

Biographical trajectories and self-constructions of competitive athletes in the GDR. An empirical analysis using (reflexive) grounded theory methodology

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Summary of the thesis:

This doctoral thesis was produced as part of the research project ‘Long-term health consequences of SED injustices’, which examined the biographical and health-related consequences – particularly psychological ones – experienced by doped GDR elite athletes, as well as the interplay between training conditions in the GDR and the family home. Against the backdrop of a lack of qualitative research and a discourse on coming to terms with the GDR that has been criticised as one-sided, the research focus of this doctoral thesis was on the diversity of subjective perspectives on interpretation and memory among female competitive athletes from the GDR. The central research question was: which biographical trajectories and identity-related aspects are reflected upon against the backdrop of their competitive sporting past? Fifteen biographical-narrative interviews (Schütze, 1983) were conducted with GDR elite athletes, including state-recognised victims of doping, and analysed using reflexive grounded theory methodology (Breuer et al., 2019). As a result, the ‘affected’ and ‘winners’ types, each with two subtypes, were identified, thereby broadening the spectrum of ways in which GDR competitive sporting histories are self-interpreted and processed: Whilst the former group predominantly interpret their past in competitive sport as an obstacle to development within the context of a life marked by suffering, the latter group view it primarily as an advantage for their personal development and career. While the subtype of *victims of the GDR sports system* is characterized by enduring consequences of doping, psychological burdens resulting from structural and interpersonal violence, and the central biographical significance of a victim identity, the subtype of those *strengthened through suffering* interprets overcome sport-related suffering as a starting point for processes of personal growth and self-transformation that are associated with subjective agency. Those with an *ambivalent outlook* are characterised by a high degree of ambivalence between the benefits and the consequential harm of their sporting past; actively coping with the suffering helps to maintain their self-perception as autonomous architects of their own success. In contrast, the *affirmative success-builders* distance themselves from victim status, involvement in doping and consequential harm, whilst maintaining continuity in their identity as successful athletes.

The doctoral thesis comprises three academic publications:

The Development of Suffering and the Perspective of Those Affected

Bierstedt, A., Hunger, I., & Spitzer, C. (2024). "I didn't want to do this bloody sport." The case history of a former GDR elite athlete and a present-day victim of GDR doping. *Trauma & Violence*, 18(3), 208–223. <https://doi.org/10.21706/tg-18-3-208>

Self-reflexivity as a methodology for broadening perspectives

Bierstedt, A. (2025). Self-reflexivity as an opportunity for insight – using the example of research into GDR elite athletes as victims of doping. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 26(2), 55 paragraphs. <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-26.2.4282>

The spectrum of ways of interpreting and coming to terms with the past of competitive sport in the GDR

Bierstedt, A., Spitzer, C., & Hunger, I. (2026). 'It wasn't all bad in elite sport' – The narrative processing of the GDR elite sporting past and its biographical consequences. *Psychosozial*, 49(2), 101–112. <https://doi.org/10.30820/0171-3434-2026-2-101>

Table of Contents:

1. Introduction

2. Theoretical and Research Background

2.1 Competitive sport in the GDR and doping as a subject of research

2.2 Quantitative studies examining the long-term consequences of the GDR's competitive sport and doping system

2.3 Qualitative studies on the history of competitive sport in the GDR and its biographical consequences

2.4 Implications for the present study

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 A theoretical approach to the concept of identity

3.2 The social constructivist research perspective

3.3 The socio-linguistic constitution of identity

3.4 On the relationship between biographical and identity construction

3.5 Identity construction in autobiographical narrative

3.6 Formulation of the research question

4. Methodological approach

4.1 Field access and recruitment

4.2 Narrative interviews as a data collection method

4.3 Sampling

4.4 Ethical considerations in the research process

4.5 Reflexive grounded theory methodology as an analysis method

5. Publications

5.1 Article I: 'I didn't want to do this bloody sport.' – The case history of a former GDR elite athlete and a contemporary victim of GDR doping

5.2 Article II: Self-reflexivity as an opportunity for insight – using the example of research into GDR elite athletes as victims of doping

5.3 Article III: "It wasn't all bad in competitive sport" – The narrative processing of the GDR's competitive sporting past and its biographical consequences

6. Discussion and interpretation of the empirical findings

6.1 Ways of interpreting and coming to terms with the history of competitive sport in the GDR

6.2 Reflection on the research process and subjectivity

7. Summary and outlook