



## Athletes' experiences of social support during their transition out of elite sport: An interpretive phenomenological analysis



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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The sources and types of social support that athletes receive during the transition out of sport have been well documented. However, less is known about how athletes perceive, mobilise, and manage supportive relationships. This study aimed therefore to gain a more comprehensive insight into the ways that social support may influence how athletes adjust to life following retirement from elite sport.

**Design:** The study was designed according to the principles of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis.

**Method:** Eight former British elite athletes (four male and four female) from eight different Olympic sports were recruited using criterion-based purposive sampling strategies. Data collected using semi-structured interviews were analysed to explore subjective experiences of social support during transition.

**Results:** Participants' perception of feeling cared for and understood enabled support to be effective. There were variations in participants' ability to seek out and ask for support and those who found this difficult also found transition a more distressing experience. As transitions progressed, the adjustment process was closely linked to the participant's evolving sense of self. New social relationships and social roles fostered a sense of feeling supported, as well as providing opportunities to support others (e.g., other retired athletes). Providing support helped the participants to experience a sense of growth that facilitated adjustment to life after sport.

**Conclusions:** The content of support was largely dependent on context; that is, perceptions of supporters were just as important, if not more so, than specific support exchanges. Stigma around asking for help was a barrier to support seeking.

### 1. Athletes' experiences of social support during their transition out of elite sport: An interpretive phenomenological analysis

Retirement from elite level and professional sport, often referred to as the transition out of sport, is the process of ending a competitive career as an athlete and beginning a new life (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). It is widely recognized that athletes need to adjust to numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes when they stop competing (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). Furthermore, evidence suggests that, while some athletes find adjusting to these changes relatively straightforward, others find it a long and emotionally distressing experience (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). Extant research has highlighted numerous personal and contextual factors that influence the process of adjustment including the athlete's age, gender, nationality, level of education, financial status, relationship status, reason for retirement,

self-concept, level of pre-retirement planning, social support, use of coping strategies, and satisfaction with career achievements (for reviews, see Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Park et al., 2013).

The way that these factors influence the experience of transition varies from person to person; however, several consistent findings have been identified. For example, athletes who retire suddenly and/or are forced to retire (e.g., through injury) typically find the transition to retirement more difficult (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004), whereas athletes who have prepared for their life after sport before they retire tend to adjust better (e.g., Lally, 2007). Identity also plays an important role in the process of transition, with evidence suggesting that athletes whose identity is based on participation and success in sport tend to be more vulnerable to psychological difficulties, such as depression (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). One of the most consistent findings is the importance of social support during transition, with athletes who feel

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supported typically finding it easier to adjust to life after sport (Park et al., 2013). Nevertheless, findings to date suggest that there is variability in the support that athletes receive and not all athletes get the support that they need (e.g., Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Furthermore, while social support has been studied primarily as a resource to aid coping, the complexities involved in support exchanges and social relationships during the transition out of elite sport have received less attention (Park et al., 2013).

In the broadest sense, social support refers to “social interactions aimed at inducing positive outcomes” (Bianco & Eklund, 2001, p. 85). More specifically, social support has been referred to as a ‘multi-construct’ comprising three primary dimensions: (1) a structural dimension that reflects the composition and quality of social support networks; (2) a functional dimension that reflects the social exchanges involved in providing and receiving support, including the type of support that is delivered; and (3) an appraisal dimension that includes assessments of the availability and quality of support (Vaux, 1988). The functional dimension of social support largely concerns support that is actually received or enacted, such as emotional support (e.g., displays of intimacy or encouragement), informational support (e.g., advice, guidance, and suggestions), esteem support (e.g., that designed to strengthen an individual's sense of competence), and tangible support (e.g., concrete assistance, such as financial support). The appraisal dimension of social support concerns what is typically referred to as ‘perceived support’; that is, the perception that support is available, regardless of whether that support is actually sought or received (Barrera, 1986).

The mechanisms through which social support influences outcomes are widely debated (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). The stress and coping perspective suggests that social support buffers the negative effects of stress, with received support thought to help people to cope and perceived support thought to alter perceptions of potentially threatening situations (Lahey & Cohen, 2000). However, the relationship between support and outcomes is complex. Quantitative research on sporting performance (Freeman & Rees, 2008) and self-confidence in sport (Rees & Freeman, 2007) has found that, when examined separately, perceived and received support were able to buffer against stress, but when both kinds of support were considered together, stress-buffering effects were observed primarily for received support. Nevertheless, in research on social support outside sport, perceived support tends to have a greater stress buffering effect than received support (Uchino, 2009). Moreover, perceived support generally has a direct relationship with outcomes, such that perceived support is important even in the absence of adversity and can provide people with regular positive experiences that can enhance wellbeing (Thoits, 2011).

Despite these findings, research on perceived support during transition is limited. Researchers who have studied perceived support have operationalized it as a coping resource (e.g., Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Zoe Knowles, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2007), but this may fail to fully account for the complex nature of supportive relationships (Lahey & Drew, 1997). Research on transition has tended to focus on the structural and functional dimensions of social support by highlighting the types of support that athletes have received, and from whom (Park et al., 2013). For example, athletes reported that when they received information from organizations, former teammates, and coaches they were better able to manage their transition (Park, Tod, & Lavalley, 2012; Stephan, 2003). Furthermore, athletes who received tangible support to develop their career as part of a formal support program from national sporting organizations experienced fewer difficulties following retirement than those athletes who did not receive support (Leung, Carre, & Fu, 2005). The importance of emotional and esteem support has been discussed most widely, with findings suggesting that these types of support can help with account making, reducing emotional distress, and fostering positive self-regard (Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997; Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000; Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999).

In general, the evidence suggests that athletes who feel supported during transition experience fewer difficulties; however, there is variability in the quantity and quality of support that they receive. Indeed, athletes have reported a lack of organizational support, leading them to feel used and abandoned as they struggled with their transition (Brown & Potrac, 2009). Furthermore, athletes' social networks tend to be related to their involvement in sport. However, without the shared connection of sport, retired athletes may quickly lose contact with network members (e.g., coach, teammates), and thus receive little support from them (Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). As a consequence, athletes may become lonely and socially isolated, hindering their ability to adapt to their new life (Park et al., 2013).

Given the limited availability and quality of support from sporting organizations and social networks within sport, it is perhaps unsurprising that many athletes turn to family and friends for support during transition. Family members and friends often play a crucial role in transition by providing work opportunities, career assistance, and emotional support (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). In particular, partners/spouses have been recognized as important sources of emotional comfort and, in many cases, are seen by athletes as their primary source of support (Gilmore, 2008; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). However, as with support from the people and organizations within sport, there is variability in the quality of the support that athletes receive from family and friends. Athletes who have experienced difficult transitions have reported that their family and friends did not fully understand what they were going through. As a result, athletes found it difficult to turn to them for support, or see value in the support that was offered (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Gilmore, 2008).

These findings appear to support a social cognitive perspective on social support (Lahey & Drew, 1997). This approach suggests that, once beliefs about the supportiveness of others are formed, they influence current thinking and experiences of support (Lahey, McCabe, Fiscaro, & Drew, 1996). Social support can, therefore, be understood in the context of the recipient's evaluations of supporters, and potential supporters, rather than by the support itself (Lahey & Cohen, 2000). The social cognitive view of social support shares some assumptions with symbolic interactionism, which explicitly links knowledge of the self to social roles and interactions with others (Stryker, 1987). Thus, social support is deemed to create and sustain identity and to influence subjective feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Lahey & Cohen, 2000; Thoits, 2011).

### 1.1. The present research

These perspectives on social support suggest novel ways of looking at the process of transition out of sport that has not yet been fully considered. For example, social support during transition is likely to involve athletes identifying and mobilizing potential supporters and assessing the potential benefits and costs of support, both as an aid to the coping process and in terms of the impact that seeking and accepting support may have on their sense of self (Gage, 2013). The purpose of the present research was therefore to explore former elite athletes' subjective experiences of social support during their transition out of sport. The aim was to gain an in-depth insight into the way(s) that social support influences the process of adjustment, and to explore the interpersonal processes through which the participants interpreted, managed, and made sense of their support. By exploring social support in this way, it was hoped to gain a richer understanding of the extent to which athletes feel that they are supported as they retire from sport, the nature of the support they receive, and how athletes might be better supported in the future.

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