, an excellent context for spreading the gospel, or a way of cultivating virtues and positive character traits.

Borer and Schafer (2011) analysed the accounts of Christian MMA fans and argued that the disagreement is not only between individuals but also within them. The fans experience and need to negotiate a mismatch between the moral orders of ‘[t]urning the other cheek’ and ‘knock him out’ (166). Being both a professing Christian and an MMA enthusiast involves cognitive and emotional dissonance that makes CMMA a rich context for studying the processes that people engage in to bring their various social identities into a unity.<sup>1</sup>

## **The present study**

### *Theoretical perspective*

In this study, we apply DST to examine the identity construction of a Christian MMA professional. Despite being a less often used approach in the psychological study of sport, DST has become well established in the psychology of religion (see, for example, Belzen 2010b; Buitelaar and Zock 2013). Fundamental to DST is the view that, instead of a stable intrapsychic structure, the self is a dynamic process. Following William James, Hermans (2001) postulated an acting and experiencing subject that he refers to as ‘I’. The I does not have a fixed point of view from which it regards the world, but it may switch between several alternative perspectives, or ‘I-positions’.

Hermans’s notion of I-positions has certain similarities to imagoes in McAdams’s (1993) theory. Like I-positions, imagoes typically personify the two key human motivations: power and love (McAdams 1993, 133), or in Hermans’s (1999) terminology, S- and O-motives. However, there are

also noteworthy differences. According to McAdams, imagoes are characters in a personal myth that a person creates in order to infuse her or his life with meaning. An acting subject thus predates and is separate from a personal myth and its imagoes (p. 45). As a result, imagoes lack the agency that I-positions possess. We will discuss I-positions and other concepts central to DST in more detail in the following sections as they become relevant in our analysis.

Den Elzen (2017) applied DST to study the multiplicity of subject positions in memoirs of young widows. According to her, autobiographical writing is, in essence, a 'performative act of narrative identity construction' (43), the function of which is to textually negotiate the potentially conflicting voices in the self and, ideally, to find an agreement among them. In a somewhat similar vein to Den Elzen (2017), we apply DST to make sense of identity multiplicity as it appears in an autobiography of a Christian MMA professional (on the use of autobiography in the psychology of religion, see Belzen 2010a, 2010b).

### **Autobiography as data**

Qualitative researchers in sport and exercise are increasingly considering autobiographies as useful data for understanding sporting experiences and identities (Butryn and Masucci 2003; McGannon and McMahon 2019; McGannon and Smith 2020; Newman, Howells, and Fletcher 2016; Sparkes and Stewart 2016). However, as Sparkes and Stewart (2016) noted, sporting autobiographies have often been dismissed for being predictable, formulaic, driven by economic interest, and predominantly communicating gossip rather than insights about human experience. Furthermore, the issue of the ghostwriter's input in shaping a 'selling' story has been considered a major threat to the authenticity of the account. This said, the defenders of autobiography as a valuable source of data have argued that all types of qualitative data have a performative element and also the qualitative researcher is a ghostwriter who selectively tells a particular story to a particular audience in their research report (Sparkes and Stewart 2016). Therefore, when qualitative researchers approach autobiographies in the same way as they approach other forms of qualitative data – that is, as partial, selectively crafted stories that are intended to particular audiences and to achieve certain outcomes – they can be a rich resource for expanding our understandings of how athletic careers and identities are constructed and negotiated over time.

McGannon and Smith (2020) suggested that sport psychology researchers working with autobiographies and narrative inquiry could usefully expand the knowledge base by exploring a broader range of sporting contexts, identity intersections, and geographic locations. While our study focuses on a similar demographic as many previous studies using autobiography (a white, able-bodied, and heterosexual male athlete), we believe that our focus on Christian MMA and the use of DST as a theoretical lens can expand understandings of identity in sport both empirically and theoretically.

The person whose life story we are going to investigate is Ron 'H2O' Waterman, a professional MMA fighter and show wrestler turned evangelist. Waterman has fought in several MMA promotions and holds a record of 16 wins, 6 losses, and 2 draws. Besides his career as a fighter, he has also travelled the world with Team Impact – a group of Christian bodybuilders who arrange revival meetings that combine evangelising with feats of strength.

As material we are using Ron Waterman's autobiographical account *Tapped Out By Jesus: From the Cage to the Cross* that was published by Bridge Logos in 2011. The book is relatively short, a little over one hundred pages, and it concentrates mostly on Waterman's years as a professional fighter (ca. 1999–2008). However, for reasons discussed below, it is often difficult to pinpoint exactly when the events narrated in the book have occurred.

The first striking feature of the book is its structure – or rather, the lack of it. Untypically for a biographical account, the book does not follow a chronological order but, rather, a train of free association. The chapters are short, usually only a few pages and they are connected by some common element rather than chronological succession. For example, in chapter 23 Waterman recounts a fight in which he came close to injuring his opponent which brings him to chapter 24

in which he tells about the training sessions early in his career and how he then ended up injuring his brother while practising with him. This in turn leads him to chapter 25 in which he recalls his other early training partners.

Another striking aspect of Waterman's narrative is the marked changes in style and tone. It almost feels like Waterman's life story was told by several completely different people. This, in turn, links the narrative to the DST, the idea of which is that the narrative identity, or self, is like a dialogue between voices, all of whom recount the same set of events from their own perspective. This impression is strengthened by the fragmented structure of the book. Time and again, Waterman goes back to events that he has already narrated and narrates them again – but in a completely different style and tone!

Prior to publication, an autobiography goes through an editorial process that typically seeks to integrate the variety of life events into one coherent narrative. However, Waterman's account is in this respect very exceptional. Unlike in published autobiographies typically, the copy editor has not harmonised dissonant voices, but Waterman's various I-positions are all given space to express themselves. *Tapped Out By Jesus* does not present one coherent, temporally sequenced story of Waterman's life but I-positions take turns in telling different stories of the same events. The I-positions engage in a dialogue not unlike the identity negotiations that occur in everyday interpersonal encounters (on the blurred boundary between interpersonal and intrapersonal dialogue, see Hermans 2001, 255).

### Data analysis

After acknowledging the presence of several different voices, we started to analyse them more systematically by applying the negotiational self method (NSM) as outlined by Nir (2011). NSM has been developed on the basis of DST to provide tools for identifying and analysing conflicts that may exist between I-positions. As our primary interest is on the (potential) identity conflicts that are involved in being a Christian MMA fighter, NSM was for us a natural choice as a method. However, because Nir's (2011) own use of the method involves interview or questionnaire data as well as an additional goal of resolving the identified conflicts, we made certain adjustments to make the method better suited for studying a written autobiography.

NSM, as delineated by Nir (2011), involves several stages, the first of which is identifying a conflict and describing its 'for' and 'against' poles. Second, the poles are linked to I-positions. In our study, we conducted the first two stages as follows: We started the analysis with the first author reading Waterman's book and looking for events that were narrated more than once and from more than one perspective. After locating such events, the first author compared the different perspectives on the same event in terms of narrative elements, such as tone or theme. Gradually, through the examination of several events and their different narrations, two main voices with markedly different characteristics emerged.

The third stage in Nir's (2011) NSM is the identification of needs and interests that underlie the various I-positions. In our study, and on the basis of the previous two stages, the first author wrote short descriptions of the two voices and the characteristics that distinguished them from each other. Then he read and reread the whole book, comparing each passage to the descriptions of the two main voices. The majority of the passages fitted one of the descriptions but may have introduced new details to it. When encountering a passage that was not congruent with either of the descriptions, the first author sought to adjust the descriptions to account for that as well as all the other passages. In this way, the descriptions became ever more elaborate and sophisticated.

Nir's (2011) NSM is originally designed for practitioners, and its aim is not only to identify inner conflicts, but also to help in resolving them. Accordingly, the fourth and final stage in NSM is the building of integrative solutions that address the needs of the different I-positions. Of course, in our study, we did not aim at offering solutions to Waterman's conflicts, but at being attentive to solutions that present themselves in the data. In the previous three stages, we outlined two

conflicting I-positions and generated descriptions of their central characteristics. However, despite adjustments, certain passages appeared to not fit either of the descriptions. These passages were compared with each other, and because they appeared to bear narrative similarities, they were grouped together and seen to represent a third distinct voice.

Despite the first author bearing the primary responsibility of the data analysis, the authors discussed the interpretations with each other throughout the analysis process. In the following sections, we outline the key I-positions that make up Waterman's dialogical self.

## Results

### *'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias'*

In the case of Waterman, we discerned two main I-positions which we have dubbed 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias'. To 'Ron the Fighter' belongs the voice that takes the primary responsibility for narrating the parts that deal with Waterman's fighting career. It is the traditionally masculine voice that emphasises competitiveness, autonomy, and self-reliance. 'Ron the Fighter' is strong and competent, the iconic alpha-male who is able to bend the other men to his will:

I was confident the fight would not go three rounds, but if it did, I would be ready. As the Bear entered the cage, I stared into his eyes with confidence and determination. He tried to glare back but quickly turned his eyes away, which only increased my assurance. (Waterman 2012, 2)

'Ron the Fighter' is a simple and straightforward guy who does not dwell on the past or engage in introspection. Instead, he cherishes the moment and the adventures that life brings. In comparison to the other I-positions, what is typical of 'Ron the Fighter' is the meticulous description of the external events of the situation at hand:

We walked into a small locker room that smelled of baby oil, cooking spray, and smelly knee pads. I was a little surprised to see 12 wrestlers in this tiny room, changing right alongside a handful of women. (Waterman 2012, 19.)

The main thread in the identity narrative of 'Ron the Fighter' is perhaps best captured by his own self-description (Waterman 2012, 29): 'I was intense, physical, and powerful, but almost always a nice guy.' Fittingly, his 'life verse' from the Bible is Joshua 1:9 (Waterman 2012, 12): 'Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.'

Contrast this self-confident openness to the present moment with the voice that narrates especially Waterman's life back home. Waterman's other main I-position, 'Ron the Pater Familias', is anxious, even brooding. Instead of what happens in the present moment, he ruminates on the past and worries about the future:

My past failures have created a constant burden on me that I pray will someday be forgotten completely. I am overly-paranoid now when I'm in a relationship and have insecurity which I know is not of the Lord but of my flesh. I believe it stems from my past, and even though it's not a part of my life now I still constantly have to get insecure thoughts and feelings out of my mind. (Waterman 2012, 109.)

The difference between the I-positions stands out most clearly when analysing chapters in Waterman's life that are narrated by both 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias'. As mentioned previously, *Tapped Out By Jesus* contains several episodes that are narrated more than once but with a different style and focus. For example, Waterman's first year in WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) is initially described as a childhood dream come true (Waterman 2012, 16 & 18). Typical of 'Ron the Fighter', the focus is on the outside; the narrator shares his diet and exercise routine, praises his training partners, and marvels at everything new. The overall tone is positive, and the strains and frustrations are redefined as 'learning experiences' (Waterman 2012, 21).



Shortly thereafter, however, there is an abrupt change in narrative style, as 'Ron the Pater Familias' takes the floor to share his perspective into the first year in WWE. The tone becomes remarkably sombre, and the focus turns inward and from the present moment to the past and the future. The childhood dream turns bad and close friends suddenly appear distant:

Most OVW [Ohio Valley Wrestling School] wrestlers, both on contract and locals, were good people, but lost and living for the world. I can't say one bad thing about them because as much as I wanted to make a statement for the Lord and live as He would have me live in that dark environment, I found myself no different than the rest. [- -] My big chance of chasing a childhood dream was not as exciting as I expected and certainly wasn't worth the price—my soul. [- -] I had given up a teaching and coaching position to chase this dream. I missed a year of my boys' lives, school functions, and sporting events. I had no idea what the Lord was doing or planning for my life. I was not at peace and always wondered if the day would come when I would be called up to the traveling roster and be able to move back home and live the life I had dreamed about for so long. (Waterman 2012, 30–31.)

The different perspectives that the two I-positions provide to the same set of events exemplify well the key dynamics of a dialogical self. According to Hermans (2001), I-positions 'function like interacting characters in a story, involved in a process of question and answer, agreement and disagreement. Each of them has a story to tell about his or her own experiences from his or her own stance.' The 'complex, narratively structured self' thus created is markedly different to the centred and unified 'Enlightenment subject' (cf. Hall 1992). None of the I-positions is Waterman's 'true self' that contains his very essence. Neither 'Ron the Fighter' nor 'Ron the Pater Familias' represents the 'true' Ron Waterman but, even in an ontological sense, Ron Waterman *is* the dialogue.

### *External I-positions: 'great guys' and 'most men'*

Drawing on William James, Hermans (2001) argued that the boundaries between self and nonself are gradual instead of clear-cut. More specifically, the dialogical self includes voices that are perceived as belonging to other people. As Hermans (2001) noted, the 'external positions refer to people and objects in the environment that are, in the eyes of the individual, relevant from the perspective of one or more of the internal positions' (252). In Waterman's case, the key external I-positions are God, family, and fellow athletes. Of these, the fellow athletes are clearly the most differentiated as individuals. Waterman's various training partners, team mates, and opponents are described individually and in great detail. Fellow athletes feature mostly in relation to the internal I-position of 'Ron the Fighter', and this also colours the way in which they are depicted. The athletes in *Tapped Out By Jesus* are above all 'great guys' (Waterman 2012, 17 & 19 & 31 & 35 & 104 & 116). Like 'Ron the Fighter' himself, they are straightforward, vigorous, and traditionally masculine, almost like characters in a boys' adventure novel:

Dave Batista (Leviathan) a 6' 4" former bodybuilder with veins bigger than some of the guys' arms, was among the new talent. John Cena was also there, one of the most gifted talkers I have ever heard and another physically-gifted guy. There was Shelton Benjamin, a former Minnesota wrestler who ate Pringles potato chips, drank pop, and was one of the most gifted natural athletes I've seen. (Waterman 2012, 20.)

The dynamics involving Waterman's external I-positions bear a certain resemblance to what feminist scholars have referred to as homosociality. Homosociality – that is, 'the seeking, enjoyment, and/or preference for the company of the same sex' (Lipman-Bluman 1976, 16) – is often perceived as a driving force behind the maintenance of hegemonic masculinity and male dominance (see, for example, Bird 1996; Flood 2008). However, homosociality can only achieve this if it is guarded from 'gliding over into homosexual desire' (Hammarén and Johansson 2014, 2). Accordingly, homosociality is typically accompanied by a strong rejection of homosexuality. Instead of intimacy, homosocial bonds are often based on competition and the creation of male hierarchies (Hammarén and Johansson 2014).

The interaction among the various male positions in Waterman's position repertoire is characterised by competition for dominance and respect for a worthy opponent. Waterman looks in

admiration at the muscular male bodies, but frames his attraction as being about identification instead of sexual desire:

Big muscles have always intrigued me. Like many males my age, Arnold Schwarzenegger was one of the first bodybuilders I remember. Ever since the first time I saw a picture of him in Muscle and Fitness magazine I told myself that's how I want to look. I can't forget the picture of his bicep and then looking down at mine and wondering if I could ever look like that. (Waterman 2012, 103.)

The way Waterman's fellow athletes are portrayed is in marked contrast with the depiction of his family. Unlike training partners and opponents, Waterman's family members are described only vaguely and in very little detail. For example, Waterman (2012, 112 & 114) mentions that his wife is working as a sales director and 'putting in long hours to get her career off the ground', but otherwise gives no hint of how his wife is as a person.

As already hinted at, 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias' relate quite differently to the family and fellow athletes. For 'Ron the Fighter', family is at best a source of support and at worst a hindrance to the accomplishment of one's dreams. Early in the book, Waterman recounts a chance encounter with a man who is a friend to Shane McMahon, the son of World Wrestling Entertainment CEO Vince McMahon. Waterman comments on the encounter as follows:

WWE had always been a childhood dream of mine, but one I never really had the opportunity to pursue. I was married my senior year of college, had two incredible boys soon after, and became a teacher and coach. So how was I ever to pursue a childhood dream of being a professional wrestler? (Waterman 2012, 16)

As an answer to his own question, Waterman leaves his family in Colorado and moves for a year to a WWE training camp in Kentucky in hopes of achieving 'money, fame, and a lifestyle that most only dream about – a WWE superstar' (Waterman 2012, 115). 'Ron the Pater Familias', in contrast, takes his family responsibilities quite differently. He is committed to a gendered ideal of a man as the natural breadwinner, whose duty it is to secure 'a comfortable life for himself and his family' (Waterman 2012, 13). He does not worry about achieving fame and stardom, but about the well-being of his family. In the following excerpt, 'Ron the Pater Familias' seems to be responding to a collective position of 'most men':

Like most men, I really worry about being in good financial shape and providing for my family. It's always been a stress for me, especially when times are tough. Most families do the normal cutbacks with spending on entertainment and eating out. I've gone as far as selling cars and downsizing everything possible. (Waterman 2012, 140.)

In contrast to the traditionally masculine 'Ron the Fighter', 'Ron the Pater Familias' is intriguingly androgynous. Whereas 'Ron the Fighter' enjoys the competition among men and excels in it, 'Ron the Pater Familias' falls short of his image of 'most men'. Instead of challenge, he longs for security and calm. As we will see next, he finds them in God.

### ***God the cornerman and source of comfort***

Besides the family and fellow athletes, God is an important participant in Waterman's self-dialogue. However, Waterman's two key internal I-positions relate quite differently to God. For 'Ron the Fighter', God is sort of a heavenly cornerman, or perhaps a talent agent. God's primary function is to provide opportunities and open doors. He works in the background, supporting 'Ron the Fighter' in achieving his dreams and ambitions:

My corner men were waiting to give me one more pep talk and hug of encouragement. At the end of the ramp I tapped my cup twice, showed my mouth guard, and had some cold petroleum jelly rubbed over my eyes and mouth. I paused before entering the cage and prayed one last time for Jesus to enter with me, comfort me, and allow me to compete at my best. (Waterman 2012, 1–2.)

'Ron the Pater Familias', in contrast, gives God a much more central role. Instead of opening doors, 'Ron the Pater Familias's God closes them. God's function here is not to help Waterman in achieving his worldly goals but to divert him from them. In the drama of 'Ron the Pater Familias's life, God is not a talent agent but the director.

I try to remember every morning when I pick up my cross that it's not me but the sin in my flesh that allows the world into my life at times. I need to always be on guard and remember the Lord's hand is always on me to divert me from the path my body and mind often are drawn to. (Waterman 2012, 107.)

A recurring word in Waterman's narrative is 'control'. However, the I-positions attribute control quite differently. 'Ron the Fighter' refers to himself as the source of control, such as when writing that he 'took down [his UFC opponent Satoshi] Honma and controlled all three rounds' (Waterman 2012, 136; see also pp. 87 & 125 & 126). In contrast, 'Ron the Pater Familias' emphatically and explicitly denies humans having any control over anything and attributes all control to God (Waterman 2012, 12 & 70 & 71). This is expressed most eloquently in the following excerpt:

Jesus has His hands all around me and my life. I understand that He is in control and has the perfect plan for my life and that not a single thing happens without His prior knowledge of it. (Waterman 2012, 157.)

God determines the whole course of 'Ron the Pater Familias's life. However, God does not use his power like a despot but like a father. God has Waterman's best interests in mind also when keeping him from achieving his goals. Accordingly, God serves as a key source of solace and consolation for 'Ron the Pater Familias'. As discussed above, 'Ron the Pater Familias' narrates his life in a strikingly negative tone, even to the extent of thinking of himself as a 'terrible person' (Waterman 2012, 107).

Whereas 'Ron the Fighter' is self-sufficient, 'Ron the Pater Familias' is lonely. He longs for connection but appears to find it hard to reach for other people. On page 118, he actually confesses not being 'a great communicator when it comes to talking about feelings'. When he hits rock bottom, he finds catharsis in church:

Every word [the pastor] spoke was piercing through my skin and grabbing hold of my heart. I didn't know how to act or feel, but I found myself fighting back emotions I hadn't felt before. I looked around to see if anyone was looking at me because tears were building up in my eyes and I had to get them out before someone did see them. (Waterman 2012, 113).

Despite not completely understanding what happens, Waterman (2012, 113) knows he needs 'more of it'. Finding it hard to open up to other people, Waterman brings his worries to God and turns to Him for aid and comfort.

The idea of God being in control provides Waterman with rhetorical means to justify his violent choice of career. In the early pages of his book, Waterman (2012, 11) gives two different arguments for being a Christian in MMA. First, to him, MMA is 'a sport, a competition, no different than football, hockey, boxing, or any other sporting event'. Second, his fellow fighters 'need to know Jesus and need all the Christian examples they can get' (cf. Borer and Schafer 2011, 177). According to Waterman (2012, 11), God is using him as such an example. Therefore, quitting MMA because of faith would be saying no to God.<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1.** Differences between the two main I-positions.

| 'Ron the Fighter'   | 'Ron the Pater Familias'  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•ambition, desire to win</li> <li>•autonomy, adventures</li> <li>•focus in the present and the events of the outward world</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•resignation, longing for peace of mind</li> <li>•responsibility, worries</li> <li>•focus in the past and in the future as well as one's own internal world</li> </ul>             |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•a clear and unambiguous view of one's role and relationships</li> <li>•'Cornerman God' helps to overcome obstacles but stays on the background</li> <li>•key virtues: stamina, respect</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•role ambiguity, complicated relationships</li> <li>•God and religion provide meaning in challenging times</li> <li>•key virtues: submission, contentment, gratefulness</li> </ul> |

### Searching for a third position

In the Table 1 below, we have summarised the key differences between the two main I-positions from which Waterman's autobiography is narrated.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the two voices, or I-positions, do not fit seamlessly together but are in some tension. In fact, Waterman's account portrays the tension between the I-positions as something of a root cause for his restlessness and unease. He strives for possessions, fame, and success, but ultimately, they leave him empty. A fighting career leaves the communion needs of 'Ron the Pater Familias' unfulfilled. At the same time, a domestic life makes 'Ron the Fighter' long for agency. A compromise is desperately needed. In the following excerpt, Waterman appears to be acknowledging the divide that exists between his I-positions:

Sometimes I feel like I have my foot in many doors but am not really committing myself and giving my all to any of them. Being a hard worker is not the point, it's that with so many different things going on I'm not focused enough on making one really work. (Waterman 2012, 139.)

The key factor that resolves the narrative tension between conflicting I-positions is joining Team Impact – a group of Christian bodybuilders that travel the world evangelising and bending steel. This combination of adventure, physical challenge, and bringing people to God appears to bring a balance between competing needs and helps the various I-positions to find a common tone. The membership in Team Impact creates what Hermans and Gieser (2011) called 'a third position' – a position that reconciles two conflicting positions and thus alleviates the tension between them. The cultural narrative that surrounds Team Impact seems to provide Waterman with resources to craft more harmonious personal stories that 'work' for him. In Team Impact, Waterman is moreover able to satisfy both the S-motives of 'Ron the Fighter' and the O-motives of 'Ron the Pater Familias'. In Waterman's (2012, 117) own words, Team Impact is 'the medicine [he] needed for recovery'. He has a chance to publicly prove his physical superiority, but at the same time he attains a sense of belonging that he has not experienced before:

I felt very comfortable around the guys, especially after traveling with the WWE. This was a bright light after coming out of a dark tunnel. The pride and egos I was used to dealing with, looking the other way, tuning out poor language, and trying to look past poor choices was not a part of Team Impact. This was different, much different. This was so real, so refreshing, and so different from anything I'd experienced in my entire life. [- -] This was what I was called to do, this was where I belonged, this is where God wanted me. A part of my life started to come into perspective. I was given a glimpse of stardom and limelight, but just to use as a stepping-stone to win souls to Jesus. I was still on stage and this time able to be myself, showcase my God-given gifts and use them to glorify Christ. (Waterman 2012, 44 & 48.)

Despite Team Impact alleviating the tension between 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias', the narrative does not close with a happily-ever-after. A resolution provided by a third position is always partial and transitory, and the dialogue among the various I-positions does not end in a serene stillness in which everything that needs to be said has been said.

In the case of *Tapped Out By Jesus*, external circumstances introduce a new disequilibrium into the narrative. Waterman himself wants to become a full-time evangelist with Team Impact, but his wife is not 'sold on' the idea (Waterman 2012, 54).

### A higher purpose or defence mechanism?

Waterman's memoir was originally published in 2011, three years after his last professional fight. In fact, the memoir seems at least in part to be motivated by a need to come to terms with the end of a career that perhaps was not as satisfying as the author had hoped:

I have always felt like I've been on the edge but never over the top. To me maybe it's failure or never reaching my potential, never going the extra mile to get to the top. I blame myself for not achieving it. I've seen my friends get there or seem to get there—breaking through to TV stardom, or reaching financial security, or getting to a place of complete comfort. (Waterman 2012, 158.)

The key element of autobiographical writing is the interplay between the lived experience of the past and the current vantage point from which to reflect and reinterpret it; an autobiography holds the potential to go back to the past and find some new wisdom in it (Den Elzen 2017). A particular narrative resource that Waterman uses to make sense of his past is the idea of divine providence. Time and again Waterman expresses a conviction that ‘God is in control’ (70 & 71 & 157) and has a plan for his life, even though he does not always understand the plan:

As I write this book and think about all the different chapters of my life, it amazes me how much God is in control. He decides to change the chapter of life I am in and send me in a direction I had no idea I would ever go. Oftentimes I feel like I have my life totally in control and set on a good path and it’s suddenly changed and I’m on a path I don’t understand or like. Other times in my life I am distraught and confused and not content with where my life is headed and the Lord suddenly makes things clear to me, straightens that path and makes my way perfect. (Waterman 2012, 12.)

In this context, the name of the book *Tapped Out By Jesus: From the Cage to the Cross* is quite noteworthy. Tapping out indicates a decision to give up and quit the fight. The title and subtitle hint at the undercurrent of loss and disappointment that runs through much of the book. Waterman’s career did not lead to fame and fortune that he had hoped for, but he derives consolation from thinking that it has all been God’s plan. ‘Defence mechanism’ is a word that even Waterman (2012, 115) himself uses for his religiosity.

## Discussion

Our goal in this paper has been to investigate the potential tensions between the identities of a devout Christian and a mixed martial arts professional, and how such tensions are negotiated in narrative identity work. Our work extends the literature on Christianity and sport (e.g., Mosley et al. 2015; Ronkainen, Ryba, and Tod 2020; Stevenson 1991), showing that religion and sport exist in relative harmony in some passages of the protagonist’s life, whereas in other passages tensions arise. In Waterman’s case, however, the conflict is not so much between Christianity and mixed martial arts per se, but between the motives that they serve. MMA is for Waterman about S-motives – strength, pride, self-esteem, and self-confidence (Hermans 1999) – whereas religion is mostly in service of his O-motives (caring, intimacy, love, and tenderness; Hermans 1999). The different motives are represented by different I-positions in Waterman’s position repertoire. ‘Ron the Fighter’ embodies the traditionally masculine virtues of autonomy, self-reliance, stamina, and physical prowess, and God features as a sort of heavenly cornerman. In complete contrast to this, ‘Ron the Pater Familias’ emphasises his dependence and need for comfort that finds expression in total submission to God. In McAdams’s (1993, 124) typology of imagoes, ‘Ron the Fighter’ resembles the Warrior, while ‘Ron the Pater Familias’ is a closer match with the Caretaker.

Not surprisingly, the two I-positions are in marked conflict with each other. The conflict is resolved, at least temporarily, by an introduction of a third position that addresses the needs of both ‘Ron the Fighter’ and ‘Ron the Pater Familias’. By joining a travelling band of Christian body-builders, Waterman is able to bring his competing voices into at least a relative unison. While the autobiography ends with some sense of resolution, it provided unique material for analysing the protagonist’s identity negotiation compared to the typically neat and heavily edited sporting celebrities’ autobiographies (Sparkes and Stewart 2016). In contrast to many studies using sporting autobiographies as data, our analysis focused on a protagonist who never really achieved his sporting dreams, thus shedding light on how meaning was found from a somewhat unsuccessful athletic career. Studying the identity intersections within Christian MMA furthermore responded to recent calls for additional studies at the intersection of autobiography and narrative inquiry to understand identity issues in sport (sub)culture contexts (McGannon and Smith 2020).

While our protagonist Ron Waterman might have a particularly ‘messy’ self-narrative due to incompatible values and cultural ideals embedded in Christian religion and MMA, scholars have

emphasised that the dialogue between different I-positions is a common feature of any self-narrative (Hermans 1999). It is therefore intriguing to ask how many athletes simply perform a monological performance narrative or 'play the part of the athlete' (Carless and Douglas 2013, 708) and to explore the processes of how, in some cases, the internal dialogue and other I-positions fade away or become suppressed. Using DST as an analytic lens might be a particularly fruitful perspective when addressing these questions.

Our analysis also exemplifies how DST can be used to conceptualise intersectionality. When intersectionality has been addressed in a sport psychology context, often the assumption is that athletes have to negotiate between the different – albeit layered – identity categories of gender, age, religion, race, and so forth that could be in conflict with each other. However, as our reading of Waterman's account demonstrates, neither the religious nor the athlete identity is a distinct, well-defined entity in itself, but they intersect both with each other and with other social identities, most notably gender. Put differently, Waterman does not negotiate between faith and MMA or between the religious and athletic identity, but between his different I-positions. These I-positions relate differently to religion and sports, but also to other things, such as masculinity. A dialogical self is thus complex on multiple levels: First, instead of being unified and centralised, the self consists of dialogue among diverse (and often dissonant) voices. Second, each voice is attached to an I-position, and each I-position is a composite of intersecting identities.

From a practical perspective, our research reinforces the call for applied sport psychology practitioners to develop cultural competencies to address the potential role of religion in athletes' lives (Egli, Fisher, and Gentner 2014) and extends understandings of the potential dilemmas athletes face when negotiating ways of relating to religion and sport (Stevenson 1991). DST can be a valuable perspective for counselling and psychotherapy also with athletes, and its application has been extensively discussed elsewhere (e.g., Konopka, Hermans, and Gonçalves 2018; Neimeyer 2006). For example, Neimeyer (2006) outlined ways of enacting and reflecting upon problem patterns in the dialogic processes, using both writing tasks and oral narrative methods. Konopka, Hermans, and Gonçalves (2018) noted that one important therapeutic task from a DST perspective is forming 'meta-positions' that can recognise and articulate conflicts between I-positions and organise the interactions. In the case of Ron Waterman, the act of writing seems to have worked as a platform of articulating the conflicts between his I-positions and finding some degree of coherence from a third position. Using writing as a therapeutic practice is certainly not new (e.g., Connolly Baker and Mazza 2004) and is one potentially valuable tool for sport psychology practitioners working with athletes who are struggling to reconcile the different aspects of who they are.

### **Strengths and limitations**

Similar to other scholars who have used athletes' autobiographies as research data, we acknowledge that these accounts are typically produced with a ghostwriter, to a particular audience, and intending to produce a 'selling' storyline (e.g., Newman, Howells, and Fletcher 2016; Sparkes and Stewart 2016). Similar to other forms of qualitative data, they need to be critically scrutinised for the performative element of the storytelling and what is being achieved by portraying a particular version of the protagonist's life and identity. While we acknowledge that Waterman's account is a situated performance like any other type of qualitative data (Sparkes and Stewart 2016), we felt that it provided an exceptionally valuable resource for study in that the editing of the book had clearly been light. It seemed that the editor had corrected spelling mistakes, but left intact other narrative peculiarities that would typically be smoothed out during the editing process. One such peculiarity is the very thing that interested us; considering how strong the cultural pressure for narrative coherence is (Linde 1993), it is surprising how the conflicting voices in Waterman's account are allowed to stand out.

## Concluding remarks

The present study used DST to extend understandings of intersecting identities in sport with a particular focus on how a Christian MMA fighter engaged in narrative identity work to resolve the potential tensions between his religion and sport. Using DST as an analytic framework helped in discerning two I-positions, 'Ron the Fighter' and 'Ron the Pater Familias', which related differently to religion, sport and masculinity. Our analysis shows that some degree of narrative coherence is needed for psychological well-being, which can be a challenging task for Christian MMA fighters. We hope that future studies will continue exploring the value of DST for understanding intersectionality and identity negotiations in sport. In particular, it can provide a promising framework for understanding how healthy and problematic stories develop over time to inform applied work to support healthy identity development in sport.

## Notes

1. Of course, there are also biblical and other Christian traditions that justify or even encourage physical violence, at least in some restricted context (e.g., Exodus 21:23–25, Leviticus 24: 19–21). However, the CMMA scene is predominantly evangelical, and as such, very centred on the person of Jesus Christ (Greve 2014). In line with the popular slogan WWJD (What Would Jesus Do?), many Christian MMA fighters emphasise Jesus as a role model that they seek to emulate (see, for example, Waterman 2012, 53). As a result, they need to somehow come to terms with sayings of Jesus such as Matthew 5:39 that call for offering the other cheek to the aggressor.
2. For a theological critique of both arguments, see Watson and Brock (2015).

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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