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

Christopher J. Brown
The University of Sheffield
Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Cathedral Court, 1 Vicar Lane, Sheffield, S1 2LT. cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thomas L. Webb
The University of Sheffield
Department of Psychology, University of Sheffield, Cathedral Court, 1 Vicar Lane, Sheffield, S1 2LT. t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk

Mark A. Robinson
The University of Leeds
Leeds University Business School, Maurice Keyworth Building, University of Leeds, Leeds, LS2 9JT. m.robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk

Rick Cotgreave
Mobius Performance and Lane4 Management Ltd.
Station Road, Bourne End, SL8 5QF. rick.cotgreave@lane4.co.uk

All correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Christopher Brown at the address above.

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Abstract

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

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

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

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

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

Keywords: *career transition, identity, IPA, relationships, retirement from sport.*

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Retirement from elite level and professional sport, often referred to as the transition out of sport, is the process of ending a competitive career as an athlete and beginning a new life (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). It is widely recognized that athletes need to adjust to numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes when they stop competing (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). Furthermore, evidence suggests that, while some athletes find adjusting to these changes relatively straightforward, others find it a long and emotionally distressing experience (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). Extant research has highlighted numerous personal and contextual factors that influence the process of adjustment including the athlete's age, gender, nationality, level of education, financial status, relationship status, reason for retirement, self-concept, level of pre-retirement planning, social support, use of coping strategies, and satisfaction with career achievements (for reviews, see Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016; Park et al., 2013).

The way that these factors influence the experience of transition varies from person to person; however, several consistent findings have been identified. For example, athletes who retire suddenly and/or are forced to retire (e.g., through injury) typically find the transition to retirement more difficult (e.g., Lotysz & Short, 2004), whereas athletes who have prepared for their life after sport before they retire tend to adjust better (e.g., Lally, 2007). Identity also plays an important role in the process of transition, with evidence suggesting that athletes whose identity is based on participation and success in sport tend to be more vulnerable to psychological difficulties, such as depression (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). One of the most consistent findings is the importance of social support during transition, with athletes who feel supported typically finding it easier to adjust to life after sport (Park et al., 2013).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The present research

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

Method

Methodology and philosophical underpinning

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

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

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

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

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

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

Participants

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

Procedure

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

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

Data analysis

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

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

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

Research quality and methodological rigor

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

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

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

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

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

Results

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

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

Feeling cared for and understood

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Ability to seek and ask for support

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Being busy and proactively managing his transition was also important for Luke. Here, he talks about reaching out to his social network outside of sport:

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

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

The role of support in the transition of the self

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Limitations, future research, and implications for practice

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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Appendix 1

Study interview guide

Questions	Possible follow up questions and prompts
1. Can you tell me about your sporting career?	Can you describe a typical week for you when you were competing? What did it mean to you to be an athlete?
2. Can you tell me about the circumstances regarding your retirement?	What was the reason for your retirement? Who was involved in the decision making process?
3. How would you describe your experience of retirement and transition from sport?	How would you describe the impact the experience has had on your life? How did you react to the changes you experienced? Why did you react in that way? How do you feel about your retirement experience?
4. Can you tell me about your relationships during transition?	How would you describe the impact retirement had on your relationships? What does your partner think about your transition?
5. Can you tell me about any help you received during your transition?	To what extent did you feel supported? Who supported you? What did they do to help? Why was that helpful?
6. Can you tell me more about your life right now?	How do you see yourself now? What is important in your life? Why is this important?

Table 1

Table of themes identified from the interviews

Superordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Themes
Feeling cared for and understood	Support from family	Career and transition as a shared experience
	Support from mentors and peers	Athletes as commodities
	Support from within sport	Trust
		Shared understanding
Ability to seek and ask for support	Difficulty asking for help	Shame, embarrassment
	Accessing new and existing social networks	Masculine attitude
		Personal agency
Role of support in the transition of the self	Redefining athletic identity	Enhancing self-worth
	Becoming a supporter	Enhancing self-esteem
		Re-evaluating own transition