Athletes' retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners' experiences

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Abstract

Objectives: Athletes' experiences of transition out of elite sport have been well documented. Less is known, however, about how the family members of athletes experience the process of transition. This study aimed to gain an in-depth understanding of parents and partners' experiences and the way that they managed and interpreted their role in the process of transition.

Method: Individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with the parents and partners (two male and five female) of seven retired elite athletes from the UK. Data were analysed according to the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Results: Parents and partners experienced their own transition as they navigated uncertainty and upheaval in their own lives when the athletes retired. Parents and partners had to renegotiate their identity as they adjusted to changing roles and dynamics in their close relationships. Providing support to the former athletes was complicated by parents and partners' own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a supporter. Parents and partners often experienced difficulties in their relationship with the athletes during their transition, but things improved as time went by. This was due to better communication and a willingness to share their feelings about their experiences. This helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective on their transition and a sense that their relationship with the athletes had strengthened and grown.

Conclusions: Transition is often a shared experience and the findings of the present study underline the value of exploring transition at the level of the family or partnership as well as the individual.

Keywords: *career transition; identity; interpretive phenomenological analysis; relationships; social support.*

Introduction

Retirement from sport, also referred to as the transition out of sport, is associated with numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes in an athlete's life (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). The changes that athletes experience during transition can present significant challenges as they attempt to deal with a range of complex emotions, negotiate a shift in their identity, and deal with disruption in their social networks (Brown, Webb, Robinson, & Cotgreave, 2018; Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). The process of adjusting to these changes can unfold over several months and years (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and, in the most challenging cases, difficulties adjusting develop into long-term mental health issues (Cosh, Crabb, & Tully, 2013; McKenna & Thomas, 2007). Indeed, athletes have reported suffering from anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse many years after they retired (Gouttebarge, Aoki, & Kerkhoffs, 2015; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007).

Models that describe the process of the transition out of sport (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) highlight numerous factors that influence the process of adjustment, including the reason(s) for retirement, level of pre-retirement planning, strength of athletic identity, the use of coping strategies, and the availability and quality of social support. Although this research has recognised the importance of understanding the factors that promote adjustment, the interpersonal contexts and relationship dynamics involved in the process of transition have received less attention. In particular, there is a lack of research on transition from the perspective of people in athletes' close social networks, such as their parents and/or partners. Given that major life transitions are often shared social experiences (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993), more work is therefore needed in this area.

Relationships and life transitions

Significant transitions in life are complex interpersonal phenomena, such that transitions can be instigated, influenced, and resolved by the relationships that people share with others (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Relationships and social support have long been considered to be important to the quality of the transitions that people experience (Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). For example, research on retirement from work has found that people with higher quality relationships are more satisfied with retirement and find it easier to adjust to the changes that they experience when they leave work (Sherry, Tomlinson, Loe, Johnston, & Feeney, 2017). Research has also shown that the disruption of students' close relationships and loss of support from their family members can have a negative impact on their adjustment during the transition to university (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). These findings emphasise that both positive and negative life experiences often occur in the context of interpersonal interactions in close relationships (Carstensen, Fung, & Charles, 2003).

Life course theory (Elder, 1998) and family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) also acknowledge that an individual's life is intrinsically linked to others. Relationships are not isolated across time and space; rather, inter-personal processes shape experiences in dynamic and complex ways (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Previous research has found that life transitions are often shared experiences, with studies highlighting how one individual's transition can influence the lives of others (Holdworth, 2004). For example, being made redundant from a job or a child leaving the family home, may not only have an impact on those experiencing the transition directly, but also those people with whom they share close social bonds (e.g., Doiron & Mendolia, 2012). Shared transitions can take place in a variety of close relationships, such as those involving romantic partnerships, parents and children, siblings, and grandparents and grandchildren (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991).

The features of these transitions are often related to the way that people (re)negotiate their personal and social identity, (re)define their role in close relationships, and manage the provision and receipt of social support (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Research suggests that these factors play an important role in adjustment to transitions by influencing the personal and relational well-being of those involved (Schulenberg & Schoon, 2012). For example, poor interpersonal communications during transitions can lead relationships to fracture and break down, with both parties suffering as a result (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010).

Given the vast amount of research that has examined the relational aspects of life transitions, it is perhaps surprising that little attention has been given to these processes during the transition out of sport. This represents a significant gap in knowledge and more research into the interpersonal nature of close relationships may help to further understand the process of transition and associated outcomes.

Interpersonal aspects of the transition out of sport

Research that has addressed interpersonal aspects of transition has tended to concentrate on athletes' appraisals of the availability and quality of social support (see Park et al., 2013, for a review). Close family members, particularly parents and partners, are often an athlete's most important source of support and, in general, athletes who feel supported by parents and partners during their transition find it easier to adjust to the changes that they experience (Gilmore, 2008; Park et al., 2013). However, support from parents and partners can vary in quality and not all athletes feel that they receive the support that they need (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015). There is also evidence that the changes that athletes experience during transition can lead to difficulties in their close relationships (Cecić Erpič et al., 2004). For example, athletes have reported tension and

conflict in their relationships because they believed that close others did not understand what they were going through (Brown et al., 2018).

There is strong evidence to suggest that parents and partners play an important role in the process of transition (Brown et al., 2018); however, there is little research on how parents and partners experience the process of providing support and how this may influence their wider experience of transition. Research outside sport suggests that people often face a number of challenges when they provide social support, including feeling anxious about their role and the possibility of giving inappropriate or ineffective support (Goldsmith, 1992). Providers of support can also experience deterioration in their own wellbeing as they take on the burden of the recipient's difficulties or distress (Coyne, Ellard, & Smith, 1990). These factors may act as barriers to parents and partners' ability or willingness to offer appropriate support to athletes during transition and lead to significant relational challenges that have a negative impact on the experience of transition for both parties. Indeed, athletes have reported tension and conflict in their relationships because they felt that family members did not understand what they were going through (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999).

It is therefore critical to understand how people in athletes' close social networks experience the process of transition out of sport to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. To the authors' knowledge; however, the only example of this kind of approach is Lally and Kerr's (2008) study involving the parents of former elite gymnasts. Lally and Kerr found that parents experienced significant disruption in their lives when their child retired. This disruption was characterised by changes in the parents' relationship with their child and the other parent. Parents also described a loss of purpose as family roles and responsibilities evolved. Lally and Kerr's study demonstrates, therefore, the importance of understanding athletes' retirement from the perspective of family members and reveals

important information about the challenges that close family members may face during transition.

Despite making a significant contribution to understanding relational aspects of transition, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study only focused on the parents of athletes. Research suggests that other family members, particularly spouses/partners, can also play an important role in the process (Brown et al., 2018; Chow, 2001). Although relationships between athletes and their parents and partners may differ in fundamental ways, exploring these relationships in a single study provides the opportunity to explore the relational aspects of transition, identify similarities and differences in the experiences of parents and partners, and develop a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon (Noohi, Peyrovi, Goghary, & Kazemi, 2016).

Furthermore, Lally and Kerr's (2008) study largely focused on parents' responses to their daughters' retirement and this leaves considerable scope to explore the interpersonal processes involved in transition. In this respect, an interpretive phenomenological approach (e.g., Smith, 1996) might be of potential benefit. The phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity, in particular, can help to understanding how shared experiences are characterised by interactive meaning-making that is *co-created* (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007). In addition, the phenomenological focus on agency and identity can expand our understanding of the personal meaning that transition can have for parents and partners and positions them as important participants in the phenomenon, worthy of study in their own right.

The present research

The purpose of the present research was to explore the experiences of parents and partners of elite athletes during the athletes' transition out of sport. Specifically, an interpretive phenomenological approach was used to explore the interpersonal nature of

transition and the way(s) that retirement from sport can affect close relationships. The present research also aimed to understand how parents and partners of athletes managed and interpreted their role in the process of transition, including their possible role as providers of support.

Method

Methodology and philosophical underpinning

The study was designed and conducted according to the theoretical principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996), and the philosophical assumptions of critical realism. Wiltshire (2018) suggests critical realism offers a way of transcending persistent paradigmatic debates that constrain the impact of research in the field of sport and exercise psychology by bridging the gap between realist and constructivist–interpretivist approaches.

Critical realism maintains that there is a reality that is independent of subjective perceptions of the world (Bhaskar, 1989). Access to this reality, however, depends on sensory perceptions and subjective interpretations that are limited and incomplete, such that people may understand and interpret reality in different ways (Parker, 1992). This is congruent with aspects of hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological philosophy that acknowledges a pre-existing social world that people are 'thrown into' (Heidegger, 1962/1927), but also accepts that understanding of the world is mediated through individual's consciousness, and their own interpretations of their experiences (Finlay, 2009; Heidegger, 1992).

The present research was conducted, therefore, from an ontological perspective that recognises a pre-existing 'real' world but acknowledges that it is impossible to describe objective reality (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jacobsen, 2005). Rather, the aim was to explore and understand the nature of the participant's experience and how they made sense of that experience as they engage with their social world (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin,

2009). As a result, the present research was conducted from a perspective that is congruent with epistemological relativism (Willig, 2016).

IPA is grounded in hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenology and views language as important for describing and understanding the meaning of experience. Interpreting experience involves a 'double hermeneutic' process whereby the researcher attempts to understand the participants' attempt to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). Findings are, therefore, the researchers' interpretation of the participants' experiences. IPA was considered appropriate for investigating parents and partners' experiences of the transition out of sport because it draws on a phenomenological philosophy that seeks to explore the intersubjective nature of the world as experiences unfold over time (Smith et al., 2009). Thus, IPA was used to explore the interpersonal nature of social relationships during the *process* of transition.

Participants

Purposive sampling was used to recruit parents and partners of seven former elite athletes. Studies using IPA typically use a homogenous sample; however, the nature of this homogeneity differs depending on the study and the focus is on selecting participants who can provide a particular perspective on the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). In the present research, potential participants were invited to take part if they had experienced all, or a significant part of, the former athletes' career in elite sport and their subsequent transition. Given the paucity of previous research, the exploratory nature of the present research, and the practical issues of gaining access to participants meeting the criteria, few other restrictions were applied.

Four long-term partners of former athletes (one male and three females) aged between 30 and 47 (M = 37.75, SD = 6.95) and three parents (one male and two females) aged between 55 and 67 (M = 60.66, SD = 7.50) volunteered to take part. All participants were

from the UK, were employed at the time of the athletes' careers, and lived with the athletes at the time of their transitions. The former athletes had all competed at an international level for between 5 and 15 years (M = 12.50, SD = 3.88), competed in individual summer Olympic sports, and had taken part in multiple major championships; six having competed at the summer Olympic Games. At the time of the interviews with their parents and partners, the former athletes had been retired for between 3 and 12 years (M = 6.42, SD = 3.90).

Procedure

Following institutional ethical approval, former athletes were contacted through social media and the authors' existing contacts. The aims of the study were discussed and the former athletes were asked to nominate, and provide permission for us to contact, a family member who might be willing to take part in the study. Potential participants were asked to nominate someone who they were particularly close to, and who had played an important role in their transition. The decision to let the athletes decide who to nominate was intentional and ensured that they had the freedom to choose the relationship that was most important to them. This strategy, borrowed from personality and social psychology (see Snyder & Ickes, 1985), suggests that research on social phenomena or processes should study people who are particularly likely to manifest or offer insight on the phenomenon or process of interest. It is argued that this will generate knowledge of the phenomenon or process as it naturally occurs in the most effective and efficient way. In this regard, we reasoned that the interpersonal processes related to identity, communication, and social support - that have been identified as being important during transitions (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993) - would be more salient for close relationships nominated by athletes, than those selected by us.

Not all of the former athletes who were contacted wished to invite someone to participate. Also, several parents and partners who were approached declined to take part. In these cases, the former athletes and/or their parents and partners said that they wished this

time to remain private, did not want to revisit a difficult time in their lives, and/or felt that discussing issues around transition may cause some distress. Three of the former athletes who were contacted participated in research that has been reported in another publication (see Brown et al., 2018).

Interviews were conducted with the nominated parent or partner who agreed to take part. Face-to-face interviews were used because IPA is well suited to methods that provide participants with the opportunity to offer in-depth, first person accounts of their experience (Smith et al., 2009). All of the interviews were conducted by the first author using a semi-structured interview schedule. Guidelines on conducting interviews from a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) were used to develop questions to explore the context, structure, and meaning of participants' experiences. For example, participants were asked: "Can you tell me about (athlete's name) sporting career?", "Can you tell me about the circumstances surrounding (athlete's name) retirement?", and "Can you tell me about what it was like for you when (athlete's name) retired?" Although an interview schedule was used, it was implemented in an open and flexible way and participants were encouraged to lead the interview by discussing the experiences and issues that were most pertinent to them. Participants were interviewed for between 70 and 95 minutes (M = 83.57, SD = 7.74) and the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Participants and the athletes with whom they were associated were given pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Data analysis

The readings of the transcripts were informed by interpretive phenomenological philosophy including concepts related to agency, identity, intersubjectivity, and the processual nature of experience (Ashworth, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). These concepts became more prominent during the latter stages of the analysis in which the researchers engaged in a

reflexive 'dialogue' between their psychological knowledge and the data to gain the interpretive analysis that is crucial to IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Analysis of the transcripts followed the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009). A particular feature of IPA is its commitment to idiographic enquiry; therefore, the analysis was conducted on each case separately before conducting a cross-case analysis. The first stage of the analysis involved reading each transcript several times before a detailed set of notes and comments were recorded to capture salient features of the account. The notes focused on describing the experiential content of the account, the language that was used by the participant, and conceptual interpretations that aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning that was attached to each person's experience. These notes were used to develop emergent themes that served to condense the data and capture the structure of the participant's account. Next, a process of abstracting and subsuming the themes enabled them to be clustered together to form superordinate themes that represented shared meaning or a central concept. This 'cross-case analysis' identified patterns, similarities, and differences across the themes and superordinate themes for each participant that were used to develop higher-order concepts. The aim was to provide a coherent account of the data, while still maintaining the idiographic focus that is central to IPA.

Writing up the final analysis also formed a key part of the analytical process as it facilitated a deeper engagement with the participants' accounts and enabled further interpretation of the data. In line with the philosophy of IPA, the accounts were co-constructed between researcher and participants and the final report represents the researchers' interpretations of the experience of transition for *these* participants (Smith et al., 2009). Our claims, therefore, should be regarded as tentative, rather than a 'true' account of parents and partners' experiences of transition.

Research quality and methodological rigor

The present research draws on a pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the quality of research, rather than a predefined 'checklist' that is applicable to all qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). The aim was to produce research that is faithful to the theoretical principles of IPA using a rigorous and transparent method (for a full description of the criteria suggested to produce 'good' IPA, see Smith, 2011).

Qualitative research within sport and exercise psychology tends to describe rigor in the context of method (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Thus, we focussed on developing meticulous data collection and analysis procedures that were transparent and thorough. Specifically, applying guidelines for phenomenological interviews (Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) encouraged participants' to recall and reflect on the key experiences that were relevant for them, and helped us to maintain an approach that was congruent with IPA. At the same time, the interview guide was based on a thorough review of relevant literature, which aimed to ensure the present research was conducted with relevance to contemporary theoretical issues related to the transition out of sport (Tracy, 2010).

A reflexive approach during data collection and analysis was crucial to the pursuit of rigor. This included producing fieldnotes immediately following each interview to outline aspects of the interviews that could have been lost once the analysis was limited to the review of audio recordings. Fieldnotes included details of the interactions between the researcher and participants prior to interviews commencing, the participants' body language and mannerisms, and the researcher's initial reactions following the completion of the interview. Fieldnotes formed part of a research diary kept by the first author (anonymised extracts of which are available on request) that was used to document analytical decisions and to promote a reflexive approach to the research. The dairy helped to highlight any prior

assumptions and ideas about the research topic and any emotional reactions to the data during collection and analysis.

The primary analysis was conducted by the first author, with the other authors acting as 'critical friends' (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this respect, the other authors read and, in some cases, coded transcripts; discussed the context and meaning of the transcripts; and helped to develop themes, the structure of the cross-case analysis, and this report of the findings. This aim was not to research consensus or achieve agreement (as is the case with 'inter-rate reliability'), but to use critical dialogue as a resource for developing the interpretations made by the first author (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

Results

Context

The present research sought to explore the experience of transition out of elite sport from the perspective of the parents and partners of athletes, rather than the athletes themselves. However, we start by providing some description of the athletes' experience, as described by their parents and partners, in order to provide context: Athletes' experiences of transition were idiosyncratic and their reactions to retirement depended in part on the specific circumstances that surrounded their exit from elite sport. However, there were several common features of athletes' transitions that related to issues such as disruption of identity, loss of self-esteem, difficulties establishing a new career, and the changing nature of their relationship with their parents and partners. Many of these have been described in previous research focusing on athletes' experience of transition (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Park et al., 2013) and so here we focus on the experience of transition from the perspective of the parents and partners of the athletes.

Overview

The changes and difficulties in the athletes' lives meant that parents and partners experienced changes in their own lives that were often difficult to navigate. In effect, parents and partners experienced their own transition. At times, parents and partners felt that their relationship with the athlete was distant or detached, with each person in the relationship experiencing a similar, but somewhat separate transition. However, parents and partners also described times when they felt close to the athlete and transition seemed to be more of a shared experience. During these times, they worked through challenges together and parents and partners were willing and able to offer support to the athlete. This interpretation of the parents and partners' accounts is captured by an overarching theme that was labelled 'parallel and shared experiences of transition'. This overarching theme provided the context for three other interwoven themes that form the structure of the analysis that follows: (a) initial experiences of transition, (b) experiences of being a supporter, and (c) integrating experiences into current life. Table 1 summarises these themes.

Initial experiences of transition

This theme refers to parents and partners' initial reactions to, and appraisals of, the athletes' retirement, and the way that transition influenced their own sense of self.

Appraisals and reactions. All three of the parents, and three out of the four partners, reported that the athletes experienced a difficult start to their transitions. Parents and partners reported that this led to a difficult period for them and their relationship with the athletes as they tried to make sense of changes in their own life. Parents and partners often experienced intense emotional reactions to the athletes' retirement, including anger, sadness, and worry. Parents, in particular, often experienced a sense of sadness and anger that the athlete's career was ending, often in difficult circumstances. For example, in the quote below, James talks about his experience when his daughter retired because she was not selected to compete at a major event. James' emotional state at the time is reflected in his description of wanting to

find a physical outlet for his anger. Furthermore, during the interview itself, James seemed to re-experience the same emotions as he described how he felt:

> Her transition became really quite difficult quite quickly. It was very stressful for us [James and his wife] as well to be honest. I felt angry, a lot, and sad…you just feel duff…I didn't deal with it very well, what I wanted to do was go round and smack one or two people in the mouth, but of course I couldn't do that…and then you start thinking what the hell is she is going to do with her life, she'd given everything to her sport for 17 years.

The apparent worry that James had about his daughter's future was also reflected in the way that some of the partners of other former athletes discussed their experiences. All of the partners were concerned about the future and what the former athlete would do for work. Three partners reported that the athletes had been away for a significant part of the year when they were training and competing and they seemed to be worried that the athlete's retirement may disrupt their own lives. Despite having been together for many years, they anticipated that they would need to get used to living with each other again. For example, Dani talked about her partner's retirement after a 15 year career as an international athlete. The following quote reflects how a phenomenon (in this case transition) can influence the way that people reflect on the future and how this can shape their current experience.

> **Interviewer:** What sort of emotions were you going through, what were you feeling when Dave retired?
>
> **Dani:** Just nervous I think…I thought he would find it very, very difficult because it would be such a complete change of lifestyle and a completely different way of life. I

> wondered what he would do for a job and about how it would be, him being at home more, having had him not been at home very much.

The impact of transition on the self. Parents and parents were engaged in the athletes' sporting careers by providing them with support and often sharing in their experiences, including travelling to watch major events as the athletes progressed to international level. Many of the parents and parents were invested in the athletes' career in a deeply emotional way. They enjoyed the success that the athletes experienced during their career, they felt part of that success, and sport became part of their own identity. Perhaps as a consequence of developing an identity related to sport, when the athletes left their competitive careers behind, parents and partners seemed to experience a transition of their own. Here, Jo talks about what it was like when her partner retired. The use of the 'wave' metaphor invokes a sense of excitement of being part of her partners' career, and some sadness that this was no longer in her life.

> I guess after a while I was like 'oh I really miss it' (being involved partners career), because we were both then not doing anything. I guess I kind of rode the wave a little bit myself and so I was like 'oh I really miss this'. I missed being part of that environment.

The theme of loss was particularly prevalent for parents, as Jane describes:

> It was hard because it had been a big part of our lives…we'd spent ten, fifteen years of going to competitions and enjoying the success, it was a cut off for us as well. So it was quite hard, it left a big gap in our lives really….it was just a void, you find things

> eventually, it takes a few months or a couple of years and then, you know, your life moves on.

It is interesting to note that Jane talks about her transition in terms of months and years. This emphasises the often lengthy process of adjusting to the sense of loss that is experienced when athletes retire. Similarly, Gill described her daughter's decision to retire as like bereavement:

> It was difficult for me to handle the fact that she said she was retiring. I didn't feel she was ready to retire yet…so there was a period of difficulty and mourning for myself, but at the same time I supported her decision to retire. She said 'would you be there, would you support me?' I said 'yes I will be there and I will support you in every way I can'.

The quote above highlights the difficulty and conflict that several of the parents and partners experienced. They wanted to 'be there' for the former athlete, but they were also trying to understand and make sense of their own transition. Negotiating this conflict proved difficult for many parents and partners, as Gill described later in her account:

> Having to deal with the things you are going through, that was the main thing, but it's the pain that Helen went through too that I didn't fully understand. And at the same time I didn't know what to say to make it better, because I didn't understand, I didn't know how to deal with it myself.

Experiences of being a supporter

Parents and partners provided examples of the specific types of support that they offered to the athletes to help them to deal with their transition. Their reports suggest, however, that social support was not simply an exchange of resources, but was negotiated according to the complex dynamics of each close relationship and the often challenging context surrounding each transition.

Providing support. Emotional support was the most common type of support that was provided by parents and partners, particularly in the early stages of transition, and was offered in an effort to help athletes to deal with the shock, anger, and sense of loss that they experienced. Usually this involved "just being there" (Gill), being "a shoulder to cry on" (Tony), and being available to "sit down and talk" (Jane). For example, it was important for James to let his daughter know that he loved and cared for her and to convey that his support was unconditional:

> …just being there for her, you know, unconditional support and love, and reminding her what she had achieved over her career and that we would help her find something she really wanted to do and would be good at. I mean you just have to keep on repeating that until she finds her way.

Parents and partners described how the athletes were often worried about money and what they would do for work. Several parents and partners, including Emily, responded by offering advice on career options and help in looking for work:

> He's never been a paperwork man, ever. 'Cos he's obviously just got up and trained all day. But all of a sudden he's having to fill in forms and do CV's and that kind of

> thing, so I've tried to help him with that…I looked on the internet for jobs and things for him, things he could do.

As transition progressed, social support often involved the athletes working together with their parents and partners to understand the changes in their lives. This offered the opportunity for disclosure, discussion of shared goals, and an emotional connection that helped both parties to make sense of what was happening. This sense of togetherness seemed to be helpful for both parties. Here, Dani discussed how she helped her partner to set up his own business and how this helped her to understand what she wanted out of their new life:

> …I spent a period of time working for him and being a part of that business and talking about it with him and helping him put it together…so some of that was kind of, to a point, a joint venture…that's why I went back into [job role] because of what he did. I helped him in terms of, I was interested in it and that was part of our conversations about work, which kind of then led to 'right okay' that's something that I want to go back into'. So it was good how work turned out.

Negotiating support. The interpersonal processes and relational dynamics involved in transition were complex and not always easy for parents and partners to navigate. As Emily put it, "it's just something that you muddle through". Some of the parents and partners struggled to identify the appropriate type and amount of support to provide. They worried about striking the right balance between being supportive and caring, and being honest and realistic about what was happening. For example, despite wanting to provide unconditional support to his daughter, James was concerned about giving her space so that she could work through, and make sense of, her transition. Similarly, Jane provided emotional support to her

son but she was also worried about "molly coddling" a grown man. Most of the parents and partners, in some way, felt uncertain and uneasy about their role as a supporter. For example, Jo's life with her partner had been structured around sport for over 10 years and she was worried about how she would help her partner to negotiate transition. The quote below suggests that Jo understood the changes that retirement would bring, but this gave rise to a sense of uncertainty and worry around her perceived responsibility to provide support.

> I was preparing myself to support in a very different way but I knew it was gonna be a big void. It is a bit scary, you kind of think 'God, how am I gonna fill that [void in partner's life]?' Or, you know, all these evenings and all these afternoons that were taken up with talking about training or 'what are you doing tomorrow?' What's that gonna be filled with now?

Tony also reported that he struggled to know how to help his partner after she retired after a prolonged period of poor performances. He felt that this was made more difficult because his partner did not know what she wanted from her life after sport:

> I didn't know what I was gonna do for her…she didn't know what to do so she couldn't help me and say 'do this and do that' because she didn't know what to do. I felt like, I felt like [SIGH], I don't know… I can encourage you to try different things but at the end of the day I think it's you that has to make that decision [on the next steps in life].

The quote below from Emily reflects the complexity of all of the relationships; they were dynamic, subject to stress, and often proved difficult to negotiate:

518

519 **Interviewer:** Did you think that you had a particular kind of role to play when he
520 retired?
521 **Emily:** Yeah, listen and try and give good advice…it was just a question of listening
522 to him really because he had an awful lot to say, bitterness more than anything…I
523 think it's hard when you retire. He's found it very difficult and he has taken it out on
524 us, he can be quite withdrawn at times, really moody. He was really moody to start
525 with, that's when I lost my temper with him, when he started taking it out on me and
526 the kids…that's when I got angry because it's not our fault, we tried to support him,
527 and I think I remember shouting at one point 'I'm sick of trying to be nice'.

528

529 Emily clearly saw that her role was to support her partner through a difficult time. She
530 appeared to be attentive to her partner's need to talk and was able to describe his feelings and
531 emotional state. However, there appeared to be a limit to her understanding and willingness
532 to help. She saw her partner's (depressed) mood as having a negative impact on their family
533 life and threatened to withdraw her support as a consequence.

534 **Burden and costs of being a supporter.** The stress and pressure associated with
535 having someone close to them make the transition out of elite sport often weighed heavily on
536 the parents and partners. For example, Gill described the difficulties that she experienced
537 trying to support her daughter while also struggling with her own transition. Her parental
538 instinct to protect seemed to come at a cost to her own wellbeing: "I have suffered with her
539 but she doesn't know I feel like that, she doesn't know because I don't get emotional with
540 her, I just let her tell me her emotions".

541 Partners who were living with the athletes seemed to find the day-to-day pressures of
542 transition particularly difficult to cope with. As Emily discussed:

> It's been me that's suffered with the anxiety and depression, it's been me that's been on the medication for it…because it's been a massive lifestyle change, massive, everything's changed, everything changes but we are no different to anyone else that loses a job or changes career so it's just one of those things.

Emily experienced changes as a result of her partner's retirement that felt overwhelming and had severe consequences for her mental health. But in the quote above it was interesting that she also normalised the experience, likening it to the experiences of other people who have changed careers. This was a strategy that was used by some of the other parents and partners and it could suggest a desire to reappraise the situation in an attempt to reduce the emotional distress being experienced.

Jo also seemed to feel that supporting her partner came at a cost to her own sense of self, with the consequence that she needed some time away, doing something completely different, in order to get away from the stress and pressure of the experience of transition:

> It was hard and that's one of the reasons that summer I went to start playing golf because I just needed, I needed a separate outlook, and other people as well around me that I could just go and spend time with, where I wasn't talking about Sam. I'd just fully switch off…it was just kind of something completely different that was just purely for myself.

Integration of the experience into current life

All of the parents and partners talked in some way about the longer term impact of the athlete's career on their life and indicated that they were still working through many issues related to their transition and that of the athlete.

The ongoing process of transition. Parents and partners' transitions often extended over long periods and for many the process of adjustment seemed to be ongoing. In the quote below, it appears that Gill is still trying to come to terms with her role in her daughter's transitions, even several years after she retired. Gill feels a sense of guilt that she did not support her daughter, and that her retirement was somehow failure on her part.

> I felt I failed, and I still do. I feel there was a lot more for her to achieve, and that she retired too soon. Perhaps I failed her somehow and perhaps I wasn't around enough to ensure that she was happy during that period of time.

The partners of athletes were also dealing with issues and consequences related to the athletes' retirement. In particular, they expressed ongoing worries about financial security and had concerns about the athletes' career and relationship with work. For example, Emily felt that her partner was not prepared for a career outside sport and that he fell into insecure work as a result:

> There's no, there's no career path for them once they've finished playing…you're on your own so I think it's difficult…he wants me to work full time because I've only ever worked part time, now he wants me to get a full time job to take some of the pressure off him, he's always worrying about where the next bit of money's coming from so we argue about that a lot.

Dani also expressed concerns about her partner's career.

> I look at Dave and he has, he doesn't have a qualification but he has other experiences and it's thinking where do those, what jobs do those kind of fit into? And still that 9-to-5, will he ever fit into 9-to-5? Should he ever fit into 9-to-5? Could he ever work for somebody else? And maybe that's just not what he's destined to do, and that he carves a niche all the time with different things so he's, is he always kind of transitioning and moving on? Has he found, even now, has he found what he will continue to do? Does he know? Not quite sure.

The questions that Dani asked suggested that she was still wrestling with issues around insecurity, despite her partner retiring some years previously. There was a sense that Dani would like the security that would come if her partner had a 9-to-5 job, but she also recognises that many years as an athlete might make this difficult for him. There is perhaps a discrepancy between her ideal of a secure future and the reality that she faces and she appeared to be consciously working through what this means for her. She raises the question of how long transition should last and hints that it could be a never-ending process. This is perhaps difficult for her as this would perhaps also mean a never-ending transition of her own.

Personal and relational growth. Despite ongoing challenges, the passage of time and the chance for reflection seemed to bring positive meaning to some parents and partners' experiences and they expressed a sense of growth in themselves, the former athlete, and their relationship. The quote below highlights both the meaning that Jo ascribes to her experience of transition (i.e., a stronger relationship with her partner) and also the deliberate processes of

meaning-making that were used to attain and maintain this feeling. For example, a key part of the strength of her relationship with her partner was being able to talk and communicate openly with each other and putting time aside to be together:

> We've only ever got closer and stronger cos we've been through so much together… we spend a lot of time in a stressful environment…but we're very good at recognizing when that happens [stress] and it only takes an evening of having a chat about it and saying 'right let's look at the diary – we need to make sure we put some time aside just for us', I guess just to remind yourself of what's important.

Sometimes parents and partners' positive feelings were tempered with sadness and/or disappointment at how they handled the initial experience of transition. For example, Tony said:

> I wish I could have been more supportive and I could have helped her more but I didn't know how to… my communication wasn't as good and that's why I think I wasn't as supportive as I wish I could have…my communication now I think is much better and we're always aware of each other.

This quote suggests that Tony had made sense of his perceived failure to support his partner by attributing this to a lack of communication skills. He regretted not being able to help and support his partner in the way that he perhaps could have, but Tony's (later) understanding of these experiences facilitated a sense of personal and relational growth – namely, that they are closer and stronger as a result of the experience.

James felt proud that his daughter had overcome the difficulties that she had experienced after such a traumatic end to her career. His language in the quote below frames the transition as a 'victory'; however, this was also tempered by negative feelings – namely, a niggling sense of anger about what had happened:

> I'm still angry about it, I mean we've all moved on but I'm still angry about it…. she's now moved on…she's now in a much better place, so in a sense she's won, so she's come out the other side and despite what she was put through at the end of her career she's come out on top.

This quote demonstrates the fine balance between positive and negative emotions involved in meaning-making. James' view of his experience seems to be framed by the meaning that he has derived from his daughter's success in life following her retirement from sport. This enabled him to accept his anger and provides him with a sense of 'moving on'.

Discussion

The present research sought to explore the transition out of sport from the perspective of parents and partners of former elite athletes. Our interpretation of the participants' accounts position the transition out of sport as a process that not only impacts the athletes but also people in their close social network. That is, the findings suggest that parents and partners experienced their own transition when the athletes retired and the resulting changes in their own life had a negative influence on their wellbeing. At times, parents and partners also experienced difficulties in their relationships with the athletes, which reduced their capacity and willingness to provide support.

Parents and partners experienced a range of powerful emotions during the initial stage of transition, including sadness and anger at the circumstances surrounding the athlete's retirement and anxiety about the future. Parents and partners also had to renegotiate a new identity for themselves, manage changes in their close relationships, and deal with disruption to their day-to-day life. Parents and partners both provided a range of different types of social support to the athletes, but often felt the burden of being a supporter while also attempting to manage their own transition. In many cases, parents and partners felt that transition was still an ongoing process. However, despite some difficulties, many also saw positives in the way that they had negotiated their transition, felt that they had learned something about themselves, and experienced a sense of growth in their relationship with the former athlete.

Our findings suggest that the difficulties that parents and partners experienced were often magnified because the majority of the athletes experienced a difficult start to their transition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the extent to which athletes have control over their decision to retire influences their subsequent adjustment to retirement (Park et al., 2013). That is, athletes who retire for unplanned reasons such as injury or de-selection are more likely to experience difficulties (Park et al.). Although the distinction between planned and unplanned retirement was often blurred in the present research (e.g., one athlete pre-empted the loss of funding, another retired due to a loss of form), parents and partners tended to report that athletes typically struggled, regardless of the manner in which they retired.

The difficulties that athletes' experienced were often associated with a loss of self-esteem, which appeared to be related to uncertainty around their sense of self. These feelings of loss were mirrored by parents and partners, emphasising the idea that transition was a shared experience. Parents, in particular, described feelings of loss in the initial stage of transition and compared their experience to that of bereavement. This is similar to the way that many former athletes have described their transition (e.g., McKenna & Thomas, 2008)

and also supports the findings of Lally and Kerr (2008) – the only other study to explore the impact of transition on parents – who reported that the parents of retired gymnasts struggled to fill the gap that their daughter's retirement left in their life, even many years after they had retired.

The partners of former athletes also experienced change and loss, but in a different way to that of parents. As the athletes were away training and competing for much of the year, partners had developed their own careers, routines, and support networks. In many ways, this was a necessity as the athlete's commitment to their sport meant that partners had to adapt to a life where they saw the athlete fleetingly and at a time that suited the demands of sport. Thus, the partners of athletes had led separate lives and therefore transition fundamentally changed their relationships and the structure of their daily routines. Partners lost a sense of familiarity in their lives that led to a related, but somewhat parallel, transition to that experienced by the athlete. Partners often worried about money, their own career, parenting, and adjusting to spending more time with the former athlete around. Partners also experienced a loss of agency as they were no longer able to direct their own lives as they struggled to deal with the changes that the athlete's retirement had instigated.

Previous studies on transition from elite sport have reported that some athletes experiencing a difficult transition say that their parents and partners sometimes struggle to support them (Brown et al., 2018; Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Gilmore, 2008). The present research extends these findings by exploring the process from the perspective of parents and partners directly and suggests that athletes' reports of absent, or ineffective, support may be explained by what has been referred to as the 'dilemma of helping' (Coyne et al., 1990). That is, supporters often find it difficult to balance their own needs at the same time as attending to those of others. Research on life transitions outside of sport has found that supporters may find it difficult to listen to, understand, and act on another person's distress while struggling

with their own difficulties (Harris, Pistrang, & Barker, 2006). This reflects the findings of the present research which highlight the difficulties that some parents and partners faced when trying to manage their own transition while attempting to help to the former athletes with theirs.

This is not to say that parents and partners did not want to support the former athlete; they often expressed a strong desire to provide help, but were concerned and worried about the right course of action to take and many parents and partners felt ill-prepared to intervene. Providing support was complicated because parents and partners were experiencing disruptions to their own identity, uncertainty about the future, and often found it difficult to understand what the former athlete wanted from their life after sport. Thus, trouble communicating and difficulties managing expectations within the relationship posed additional challenges to providing support. Furthermore, parents and partners' attempts to provide support sometimes came at considerable cost to their own well-being. This finding is consistent with research on social support in other contexts, which suggests that providing social support to others can cause anxiety and distress as providers take on the burden of the recipient's difficulties (Goldsmith, 1992; Wortman & Lehman, 1985).

Despite the challenges and uncertainty that parents and partners experienced, on the whole they felt that they had played a positive role in the athletes' transitions. Effective support seemed to be underpinned by a sense of trust, open communication, and the feeling that parents, partners, and athletes were working through issues together. These factors played a stronger role as transition progressed as opportunities for mutual disclosure became more frequent. Research suggests that disclosing thoughts and emotions regarding a stressful experience to a supportive other can facilitate post-traumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). Furthermore, studies have found that self-disclosure can contribute to growth by enhancing feelings of closeness in relationships (Manne et al., 2004) and can also help people

to form shared narratives of survival from which they draw further strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Consistent with this idea, the findings of the present research suggest that, as time went by, parents, partners, and the athletes came to see transition as a shared experience, became more comfortable talking about issues that they were facing, and took comfort and pride in the way that they had reorganized and renegotiated their lives together.

At a theoretical level, the present findings suggest that much can be learned by examining the experience of transition from the perspective of those close to the person, as well as from the perspective of the individual themselves. The majority of existing research on the transition out of sport places relationships in the background, often characterising relationships simply as resources that facilitate successful adjustment for the athlete. For example, in describing social support as an 'available resource', Taylor and Ogilvie's (1994) model of adaption to retirement locates the process of transition within the individual athlete. This does not recognise the possibility that transition may be a shared experience that involves changes in close relationships and has consequences for the athletes *and* for the people in their close social networks. There is a need, therefore, for more complete theoretical approaches that can help us to understand the complexity of the interpersonal processes that are involved in the transition out of sport.

In this respect, family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) may offer a useful framework through which to conduct further research. Family systems theory suggests that each family member is part of an interdependent system. That is, when one family member experiences a change in their life, the other family member(s) also experience a change in their life, and the system as a whole changes (Broderick, 1993). This is the case for all types of relationships within a system (Cox & Paley, 2003). As such, systems theory offers an overarching framework to explore athletes' relationships with multiple different family members.

The most simple and fundamental unit in family systems theory is the relationship between two people, for example, the relationship between romantic partners or a parent and child (Brown, 1999). The findings of the present research support the basic premise of family systems theory that suggests that the quality of these dyadic relationships, and their ability to reorganise and adapt to change, is based on open communication, successful resolution of conflict, and the reciprocal nature of social support (Cox & Paley, 2003). These characteristics are important for athletes' relationships with both parents and partners. It is important to acknowledge, however, that previous research has outlined that the nature of romantic and parental relations differs in important ways, including the level of closeness and intimacy within a relationship, style and strength of attachment, and sources of stress and conflict (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Further research on the interpersonal aspects of transition could, therefore, choose to focus more closely on dyadic 'sub-units' in athletes social networks to take into account these differences, while at the same time recognising that dyadic relationships form part of a larger, interconnected system.

The interconnected nature of relationships is emphasised in the family systems concept of 'nonsummativity'. This suggests that the overall family system is more complex than simply the sum of each family member's, or dyad's, experiences, behaviours, and characteristics (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009). Thus, as well as looking at the interpersonal aspects of transition at the 'micro level' (e.g., partner and parent dyads), future research may also wish to explore athletes' overall network of social relationships that may include partners and parents, as well as siblings, and children. Exploring transition in this way may provide a way to investigate the complex interactions between the individual, dyadic, and collective aspects of transition, as athletes and members of their close social network negotiate complex emotions, competing aspirations, shared goals, and social support over an extended period of time.

Limitations, future research, and implications for practice

The conclusions above should be taken in the context of a number of limitations to the present research. First, it was only possible to conduct a single interview with each parent or partner, which may not be sufficient to explore and understand the complex experiences that are involved in transition. Furthermore, it is important to note that some of the parents and partners became emotional during the interview and clearly found it difficult to revisit some of their experiences. IPA relies on the participants' willingness to disclose and explore their experiences and it is possible that some parents and partners were reluctant to do so in order to avoid reliving any unpleasant emotions associated with their transition. Consequently, interesting and meaningful experiences and narratives may have been lost. In order to address these limitations, future research could consider longitudinal designs to explore patterns of support as the process of retirement unfolds. This may also give the researcher the opportunity to build rapport with participants and facilitate disclosure.

As previously discussed, a systems approach may be a useful theoretical framework to inform the design and delivery of future research. Such a framework might point to the use of dyadic (joint) interviews that invite parents, partners and athletes to explore their experience(s) together in order to provide a more detailed understanding of transition out of sport; ideally, within a longitudinal design as suggested above. A family systems/dyadic approach may also be useful for designing interventions to support athletes and their partner/parent during transition. According to theories and models of dyadic coping (e.g., Berg & Upchurch, 2007), people in close relationships interdependently and mutually influence each other's adjustment to stress. In 'common dyadic coping' (Bodenmann, 1997) both members of a partnership participate in the coping process in order to find problem-focused or emotion-focused solutions to stressful situations. On the basis of evidence that couples experiencing a life transition are more likely to maintain the quality of their

relationship and their own wellbeing if they engage in common dyadic coping (Rottmann et al., 2015), interventions designed to promote adjustment during transition could aim to support athletes *and* those close to them through, for example, joint problem solving, joint information seeking, self-disclosure and sharing of emotions. Such interventions may help athletes and their parents or partners to recognise the personal and shared aspects of transition and help them to work through issues together for the benefit of all those involved.

Dyadic interventions could be integrated into existing programs designed to support transition. Current career transition programs have traditionally been aimed at developing social, educational, and career-related skills and tend to focus on the development of transferable skills that can help athletes to transition from sport into a new career (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). Transition programs also include support and counselling components (Wylleman & Lavalle, 2004), but the present findings would suggest that this multidimensional approach could be strengthened by including a greater focus on the relational aspects of transition, the shared challenges that athletes and family members face, and the potential for joint coping efforts.

Conclusion

The present research used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore parents and partners' experiences of athletes' transition out of elite sport, and so provided insights into the interpersonal nature of the transition. In particular, parents and partners often experienced uncertainly and upheaval in their own lives as they adjusted to changing roles and dynamics in their relationship with the former athlete and renegotiated their own identity. The process of providing support to the former athlete was complicated by parents and partners' own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a supporter. Most parents and partners felt that, to some extent, their transition was still an ongoing process. However, opportunities for mutual disclosure and sharing emotions

increased as time went by and this helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective on the transition and a sense that their relationship with the former athlete had strengthened and grown. Taken together, these findings highlight the way that the transition out of sport can be explored at the level of the family or partnership and presents a more complex conceptual view that may offer a basis for future research.

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