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26 Nevertheless, findings to date suggest that there is variability in the support that athletes
27 receive and not all athletes get the support that they need (e.g., Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick,
28 1993). Furthermore, while social support has been studied primarily as a resource to aid
29 coping, the complexities involved in support exchanges and social relationships during the
30 transition out of elite sport have received less attention (Park et al., 2013).

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

45 The mechanisms through which social support influences outcomes are widely debated
46 (Haber, Cohen, Lucas, & Baltes, 2007). The stress and coping perspective suggests that social
47 support buffers the negative effects of stress, with received support thought to help people to
48 cope and perceived support thought to alter perceptions of potentially threatening situations
49 (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). However, the relationship between support and outcomes is
50 complex. Quantitative research on sporting performance (Freeman & Rees, 2008) and self-

51 confidence in sport (Rees & Freeman, 2007) has found that, when examined separately,
52 perceived and received support were able to buffer against stress, but when both kinds of
53 support were considered together, stress-buffering effects were observed primarily for
54 received support. Nevertheless, in research on social support outside sport, perceived support
55 tends to have a greater stress buffering effect than received support (Uchino, 2009).
56 Moreover, perceived support generally has a direct relationship with outcomes, such that
57 perceived support is important even in the absence of adversity and can provide people with
58 regular positive experiences that can enhance wellbeing (Thoits, 2011).

59 Despite these findings, research on perceived support during transition is limited.
60 Researchers who have studied perceived support have operationalized it as a coping resource
61 (e.g., Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Zoe Knowles, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2007), but this
62 may fail to fully account for the complex nature of supportive relationships (Lakey & Drew,
63 1990). Research on transition has tended to focus on the structural and functional dimensions
64 of social support by highlighting the types of support that athletes have received, and from
65 whom (Park et al., 2013). For example, athletes reported that when they received information
66 from organizations, former teammates, and coaches they were better able to manage their
67 transition (Park et al., 2012; Stephan, 2003). Furthermore, athletes who received tangible
68 support to develop their career as part of a formal support program from national sporting
69 organizations experienced fewer difficulties following retirement than those athletes who did
70 not receive support (Leung, Carre, & Fu, 2005). The importance of emotional and esteem
71 support has been discussed most widely, with findings suggesting that these types of support
72 can help with account making, reducing emotional distress, and fostering positive self-regard
73 (Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997; Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000;
74 Perna et al., 1996).

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

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

97 These findings appear to support a social cognitive perspective on social support (Lakey
98 & Drew, 1990). This approach suggests that, once beliefs about the supportiveness of others
99 are formed, they influence current thinking and experiences of support (Lakey,

100 McCabe, Fisicaro, & Drew, 1996). Social support can, therefore, be understood in the context
101 of the recipient's evaluations of supporters, and potential supporters, rather than by the
102 support itself (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The social cognitive view of social support shares
103 some assumptions with symbolic interactionism, which explicitly links knowledge of the self
104 to social roles and interactions with others (Stryker, 1987). Thus, social support is deemed to
105 create and sustain identity and to influence subjective feelings of self-esteem and self-worth
106 (Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Thoits, 2011).

107 **The present research**

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

121 **Method**

122 **Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

123 The study was designed and conducted according to the principles of Interpretative
124 Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). IPA is a detailed examination of subjective

125 experience and how people make sense of that experience. It is often described as falling on
126 the mid-point of the realist-relativist ontological continuum and shares philosophical
127 assumptions with critical realism (Shinebourne, 2011). IPA therefore accepts that gaining
128 access to reality depends on sensory perceptions and subjective interpretations that are partial
129 and imperfect (Fade, 2004). This perspective is congruent with the idea that perceptions and
130 experiences of the world are shaped by relatively enduring biochemical, economic, and social
131 structures (Willig, 1999). While these structures do not determine reality, they do make some
132 constructions of the world more readily available than others (Parker, 1992). The aim of the
133 present research then was not to describe objective reality, but rather to explore and
134 understand each participant's view of the world as related to the phenomenon of interest
135 (Smith, 1996). IPA draws heavily on a hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological
136 philosophy, such that language is seen as an important means of shaping, interpreting, and
137 recounting the meaning of experience. Similarly, experience is understood as being
138 influenced by the culture of a specific point in time, and can be shaped by prevailing cultural
139 practices related to, for example, age, gender, masculinity, and attitudes to career, as a person
140 is 'thrown into' a pre-existing world (Heidegger, 1962/1927). Therefore, IPA can reveal
141 something about a person's experience, but only their current position 'with' the world
142 (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). Moreover, because IPA sees people as 'sense-making
143 beings', the meaning that people give to their experience, in essence, becomes the experience
144 itself (Smith et al., 2009).

145 IPA was considered appropriate for investigating athlete's experiences of social
146 support because it subscribes to a phenomenological approach that explicitly attends to the
147 intersubjective nature of the world and the temporality of a phenomenon as experiences
148 unfold (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was well-suited therefore to the fundamentally interpersonal
149 nature of social support during the *process* of transition. Furthermore, given that retirement

150 from sport is an idiosyncratic process that likely varies considerably from person to person
151 (Park et al., 2013), it was hoped that IPA's focus on idiography would allow us to highlight
152 the divergent, as well as the convergent, aspects of the participants' experience. An
153 idiographic approach is more explicit in IPA than in other approaches to qualitative research
154 (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). For example, thematic analysis is predominantly focused on
155 identifying shared patterns of meaning across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

156 IPA was also chosen because of the stance that it takes toward cognition and
157 interpretation. The extent to which cognition and interpretation should play a role in
158 phenomenological research is contested (e.g., Allen-Collinson, 2009) and descriptive
159 approaches to phenomenology are generally more committed to defining the fundamental
160 structure or 'essence' of a particular phenomenon. However, IPA embraces interpretation in
161 the form of the 'double-hermeneutic', such that the researcher is attempting to make sense of
162 the participant's attempt to make sense of their world (Smith et al., 2009). From the
163 perspective of IPA, mental processes including reflection, rumination, and emotionally driven
164 cognition play a key role in a person's sense-making activities and constitute a fundamental
165 part of everyday experiences (Smith, 1996; Smith, 2009). Although phenomenology and
166 cognitivism are often viewed as opposing perspectives, several researchers have argued for a
167 more integrated approach (e.g., Gallagher & Varela, 2003), and IPA shares with models of
168 social cognition a belief in both an implicit (pre-reflective) and explicit (reflective) awareness
169 of self and others (Fuchs, 2013; Smith et al., 2009). Moreover, both IPA and models of social
170 cognition acknowledge that people do not approach social situations as a 'blank slate'. From
171 a phenomenological perspective, the sense and meaning of the past have a bearing on how the
172 person experiences and makes sense of the present (Blattner, 2005). Similarly, from a social
173 cognitive view, perceptions of past interpersonal experiences influence the way that people
174 perceive, experience, and interpret new events (Lakey & Drew, 1990). Thus, drawing on

175 these related ideas enabled us to explore the experiential nature of support, and also consider
176 whether and how the participants' perceptions of support and (potentially) supportive
177 relationships influence the meaning that they attached to their retirement and attempt to
178 adjust to life after sport.

179 **Participants**

180 Eight former elite athletes from the UK (four male and four female) aged between 29
181 and 46 years ($M = 36.75$, $SD = 6.18$) volunteered to take part in the research. All of the
182 participants had taken part in multiple major championships, and seven had competed at the
183 Olympic Games. Seven had competed in (different) summer Olympic sports and one in a
184 winter Olympic sport. Seven had competed in individual sports and one in a team sport. They
185 had been involved at an international level of sport for between 5 and 16 years ($M = 9.75$, SD
186 $= 4.02$) and seven of the participants were full-time athletes during this time (i.e., did not
187 have another career/were not in education). At the time of the interviews the participants had
188 been retired for between 2 and 12 years ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 3.99$).

189 **Procedure**

190 After obtaining institutional ethical approval, a purposive sample was recruited
191 through social media and the authors' existing contacts. IPA is best suited to data collection
192 methods that afford participants the opportunity to offer in-depth, first person accounts of
193 their experience (Smith et al., 2009). As such, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the
194 first author. The interviews were semi-structured, but flexible such that participants were able
195 to lead the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them including going beyond topics
196 addressed by the interview guide. Questions and probes were developed according to
197 guidelines on conducting interviews from a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Bevan,
198 2014; Smith et al., 2009) and explored the context, structure, and meaning of participants'
199 experiences; for example, "Can you tell me about your sporting career?" and "Can you tell

200 me about the circumstances regarding your retirement?” (the interview guide can be found in
201 Appendix 1). Participants were interviewed for between 65 and 180 minutes ($M = 83.12$, SD
202 $= 17.30$). All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were given
203 pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

204 **Data analysis**

205 In accordance with the interpretive phenomenological approach used, the reading of
206 the transcripts was informed by the concepts of intersubjectivity (i.e., understanding
207 experience through relationships), selfhood (i.e., agency and identity), temporality (i.e., the
208 processual nature of experience and the sense of past, present, and future), project (i.e., ability
209 to engage in activities regarded as central to one’s life), and embodiment (the body as a site
210 of experience, including emotions) (Ashworth, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Analysis of the
211 transcripts followed the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009). It began with several
212 readings of each transcript before a detailed set of notes and comments were recorded to
213 capture salient features of the account. Notes were made in three stages, with each focused on
214 a different level of phenomenological analysis and interpretation. The first stage focused on
215 describing the content and features of the account by paying close attention to the structure of
216 the participant’s experience. The second stage was concerned with the language that was used
217 by the participant, including identifying any repetition of particular words and phrases, the
218 use of metaphors, and the way that the account was expressed. The third stage examined the
219 accounts on a conceptual level, was more interpretive, and moved beyond what was explicitly
220 said in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning that was attached to what was
221 being discussed.

222 These notes were then used to develop emergent themes that served to condense the
223 data and capture the essential features and meaning of the account. Emergent themes were
224 then clustered together according to a shared meaning or a central concept in order to develop

225 superordinate themes. The whole process, from initial notes to developing superordinate
226 themes, was conducted for each participant separately. Finally, a cross-case analysis was
227 conducted, in which the themes and superordinate themes for each participant were assessed
228 for patterns, similarities, and differences. Identifying higher order concepts made it possible
229 to link the participants' experiences, yet still reflect divergence and maintain the idiographic
230 focus that is central to IPA.

231 **Research quality and methodological rigor**

232 In IPA there is no possibility of revealing, or attempt to uncover, an objective reality
233 (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). As such, it would be inappropriate to use a set of universal
234 criteria designed to examine and validate claims to knowledge in respect of an objective
235 'truth'. Indeed, Smith et al. (2009) acknowledged the need to evaluate IPA research in
236 relation to criteria that are appropriate to the approach, rather than a 'checklist' that should be
237 applied to all qualitative research. With this in mind, it was hoped that quality would be
238 enhanced by considering the application of IPA's methodology relative to the purpose and
239 context of the research.

240 To aid in this process, we considered the four general guidelines offered by Yardley
241 (2008) as they offer a more pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the quality of research
242 (Smith et al., 2009). 'Sensitivity to context' involved efforts to understand the social-cultural
243 milieu of elite sport and how this could impact participants' experiences of retirement. For
244 example, the present research was part of a wider project that made it possible to spend time
245 engaged in informal conversation with athletes, retired athletes, coaches, and practitioners
246 working within sport. At the same time, there was a need to be aware of how existing and
247 developing knowledge about transition may lead to preconceptions that could influence the
248 research process. Thus, a research diary was kept to facilitate a self-critical and reflexive

249 approach to the research and helped to highlight any prior assumptions and ideas about the
250 research topic and any emotional reactions to the data during collection and analysis.

251 'Commitment and rigor' were addressed throughout the design and delivery of the
252 research by ensuring that the sample that was selected was appropriate for the aims of the
253 research, undertaking a pilot interview, and developing meticulous data collection and
254 analysis procedures. In particular, documenting the analytical procedures that were used
255 produced an 'audit trail' that was scrutinized by the research team. In this respect, the primary
256 analysis was conducted by the first author with the other authors acting as 'critical friends'
257 (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This involved reading and, in some cases, coding transcripts;
258 'auditing' passages of text that were presented to support particular themes; discussing the
259 content of the transcripts one-to-one and in groups; and contributing to the development of
260 themes and the structure of the cross-case analysis. The audit trail also helped to enhance
261 'transparency and coherence' by clearly delineating the methods used and the decisions that
262 were made throughout the research process.

263 The 'impact and importance' of the study can be related to the steps taken to enhance
264 the quality of the research, as outlined above, and it is hoped that a thoughtfully and
265 systematically delivered project can enhance how the transition out of sport is understood. It
266 is important not to position retirement as inherently problematic, but there are numerous
267 findings to suggest that many athletes find the process difficult (Park et al., 2013). Therefore,
268 research that highlights athletes' experience of support during transition, whether difficult or
269 positive, can add to the debate around how athletes can be better supported in the future.

270 **Results**

271 The participants' accounts described two broad stages of transition. The first stage
272 was characterized by feelings of loss, denial, and uncertainty about the future. Two
273 superordinate themes were identified in this stage: (a) 'feeling cared for and understood',

274 which included the subordinate themes of ‘support from family’, ‘support from mentors and
275 peers’, and ‘support from within sport’; and (b) the ‘ability to seek and ask for support’,
276 which included the subordinate themes of ‘difficulty asking for help’, and ‘accessing new and
277 existing social networks’. The second stage of transition was characterized by a shift in the
278 participants’ self-concept and was described in a superordinate theme labelled: (c) ‘the role of
279 support in the transition of the self’, which included the subordinate themes ‘redefining
280 athletic identity’, and ‘becoming a supporter’. The superordinate themes were developed,
281 therefore, to reflect the temporal aspect of transition. The resulting list of superordinate
282 themes, themes, and sub-themes is presented in Appendix 2.

283 **Feeling cared for and understood**

284 Participants reported finding the period immediately after their retirement emotionally
285 distressing and it was common for them to report feeling lost, confused, and worried about
286 the future. All the participants provided specific examples of support that they had received
287 from various people during this time. This support was deemed to be helpful to some extent;
288 however, it was the sense that people were simply *there* for them that appeared to provide the
289 participants with the strongest sense that they were supported. This sense of supporters ‘being
290 there’ was closely linked to the participants’ previous experiences of support, the
291 characteristics of supporters, and seemed to rest on feelings that supporters understood them
292 and what they were going through.

293 **Support from family.** All eight participants discussed the support that they received
294 from close family – that is, parents and/or a partner/spouse – with seven describing the
295 experience of support as positive. For example, Cathy retired because she was not selected to
296 compete at a major event. This was a distressing experience and she retired immediately
297 afterward. Here, she discusses the support that she received from her parents during the initial
298 stage of her transition:

299 It was giving me time...they said to me 'you can live with us for as long as you need,
300 no pressure'...there was no financial pressure, they knew I wasn't making money and,
301 you know, they just were there. I think 'cos my Dad had been through the whole
302 journey and he knew the ins and outs, and I didn't have to explain anything to him
303 and I think that's really important, it's just being there to listen.

304 The instrumental support that Cathy's parents gave her by offering her a place to live
305 helped to situate Cathy's initial experience of transition within the family, perhaps providing
306 her with a feeling of security and emotional comfort. However, Cathy's statement that her
307 parents were "just there" suggests that it was her perception of the availability of support that
308 was particularly important. Furthermore, because her father had been through the "whole
309 journey" there was a shared understanding of what transition meant and how Cathy would
310 feel supported.

311 Ben, who retired after a 12 year career in elite sport, described similar feelings when
312 talking about the support of his wife throughout his career and into his transition:

313 She's just always been there...always being there, I think that's the important thing,
314 and actually just, I was going to say be a shoulder to cry on but it's not that, it's
315 actually just knowing somebody's there all the time.

316 Ben's comments indicate a sense of continuity and familiarity that underpin his stable
317 beliefs about the availability of support from his wife. Their relationship was, and is, a shared
318 experience and Ben's feelings of being supported seemed to extend beyond individual acts of
319 support to capture a deep sense of closeness that he felt with his wife.

320 Gemma, who retired after a long career that extended over three Olympic cycles, was
321 the only participant who described a lack of support from a close family member.

322 **Gemma:** I think he [Ian – Gemma's partner] openly says it's probably the worst ten to
323 twelve months of his life pretty much was when I retired, 'cos he didn't know what to

324 do, he didn't know...and to me if you're very independent, I'm very independent, I've
325 always been independent...I was away for a third of the year and suddenly I'm in the
326 house and I'm like arghhh. It was horrible, I felt claustrophobic, and he hated it as
327 well.

328 **Interviewer:** Do you think Ian understood what you were going through?

329 **Gemma:** God no, no, no.....only someone who's been through it can understand.

330 Unlike the other participants, Gemma's life as an athlete had been somewhat separate
331 from her life with her partner; he wasn't part of her support network during her career and,
332 perhaps as a consequence, she struggled to see him as a source of support when she had
333 retired. Unlike some of the other participants, there was no sense of shared experience related
334 to Gemma's career. As a result, there was an absence of shared knowledge and understanding
335 about what transition meant for her. This appeared to underpin a lack of perceived support on
336 Gemma's behalf and a much more difficult experience during transition.

337 **Support from mentors and peers.** Gemma was one of five participants who received
338 support from other retired athletes. This support appeared helpful because the mutual
339 understanding between people who had been through similar experiences seemed to foster a
340 sense of openness and trust. This allowed the participants to feel comfortable enough to
341 disclose how they were feeling without the fear that somehow their difficulties would be
342 deemed trivial and insignificant. Support from peers was especially important for Ben, who
343 described how another retired athlete had provided him with career advice, emotional
344 support, and mentored him during his initial stage of transition:

345 Sue, she got a medal in [year of Olympics] for [name of sport], she got silver, she
346 basically mentored me through it... hand-held me quite a bit through it... I think for
347 me it was just somebody who could say actually "I've been through it", it's like "I'm
348 always here to chat cos I've been through what you're going through".

349 This quote emphasizes the temporal nature of transition and invokes a sense of Sue
350 physically holding and leading Ben in the right direction. Because Sue had experienced
351 transition herself she was deemed to know ‘the way’, and was able to offer Ben a vision of a
352 future outside of sport. In contrast, Luke, who retired through injury just before an Olympic
353 Games, reported feeling lost without a role model. He wished that he had more support to get
354 “through it” from people who had experienced something similar:

355 I didn’t have anyone I could pick up the phone to and say “Hey, I’m about to retire,
356 err I’ve got this, this, and this going on; I’m feeling a bit lost, what did you do?” And
357 for someone to say “Yeah, it’s shit but you can get through it”.

358 **Support from within sport.** All of the participants talked about their relationships
359 with people and organizations within their sport. They all felt that the level of support offered
360 from within sport was limited. Ben felt that sports tend to commodify athletes and support for
361 transition was not taken seriously enough:

362 Within [Governing body] it was very much your job to produce an Olympic Medal,
363 after that they don’t really care...that’s my bugbear about transitioning; it’s actually a
364 tick box exercise, you know it’s very much “you’ve done your job”, and actually
365 support wise from [Governing body] I’ve had zero.

366 Three of the participants retired through injury and there was a sense that not enough
367 was done to support them. Jo retired through injury after well over a decade of competing at
368 an international level. Her sense of emotional loss was embodied in the loss of her physical
369 functioning and she was angry about a lack of support from her governing body:

370 They don’t care, they don’t care, it’s when you’re done, you’re finished, you’re out,
371 even phoning, not one phone call from the governing body when I was injured after
372 [Olympic Games], not one phone call, and that says a lot to me... having pushed my

373 body so hard for so long for my country I think we should receive ongoing medical
374 support, that's the only thing I really asked for but no, absolutely nothing whatsoever.

375 Jo's language has connotations of her going into sporting battle for her country and
376 feeling let down, perhaps even betrayed, because her commitment wasn't recognized or
377 repaid. It is interesting to note the language that Ben and Jo both used; in particular, the
378 references to the 'governing bodies' and use of the pronoun 'they'. This seems to suggest that
379 there was no culture or system of support in place for them, and that once they had apparently
380 served their purpose they quickly became surplus to requirements.

381 Half of the participants described the importance of the changing nature of their
382 relationship with their coach during transition. This could be a difficult transition in itself,
383 especially for those who had built up a strong relationship with their coach over many years.
384 Participants often stated that coaches were willing to offer support, but the nature of elite
385 sport meant that they had to 'move on' much quicker than the athletes. For example, Janet,
386 who was with her coach for the whole of her ten year career, described how difficult it was
387 when this relationship changed after she retired:

388 It was just all of a sudden...he got another really great [athlete] and then she had *my*
389 coach...and so I saw it as a little bit of betrayal because he was *my* coach. I found that
390 quite hard...and then when I moved away (from her training base) we'd just keep in
391 touch by email and I'd try and visit when I could, but it was almost a sense of loss of
392 that as well, you lose that relationship... just that sturdy figure being there, all of a
393 sudden not being there.

394 The sudden change in Janet's relationship emphasizes the way that the presence, or
395 indeed absence, of relationships, fixes the meaning of subjective experience. That is, Janet's
396 experience of the world was different without the physical and psychological closeness she

397 shared with her coach. The shared meaning of their relationship (namely, Janet's career) was
398 gone and it seemed like Janet experienced the world as a lonelier place as a result.

399 **Ability to seek and ask for support**

400 The second superordinate theme that was identified from participants' accounts
401 concerned their ability to seek and ask for support, which differed considerably during the
402 initial stages of transition and appeared to influence their experiences of transition.

403 **Difficulty asking for help.** A number of participants reported finding it difficult to
404 ask for help, even when they were experiencing significant psychological distress. For
405 example, Gemma said:

406 I got to a point, it was about nine or ten months afterward, and I was in quite a bad
407 place and I actually thought about counselling because I was crying all the time. I just
408 didn't know who else to turn to and I remember going, I just need to talk to someone
409 about this, I need to talk to someone about this. But then, I don't know why, I didn't. I
410 don't know who, I mean yellow pages? What do you do? Counsellor? (mimics looking
411 through book). Then I just remember thinking, can you imagine...you know, people
412 are going to counselling because they've got, they've got real serious issues, I'm
413 talking about how I don't play sport anymore, they must be there going seriously, you
414 know, get over it. I really thought that they would just not take me seriously because
415 people go to counselling for really serious things...and you're like 'I'm not a [sport]
416 player anymore' (mimics crying).

417 Janet described a similar experience. She eventually received treatment for depression
418 but initially found it difficult to ask for help:

419 **Interviewer:** So you didn't share what you are going through with anyone at the
420 time?

421 **Janet:** No, I didn't particularly want to, and I don't think people ask or know how to
422 ask what's going on, so there's no real opportunity to. I think when you're finding
423 things hard it's even harder to ask, or to talk to someone, or to, yeah just to bring it up
424 with people.

425 **Interviewer:** You found that that was an actively difficult thing?

426 **Janet:** Yeah, yeah I think because you see so many people succeeding, and
427 essentially I just bought my own flat, I'd got a job, everything seemed fine, so people
428 don't know that anything's wrong.

429 The extracts above illustrate the difficulty that some of the participants had accessing
430 social support. In Gemma's case, she discussed feeling fearful of being judged for not being
431 able to deal with what she believed others would think was a trivial issue. Janet expressed
432 being reluctant to approach people to discuss her difficulties because she saw people around
433 her "succeeding". This negative social comparison also suggests that feelings of shame and
434 embarrassment may have led her to be unwilling to ask for help. At the same time, being
435 'mentally tough' appeared to be a salient part of the self-concept of many of the participants.
436 Therefore, to ask for help might be seen to make them appear vulnerable and further threaten
437 an already fragile sense of self. Janet's perception that potential supporters either did not
438 recognize her need for support, or lacked the skills to be able to approach such a sensitive
439 subject, suggests that the difficulty asking for help that she described was compounded by
440 potential supporter's apparent failure to offer support.

441 **Accessing new and existing social networks.** Two of the participants were more
442 willing and able to get the support they needed. Alan retired because of the demands that
443 sport placed on his relationships and as a result of losing funding. The practical and societal
444 need to establish a source of income seemed important and he saw his networks as a source
445 of help to get work.

446 I used my networks and what have you for contacts for jobs so it, I guess it certainly
447 softened my landing to know that there was a bit of income, and if you're not
448 involved in things, you can probably wallow a bit but for me I was quite busy with
449 everything really so it wasn't as much of a struggle.

450 Being busy and proactively managing his transition was also important for Luke.

451 Here, he talks about reaching out to his social network outside of sport:

452 My friends were great for connections...you know, broadening my network, so
453 meeting people going 'Yeah, I've retired now', they go 'what are you doing?', I say
454 'well I'm really interested in this', 'great, I know someone who does that, I'll connect
455 you', and like literally going to networking events, have you ever been to networking
456 events? Funny old game, but you know, you've got to put yourself out there.

457 Luke had a strong sense of agency underpinned by a plan. Most of the participants
458 who were interviewed expressed the belief that planning for retirement would distract them
459 from their sporting goals. Luke was one of only two participants who had made any plans for
460 their life after retirement before they retired, and it was notable that both of these participants
461 described fewer difficulties during and after transition compared to the other participants. By
462 developing a plan for his life after sport, Luke was able to identify the support that he needed,
463 and his willingness to seek out supportive relationships helped him to feel that he was making
464 progress toward his goals.

465 **The role of support in the transition of the self**

466 The third superordinate theme identified in the participants' accounts captures the
467 second broad stage of transition, which was concerned with the participants' longer term
468 adjustment and their efforts to shape a new life beyond sport. After many years spent in the
469 elite sport environment, it was perhaps unsurprising that most of the participants had a strong
470 athletic identity. This self-concept was supported by the social practices and culture within

471 sport and by the participants' own social networks. However, once the participants had left
472 the sporting environment and their social networks had changed they were left with little to
473 support their sense of self. Nonetheless, all of the participants begun to expand their social
474 networks as transition progressed and this renewed sense of connectedness helped to reshape
475 their identities.

476 **Redefining athletic identity.** All of the athletes talked in some way about issues
477 relating to their identity. The process of reshaping identity was not necessarily about forming
478 a new sense of self, but was more about redefining and reappraising the 'old' athletic self. For
479 example, in the extract below, Cathy talks about getting her first job working for a sport
480 related charity. She talks about how feeling supported by her employer, and the trust and
481 confidence that they gave her, helped her to see her athletic self in a more positive light:

482 ... this organization is welcoming me with open arms...and I was having more of a
483 positive identity with my athlete career, and I was realising all of the positive things
484 that came out of it, because at the time it was very negative, you know, everything
485 was quite black and not good, but you realize your skills are transferrable, you realize
486 everything that you've learned from sport, and you realize that everything that you've
487 done hasn't come to nothing – because it's made me the person I am today.

488 Some of the participants described finding it difficult to deal with the apparent loss of
489 their 'elite' status. However, they were able to redefine their sense of self by developing ties
490 with new groups that were perceived to be of high status. For example, Rob talked about
491 becoming a coach within his sport after his retirement two years prior to the interview:

492 I am now involved in coaching... I'm sort of leading at the moment...my actual
493 development has gone from playing to then being comfortable and competent enough
494 as a person to coach this group who are highly opinionated...but I've also become

495 good friends with them too...so it's really challenging, but good, great company, great
496 people that are helping me work out where I want to go.

497 Coaching helped Rob to feel connected, and the new social ties increased his feeling
498 that support was available. More important, however, is what membership of this group did
499 for his sense of self – Rob began to see himself as a leader of what he perceived to be a high
500 status group (i.e., the coach of a group of athletes) and, by taking on this role, he was able to
501 use some of the skills that he had developed in sport in a new environment. This may have
502 gone some way toward helping to foster his feelings of competence and self-esteem, and
503 helped him to establish positive self-regard.

504 **Becoming a supporter.** One of the most salient aspects of the participants'
505 experiences as they moved further into their transition was their experience of supporting
506 others. Many of the participants described themselves as selfish when they were competing
507 and, indeed, thought that this was a necessary part of being an elite athlete. However, by
508 reorienting their identity towards helping others when they had retired, the participants were
509 able to find a way to regain their sense of self-worth and often learned something about
510 themselves and/or their transition in the process. For example, Gemma talked about her
511 experience of supporting young people in her role at a sport charity:

512 ...they made me realize, they made me go back on my journey. Instead of going I'm
513 great 'cos I won this, and I'm great 'cos I won that, and it's all about me, they made
514 me look back and go well who helped me? How did I get here?

515 Many of the athletes, in some way, became supporters or mentors to other athletes.
516 This was highlighted by Alan when he talked about his transition from being an athlete to a
517 role in sport administration.

518 I got involved with it because I thought it was a good thing to do for other people and
519 I wanted to represent other athletes. I had no idea what was involved but it's turned

520 out to be a bit of a life changer to be honest, the whole kind of identity thing, there's
521 something there from a kind of a human perspective in terms of rather than "I'm an
522 athlete" now it's "I'm a Sports Administrator".

523 Helping other athletes through their transition was often a powerful experience that
524 often revealed new insights on the participants' own experience. As Cathy says:

525 ...I offered that safe place for them to, to release...to be felt like they'd been listened
526 to and supported...and I was starting to understand the different stages of the
527 transition that I'd been through, and that it was okay to go through that...because you
528 just understand that it was totally normal to go through how I was feeling.

529 Helping others was at the heart of what it meant for the participants to adjust to life
530 after sport. This was highlighted, again by Cathy, when talking about what 'success' meant to
531 her:

532 ...it comes down to helping others actually...I'm doing something that is gonna make
533 me a better person where I'm constantly learning and improving. But also that's
534 gonna positively impact upon others, and where I can use my skills and everything
535 that I've learned along the way to support others.

536 Helping others was a way of striving for something that was deemed to be socially
537 useful, and it reaffirmed the participants' self-esteem and sense of self-worth that was lost
538 when they retired from sport. There was a strong sense throughout the participants' accounts
539 that they wanted to take something positive from the experience of transition, which again
540 invoked a sense of personal growth and reappraisal of their athletic identity.

541 **Discussion**

542 The present research investigated elite athletes' experiences of social support during
543 retirement using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The findings suggested that
544 participants experienced a more positive transition if they felt cared for by people that they

545 believed understood them and what they were going through. The findings also suggested
546 that participants often struggled to ask for support, particularly concerning issues around their
547 mental health. However, those who were willing and able to ask for help, for example, by
548 networking and seeking support to develop their career after sport found it easier to adjust to
549 life in retirement. As transition progressed, the participants were able to establish new
550 relationships and social roles that fostered a sense of being supported, as well as providing
551 opportunities to positively reappraise their sense of self through the experience of supporting
552 others.

553 The findings of the present research complement and extend previous work which
554 suggests that social support can help athletes to adjust to a life after sport. Specifically, the
555 research adds a closer analysis of the interpersonal nature of support, and a more detailed
556 focus on the ways that appraisals of support and supportive relationships can fundamentally
557 shape athletes' experience of transition. The findings reflect social cognitive and symbolic
558 interactionist views of social support (Lakey & Drew, 1990) to the extent that a strong sense
559 of support was dependant on perceptions of supporters, often gained through previously
560 shared and meaningful experiences, or an understanding that supporters had been through a
561 similar experience. Illustrating how these experiences influenced transitions using a
562 phenomenological approach highlighted the way that the participants experienced and
563 understood their retirement as an interpersonal process (i.e., the concept of intersubjectivity),
564 what support meant for their sense of agency and identity (i.e., selfhood), and the process of
565 personal development and the sense of growth they experienced as their transitions
566 progressed (i.e., temporality).

567 The present research found that a common feature of effective social support was the
568 strength and closeness of relationships. Closeness in a relationship signals to the members of
569 that relationship that they are liked, loved, and valued and is often the foundation of feeling

570 supported (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). The present research found that a sense of closeness
571 and trust between the recipient and the person providing support appeared to be crucial for
572 support to be seen as available and helpful. That is, when the participants felt that the person
573 supporting them understood them and what they were going through, then they felt
574 supported. Thus, supportive relationships and social support did not simply involve an
575 exchange of resources. Rather, the shared, intersubjective experience of support enriched the
576 participants' understanding of their retirement and helped to make their transition a more
577 positive experience. Sadly, however, our findings also highlight that some athletes may have
578 difficulties maintaining close relationships during transition. For example, Gemma often
579 struggled to adjust to life in retirement because she found it difficult to connect with potential
580 supporters, including close family, leading to a more isolating experience. This echoes the
581 findings of previous studies, which have found a link between a lack of perceived support and
582 mental health difficulties, such as depression (Dennis & Ross, 2006; Tower & Kasl, 1996).

583 A significant contribution of our findings is to draw attention to the role that help-
584 seeking, or lack thereof, can play in the process of transition. Previous studies have suggested
585 that athletes going through transition actively seek the social support that they need (Park et
586 al., 2012). There was some evidence of this in the current study; for example, Luke's ability
587 to 'reach out' to new people helped him to further his career development, exercise control
588 over his transition, and enabled him to begin adjusting to his new life. This is consistent with
589 cognitive perspectives of phenomenology, such that Luke's initial sense of agency was
590 strengthened through his experience of acting (Bayne, 2008), and also supports previous
591 research that suggests that athletes who feel that they have more control over their life
592 experience more positive transitions (Park et al., 2013).

593 However, many of the participants in the present research found it difficult to ask for
594 support, especially in respect to mental health issues. This finding supports previous research

595 which suggests that athletes often find it difficult to ask for help for these issues due to the
596 perceived stigma associated with doing so (Wood, Harrison, & Kucharska, 2016). A potential
597 explanation for the apparent reluctance to seek help is that athletes are often discouraged
598 from showing psychological, emotional, and physical weakness when competing (Sinden,
599 2010). Thus, it is possible that unrealistic and unachievable cultural norms related to the
600 physical and mental toughness of athletes maybe internalized and remain a salient part of a
601 former athlete's identity long after retirement (Andersen, 2011; Barker, Barker-Ruchti,
602 Rynne, & Lee, 2014; Tibbert, Andersen, & Morris, 2015). For these former athletes, asking
603 for help may incur a social cost (for a review, see Lee, 1997). That is, it is possible that a
604 perceived loss of competence and autonomy may weigh heavily on elite athletes who see
605 themselves as highly competent, high status individuals (Stephan, 2003; Webb, Nasco, Riley,
606 & Headrick, 1998). Indeed, the feelings of shame and embarrassment that seemed to underpin
607 some of the participants' reluctance to seek support may be related to the perceived social
608 costs associated with losing their 'elite' identity.

609 The findings of the present research suggest that identity continued to play a crucial
610 role as transitions progressed, but in a more positive way. Specifically, expanding social
611 networks and forming new social relationships helped the participants to reappraise their
612 sense of self by providing the basis for being supported, feeling supported, and providing
613 support to others. All of the participants found that providing support to others was just as
614 effective at facilitating adjustment to retirement, if not more so, than receiving support. This
615 finding is supported by a number of empirical studies that suggest the act of 'giving' can
616 foster a sense of making a positive contribution to someone's life that can enhance one's own
617 positive self-regard (e.g., Steffens, Cruwys, Haslam, Jetten, & Haslam, 2016). Indeed, early
618 models of social support included giving support to others as a means of promoting wellbeing
619 and ameliorating the impact of stressful life events (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Weiss, 1974).

620 To our knowledge, however, the present findings are the first empirical evidence that
621 highlights how providing support can have a positive effect for athletes transitioning out of
622 sport. In doing so, the findings extend the traditional view of support during transition beyond
623 that of a coping resource used in times of stress. Instead, the findings suggest that social
624 support can be conceptualized as a social process that can help athletes' to flourish (Knights
625 et al., 2016) and act as a mechanism for growth (for a review, see Howells, Sarkar, &
626 Fletcher, 2017).

627 **Limitations, future research, and implications for practice**

628 The present research used retrospective interviews; as such, it may have been difficult
629 for participants to recall specific experiences of support that they found helpful (or
630 unhelpful), and how this influenced their overall sense of feeling supported. The research is
631 also limited because it was only possible to conduct a single interview with each participant,
632 which may not have been sufficient to explore a complex experience such as retirement from
633 sport. This may also have restricted the opportunity for the interviewer to build rapport with
634 the participants, and therefore limited what they were willing to reveal about a very personal
635 and often emotional experience. Male participants in particular may have been unwilling to
636 discuss potential issues related to their mental health because of concerns connected to a
637 perceived loss of power, masculinity, and cultural norms around disclosure of such issues
638 (Emslie, Ridge, Ziebland, & Hunt, 2006). In this regard, the interview dynamics between the
639 male researcher and male participants are relevant as some men may regulate their
640 behaviours and interactions if they perceive that other men are monitoring them; as such,
641 interviews may provide opportunities to 'perform' stoical and dominant masculinities (Ridge,
642 Emslie, & White, 2011).

643 Future studies could use longitudinal designs to mitigate these limitations by seeking
644 to explore patterns of support as the process of retirement unfolds. More regular contact with

645 participants as they are immersed in their transition may also provide more vivid descriptions
646 of experiences of support and may build trust that could facilitate deeper, more nuanced
647 accounts. Future research could also explore social support from the perspective of the
648 providers of support. That is, the present research describes how family members, coaches,
649 and peers played a crucial role in transition, but this knowledge could be expanded by
650 exploring the experiences of these people directly; understanding what it is like for them as
651 providers of support could offer a different perspective on the nature of what is a
652 fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon.

653 The findings of the present research emphasize that it is the quality of relationships
654 that often underpins the feeling of being supported (rather than the quality of the support
655 itself), and that providing support can facilitate the process of adjustment just as much as, if
656 not more so, than receiving support. These findings constitute a type of analytical
657 generalization by offering a new and more nuanced conceptual insight into the nature of
658 support during transition (see Smith, 2018, for a review of generalizing qualitative research).
659 The present findings may also achieve naturalistic generalization (Stake, 1995) to the extent
660 that they may resonate with the personal experiences or tacit understandings of other retired
661 athletes.

662 The potential for these generalizations suggests the need to consider the practical
663 applications of the findings. For instance, previous researchers have suggested that
664 practitioners working with athletes in transition should encourage them to confide in close
665 others in order to help them confront and understand their transition (Grove, Lavalley,
666 Gordon, & Harvey, 1998). The findings of the present research support this idea, but also
667 suggest that athletes may be unwilling or unable to engage with potential supporters in the
668 first instance. With this in mind, self-help interventions could be a less threatening first step
669 towards encouraging retiring athletes to engage with support and seek help, especially if

670 delivered online (Cunningham, Gulliver, Farrer, Bennett, Carron-Arthur, 2014). Another
671 possible way to facilitate a positive transition is to consider intervention programs that are led
672 by former athletes. Evidence from outside sport suggests that interventions that are led by
673 peers can reduce anxiety, depression, and protect against stress during major life events (for a
674 review see, Miyamoto & Sono, 2012). Peer-led interventions in general can often benefit both
675 the recipient of support and the provider (Schwartz, 1999; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999) and this
676 reciprocal relationship opens up the possibility of developing mutually beneficial support
677 programs that can help a relatively large number of athletes during transition, and create a
678 self-sustaining community of supporters.

679 **Conclusion**

680 The present research illustrates the way that experiences of social support influences
681 the process of transition out of sport. The findings draw particular attention to the way that
682 past experiences of support and the characteristics of supporters contribute to the feeling of
683 being supported. It was this sense of feeling supported that played a crucial role in the
684 process of adjustment. The ability to seek out potentially supportive relationships also
685 appeared to be important. However, the findings also highlight a number of actual or
686 perceived barriers to seeking help that often accrued from the participants' perception that
687 potential supporters may not understand what they were going through and their fear of being
688 perceived as 'weak'. However, as transition progressed, the experience of providing support
689 to others helped the participants to make sense of their transition, in that it seemed to offer
690 them a way to use the knowledge and skills that they had gained through sport and presented
691 the opportunity to re-evaluate and reshape their sense of self.

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