

**Understanding Social Support During the Transition Out of Elite Sport**

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**Abstract**

The research described in this thesis explored the role of social support during the transition out of elite sport, more commonly referred to as ‘retirement’. The research positioned social support as a dynamic, intersubjective, and relational process that reflects the knowledge and experiences that athletes share with people in their close social networks. This facilitated an understanding of transition as a social experience with wide reaching impacts for the way that athletes, and those in their social network, manage and adjust to the changes that they experience during the process of retirement.

Three empirical studies are presented. Study 1 used an interpretive phenomenological methodology to explore the ways that athletes experience and make sense of social support during transition. Study 2 also used an interpretive phenomenological methodology to explore social support from the perspective of people who provide it. More specifically, Study 2 investigated how parents and partners of former elite athletes experienced transition and how they managed and interpreted their role as providers of support. Study 3 was a realist evaluation of a psychoeducational programme to support athletes’ adjustment in transition. The programme was designed using existing theoretical and empirical knowledge of transition, and the findings of Studies 1 and 2.

Taken together, the findings of the research described in this thesis emphasise the importance of social support as a basis for successful transition, but also shed light on the complexities of social life and relationships during the process of transition. Conceptualising social support as a shared, intersubjective process, comprising complex relational dynamics can open up new ways of thinking about the transition out of sport, and offers the potential to develop innovative interventions to ensure that the right athletes get the right support at the right time.

**Publications Arising from this Thesis**

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# Chapter One: Introduction

### Introduction

When athletes retire from sport they often experience changes in many domains of their life (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Often, their whole way of life is completely turned upside down (McKenna & Thomas, 2007). The safety and familiarity of sport is gone and they have to begin the process of adjusting to a new life where everything can seem different (Stronach, Adair, & Taylor, 2014). Athletes who successfully make this adjustment are likely to do so with the help and support of other people (Park, Lavallee, Tod, 2013a). However, relatively little is known about the ways in which athletes feel supported during the process of retirement, how the people around them are affected by athletes’ transition, or the role that these ‘significant others’ play in the process of social support (Lally and Kerr, 2008). The purpose of this programme of research was, therefore, to understand more about the social support during the process of transition out of sport by exploring the experiences of athletes and the people who support them. By positioning the process of retirement as a shared experience between athletes and members of their social network, it was hoped to gain a richer and more nuanced understanding of how athletes can be helped to feel supported as they retire from sport. This novel way of approaching the issue of social support then contributed to the design and delivery of a programme to support athletes to adjust to the changes they experience after retiring from sport. This programme was then evaluated as part of this thesis.

Elite athletes typically begin their career in childhood and progress through a number of career stages in which they are often encouraged to dedicate increasingly more time to sport and take part in ever more demanding levels of competition (Stambulova, 2000). Transition to the ‘mastery’ stage sees athletes at the peak of their career and their skills are finely tuned to meet the demands of their sport (Bloom, 1985). In order to reach the mastery stage, research suggests that athletes are required to dedicate thousands of hours of purposeful practice and be fully committed to their sport from an early age. This total immersion in sport and the single-minded pursuit of sporting goals can have consequences once athletes reach the final stage of their career, the discontinuation stage, when they begin the process of retirement (Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavallee, 2004).

Many years spent striving for success in competitive environments can lead to problems for athletes when they are no longer able to experience self-worth through their sporting achievements (Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003). Douglass and Careless (2006; 2009) argue that there is a dominant ‘performance narrative’ that permeates all stages of an athletes’ development. This narrative prioritises sporting success above all else and restricts athletes’ ability to explore social roles outside sport. Thus, athletes often develop a one dimensional identity that is tied exclusively to competing (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). This narrow self-concept can make it difficult for athletes to integrate into new settings when they retire, with long lasting effects on their ability to make sense of the world beyond playing and being successful in sport (Barker, Barker-Ruchti, Rynne, & Lee, 2014).

Although there is evidence that the transition out of support is not necessarily a problematic experience (e.g., Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), a recent systematic review of 123 studies summarised the extant findings on transition and found that a large number of athletes did experience some form of difficulty, including decreased physical health and physical self-worth, negative emotional responses (feelings of loss, anger and regret), financial problems, difficulties finding and adapting to new occupational roles, relationship breakdown, and in the worst cases, serious mental health issues (Park et al., 2013a). Thus, there is strong evidence to suggest that when athletes retire they often face a multitude of problems that can have an impact on their health and wellbeing.

Given the difficulties that athletes face, it is not surprising that researchers have explored the factors that can help athletes to experience a more positive transition. Existing models of transition to retirement conceptualise athletes’ successful adjustment as their ability to develop and use resources to overcome the challenges they experience (Taylor & Olgilvie, 1994). In this context, support from other people has been identified as an important factor, and in general, when athletes receive support during their transition they find it easier to adjust to life after sport (Park et al., 2013a).

The majority of research on social support during transition has focussed on delineating the types (e.g., informational, instrumental, emotional), and the sources (e.g., partner, family, practitioner) of support that athletes actually receive. For example, existing studies have described how athletes who received advice and information about future career options as part of formal support programmes are more likely to adjust to new career roles (e.g., Leung, Carre, & Fu, 2005). Furthermore, athletes tend to experience fewer emotional difficulties during transition if they receive emotional support from their family and friends (e.g., Werthner & Orlick, 1986).

Existing research is limited, however, because it tends to over simplify social support and does not fully capture athletes’ subjective experiences of the interpersonal processes involved in supportive relationships. Social support is a complex construct consisting of structural (composition of support networks), functional (specific exchanges of support resources), and perceptual (appraisals of the available amount and quality of social support) dimensions (Vaux, 1988). To the author’s knowledge, no studies on social support during transition have explored these multiple dimensions concurrently. By studying athletes’ experiences in the context of the different dimensions of social support, but also acknowledging their interconnectedness, it may be possible to understand how and why support is, or is not, effective.

Regarding the functional aspect of support, there is a need to move beyond describing the broad types of support that athletes receive to consider the relational processes involved in support, and how these process are related to adjustment. Whether they have reported positive experience of support (e.g., Lavallee, Gordon, and Grove, 1997), or negative experience of support (e.g., Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015) researchers have generally failed to provide details of the social support exchanges, or the wider relational context in which support took place. Therefore, research on athletes’ experiences of social support during transition out of sport remains abstract and the extent to which the descriptions of support in the academic literature reflect athletes’ everyday experiences is unclear. For this reason, the current research will explore athletes’ subjective experiences of social support in a more comprehensive way, taking into account that social support is likely to be a complex process influenced by a range of interconnected sociocultural factors (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Hobfoll & Vaux, 1993)

The ‘high performance’ culture of elite sport is likely to be one such sociocultural factor that influences the way that athletes think about and experience support during their transition. Indeed, athletes’ have indicated that they did not take part in formal support programmes because they thought that planning for transition would be a distraction from their sporting performance, a view that is often reinforced by coaches and support staff (Ryan, 2015). This finding highlights how the sociocultural context can shape experiences of social support. As yet, however, these complex factors remain largely underexplored and there is a need for a much more holistic view of the way that the social environment of elite sport may influence experiences of social support.

When considering a more holistic and relational approach to studying social support during transition there is also a need to explore the experiences of the people who may support athletes during the process of retirement. Research suggests that the composition and quality of athletes’ social networks (structural dimension of social support) play a crucial role in the quality of transitions (Park et al., 2013a.). However, there is a lack of research exploring the relational aspects of social support from the perspective of other people involved in the process. In particular, ‘significant others’ such as parents and partners are heavily invested in athletes’ careers and may, therefore, experience difficulties adjusting to a significant change in their own life (Lally & Kerr, 2008). Gaining a deeper insight into the experiences of significant others as they support athletes through transition may allow a more complete view of the process of retirement from sport and facilitate an understanding of the challenges that people face as providers of support

Another significant gap in research that this thesis aims to address is the lack of knowledge around how athletes can be better supported to make the transition out of sport. Despite the development of programmes to support athletes during transition (e.g., those delivered through sports’ National Governing Bodies), there is a dearth of published studies that have evaluated interventions to support athletes during transition. As a result, there appears to be in a significant gap in understanding how empirical knowledge has been applied and to what extent interventions are effective. In particular, there is a need to understand the different contextual factors that influence the successful implementation of support programmes, and to determine the psychosocial mechanisms that may underpin effective support (Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2013).

### Summary and research questions

Research indicates that social support is an important factor that can help athletes to successfully adjust to life in retirement. These findings are consistent with research that has reported positive links between social support, health, and wellbeing (Uchino, 2009). However, existing research on social support during the process of transition has tended to over simplify the social support construct. For example, the majority of research has focussed on the functional aspect of support without fully exploring the interconnectedness of the different aspects of support. Furthermore, almost all existing work has examined social support during transition from the recipients’ (i.e., athletes’) perspective. This neglects the important role that significant others play as providers of support, and fails to recognise that transition is likely to be a shared experience. Finally, there is a lack of research that has evaluated programmes to support athletes during transition and little is known about the mechanisms and context in which support programmes may (or may not) be effective. Therefore, the purpose of the research described in this thesis was to:

* Explore former elite athletes’ experiences of social support during their transition out of sport.
* Explore the experiences of close family members of athletes (parents and partners) during the process of transition out of sport.
* Evaluate the effectiveness of a programme designed to support athletes to manage and make sense of their retirement experience.

### Structure of the thesis

Chapter 2 provides a critical review of existing research relevant to the research described in this thesis. This includes the literature related to theoretical perspectives and research findings on transition; social support during transition; and provision of transition support programmes and interventions in elite sport. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approach of the thesis, including its ontological, epistemological, and methodological position. Chapter 4 presents the first empirical study, which explores elite athletes’ experiences of social support during transition out of sport. Chapter 5 explores significant others’ experiences of transition with a specific focus on their experience of providing social support. The final empirical study, presented in Chapter 6, evaluated a programme designed using the findings of Chapters 4 and 5, to help former athletes manage and makes sense of their transition. Finally, Chapter 7 provides a general discussion of the key findings and the overall contribution of this thesis, applied implications, and directions for future research.

# Chapter Two: Review of literature

### Introduction

Chapter 2 provides an overview and critique of relevant literature on the transition out of sport. First, theoretical and conceptual developments related to the process of retirement from sport will be discussed, with a particular focus on models of career transition. Next, an overview of the research findings on transition will be presented. Then, theory and research from the wider literature on social support will be used to offer a critique of the findings examining social support during transition. Finally, the different approaches to intervention strategies used to support athletes through transition will be presented and reviewed. The intention of this chapter is to provide an overview of relevant research. Each empirical chapter will then discuss relevant research in the context of that particular study.

### Theoretical perspectives on career transitions in sport

Research on career development and transitions in sport has seen a substantial increase, both in terms of quantity and scope, since studies began to appear in the 1960s. The development of the topic has seen several shifts in research foci and evolution of theoretical frameworks (Wylleman et al., 2004). Developments include a move away from understanding retirement from sport as an ‘event’, to seeing it as a dynamic process that evolves over an extended period. Contemporary views see the transition out of sport as a process of change set within the context of a whole career and in relation to the developmental changes and transitions that athletes experience within other domains of life (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Thus, the study of the transition out of sport can be conceptualised as a holistic, developmental, and multilevel approach to understanding athletes’ career development, identity, and social relationships both during and after sport.

Early research that examined how athletes make the transition to retirement viewed retirement as a single defined event, typically conceptualised as ‘an ending’ (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968). This perspective drew on theoretical frameworks that had been used to study retirement from work in later life, such as thanatology (stages of dying) and social gerontology (the study of the aging process). Thus, retiring from sport was often described by terms such as ‘withdrawal’, ‘decline’, and ‘termination’ and was linked to negative feelings of loss, isolation, and resentment (Rosenberge, 1981). Some early research, particularly studies that described the feelings of devastation that some athletes experienced when forced to retire (e.g., through injury) found some support for these frameworks (e.g., Lerch, 1984). However, these studies were limited to describing the causes and consequences of retirement at the point of retirement. They were also constrained by theoretical frameworks that were largely concerned with the latter stages of life and the negative feelings that ‘termination’ often brings (Lavallee, 2000).

The inadequacies of gerontological and thanatological models were highlighted by research that emphasised that retirement could provide athletes with opportunities to seek out and develop new challenges in a social ‘rebirth’, rather than a social death (Coakley, 1983; Sinclair & Orlick, 1994). As a result, researchers sought to gain a deeper understanding of athletes’ experiences of retirement by applying developmental theories that describe how humans adapt to change. For example, Schlossberg’s (1981) model of human adaptation has enabled researchers to develop a wider perspective on athletes’ retirement that considers the range of personal, contextual, and developmental factors that influence the *process* of transition out of sport. These factors include the timing and circumstances surrounding retirement, age at which transition begins, previous experiences of change, and the characteristics of the individuals’ environment (e.g., social relationships) (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004).

The different levels of influence and impact that multiple factors may exert on a person’s experience of retirement from sport gives rise to the dynamic nature of transition, and emphasises the different types and degrees of adjustment that athletes experience in retirement (e.g., psychological/vocational adjustment). Thus, Schlossberg’s (1981) model suggests that athletes’ retirement from sport is a process that involves developmental changes in a number of different domains in life. For example, developing the skills needed to pursue a new vocational path, managing the changing nature of close relationships and dealing with the (potential) loss of one identity and the creation of others. Crucially for this thesis, Schlossberg (1981) emphasised the importance of social support in the process of transitions, highlighting the importance of both personal (e.g., family, friends) and organisational support systems (e.g., National Governing Bodies).

### Conceptual Models of Career Transition in Sport

Although Schlossberg’s (1981) model of human adaptation was vital in the evolution of conceptual thinking in the field of career transitions in sport, it has been criticised for a relatively general description of change and a lack of detail surrounding specific transitions (Lavallee, 2000). This led to the development of a number of models that sought to focus on the specific factors and context related to transitions in sport.

**Holistic Athletic Career Model.** Wylleman and Lavallee (2004) presented the developmental model of transitions in sport using data on the career development and transitions of athletes from a range of career stages and competitive levels (e.g., student-athletes, elite athletes). A key contribution of this model was that it emphasised that transitions in sport do not happen in isolation. Rather, transitions in sport (e.g., the transition from junior to senior level competition) happen *in addition to* the changes and transitions that athletes experience in their life more generally(e.g., puberty, moving from school to university, starting a romantic relationship, or becoming a parent). Thus, the model incorporated a developmental life-span perspective to describe the concurrent psychological, psychosocial, academic, and vocational transitions that occur across an athletes’ career. More recently, the developmental model has been updated to include athletes financial development, and has been renamed the *holistic athlete career model* (Reints & Wylleman, 2013; Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011), see Figure 1.



***Figure 1:*** The holistic athletic career model (Wylleman, De Knop, & Reints, 2011). Different colours represent the different developmental stages; boundaries denote the approximate ages at which transitions occur. The ‘discontinuation’ stage concerns the transition out of sport. NGB stands for National Governing Body (of sport); NOC stands for National Olympic Committee*.*

By mapping the different transitions that elite athletes make onto normative psychosocial development transitions (i.e., transitions that can be predicted and anticipated), the holistic athletic career model draws attention to some of the challenges that athletes may face as they attempt to manage multiple changes. For example, adolescence is a time when individuals often explore different social roles and begin to form a sense of identity (Crocetti, et al., 2015), and it is also a crucial time in academic and educational development (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2015). For those involved in competitive sport, however, adolescence is a time when they are likely to dedicate an increasing amount of time to the development and mastery of sporting skills. This commitment to sport may mean that athletes do not experience a ‘typical’ transition to adulthood and miss opportunities to develop the academic, social, and vocational resources that they need to adjust to life when they leave their competitive sporting career behind (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007).

Of particular interest to the research in this thesis is the holistic athletic career model’s emphasis on the importance of relationships and social networks in the development of athletes’ careers. Family members, for example, tend to be heavily invested in athletes’ careers and the social support that they provide is likely to be a crucial aspect of athletes’ ability to successfully transition through the various athletic and developmental stages (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). During the stage referred to as the ‘discontinuation stage’ (i.e. retirement), athletes often look to their family for social support to help them manage the process of retirement. These people may be particularly important for athletes as they are likely to share strong emotional ties and a shared understanding developed through previous transitions in sport (Franck, 2009). However, once athletes end their careers, there may be fundamental changes in their relationship with family members (Lally & Kerr, 2008), which may affect their ability to provide support (Gilmore, 2008). The reasons for this will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

The major strength of the holistic athletic career model is the way it describes the interactive nature of the multiple transitions that athletes are likely to make across various developmental spheres. In doing so, the model highlights how challenges in one area of an athletes’ life might impact on another area of their development. Wylleman et al. (2004) acknowledged, however, that this overview is achieved at the expense of detail around each specific transition. For example, the holistic athletic career model does not address all the factors that may influence athletes’ adjustment to life following the end of their sporting career. As a result, there is a need to explore other more specific models of this process.

**Conceptual model of adaption to career transition.** Based on an earlier model by Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), Taylor, Ogilvie, and Lavallee (2006) presented a conceptual model of adaption to career transition that aimed to describe the whole process of the transition out of sport (see figure 2). The model describes the interrelated factors that influence the process of adjustment, or quality, of an individual’s transition, including the factors that initiate the process of transition (e.g., age, injury); the personal and contextual factors related to adjustment (e.g., perceptions of control and social identity); and the resources that athletes have available to help them to manage the process (e.g., planning, social support). The updated model recognised the evolution of understanding related to the career transitions of athletes and conceptualises the transition out of sport as a dynamic process, rather than a singular event. Thus, transition is defined as the interaction of multiple demographic and psychosocial factors operating over an extended period, which may produce both positive and negative consequences.

The conceptual model of adaption to career transition (Taylor et al., 2006) advances on Schlossberg’s (1981) model of human adaptation to transition by providing a sport specific description of the process of retirement. Indeed, the model has provided exploratory variables that have been used to guide and develop research (e.g., Coakley, 2006). In describing the whole process of transition, however, the model lacks specificity and is unable to adequately conceptualise different perspectives on the variables it describes. For example, from the perspective of the current research, the model does not adequately consider the role of others in the process of transition. That is, the model predominantly locates retirement within the individual with limited recognition of the possibility that retirement may be a shared experience involving changes in close relationships that can have consequences both for athletes and the people in their close social networks.

**Causes of Athletic Retirement**

Age

Deselection

Injury

Free Choice

**Factor Related to Adaption in Retirement**

Developmental Experiences

Self-Identity

Social-Identity

Perceptions of Control

Tertiary Contributors

**Available Resources**

Coping Skills

Social Support

Pre-retirement Planning

**Quality of Adaption to Athletic Retirement**

**Retirement Crisis**

Psychopathology

Substance Abuse

Occupational Problems

Family/Social Problems

**Intervention**

Cognitive

Emotional

Behavioural

Social

**Healthy**

**Career**

**Transition**

***Figure 2****.* Conceptual model of adaptation to career transition. (Taylor, Ogilvie, & Lavallee, 2006).

In summary, the understanding of retirement from sport has evolved from perspectives grounded in thanatology and social gerontology to current frameworks and models, which conceptualise transitions from the perspective of the whole lifespan (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Retirement is no longer regarded as signifying the end of a career; rather, it is viewed as a multi-dimensional transition, which involves psychological, social, and vocational changes in athletes’ lives (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). Although models of transitions developed specifically in relation to sport have found wide support (some of this is reviewed in the next section), it should be recognised that no single perspective can explain the range of experiences that athletes have as they make the transition from elite sport, with more research being needed to explore the process of transition as a shared, interpersonal process (Torregrosa, Ramis, Pallarés, Azócar, & Selva, 2015).

### An overview of research findings on career transitions out of sport

Research on the transition out of sport has evolved considerably from early studies that described the causes and immediate consequences of retirement (e.g., Mihovilovic, 1968; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), to more holistic accounts of athletes’ career experiences (e.g., Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2015). Much of the research on transition has, however, focussed on factors that relate to the quality of athletes’ transitions (e.g., the way that athletes adjust to the changes they experience as a result of retiring). For example, as previously discussed, the conceptual model of adaptation to career transition highlights a number of psychosocial variables (e.g., strength of athletic identify) and personal resources (e.g., social support) that influence the way that athletes manage and adjust to the changes they experience when they retire (Taylor et al., 2006).

Similarly, Stambulova (2003) suggests that the quality of transitions depends on the dynamic balance between transition resources and barriers. Resources are any factor that facilitates a way for the athlete to cope with the changes they are experiencing (e.g., self-knowledge, skills, personality characteristics, availability of social support). Demands are any factor that interferes with or hinders an effective coping response (e.g., a lack of knowledge/skills, interpersonal difficulties, challenges of new education/vocation environment). According to Stambulova (2003), successful transition is, therefore, based on the athletes’ ability to apply, or quickly develop, the necessary resources to avoid transition barriers and overcome the difficulties they experience.

The number of athletes who experience difficulties during transition is debated (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). It has been estimated that 10-20% of retired athletes experience significant psychological distress associated with their transition (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). In contrast, retired athletes have also reported relief that the demands of competing are over and show enthusiasm for their new life after sport (Alfermann, 2000). Given the individual differences in the process of adjustment, there are likely to be many athletes between these two extremes; who may experience some difficulties in their life (e.g., adjusting to a new vocation), but are relatively comfortable with their exit from sport (e.g., relief at leaving behind a demanding training schedule) (Stambulova, et al., 2009).

In a systematic review of 126 studies related to the transition out of sport, Park et al. (2013a) reported that 16% of all the athletes included (over 13,000) experienced difficulties or problems adjusting to life after sport. This is lower than reported in earlier studies (e.g., Blinde & Stratta, 1992); however, Park et al., (2013a) also reported that the majority of studies in the review (68%) found that some of their participants experienced some kind of difficulties and distress when they ended their competitive career in sport, including negative emotions, and issues around the loss of their identity as athletes. Overall, the findings on the prevalence and extent of the problems that athletes face in transition suggests that difficulties are not inevitable, but many athletes do find the process a significant challenge.

The individual differences in the quality of transitions that are seen in research appear to be determined by a range of psychosocial variables that combine to influence the process of adjustment. Park et al. (2013a) identified nineteen variables that were associated with the quality of transition. These variables were categorised into two themes in line with the conceptual model of adaption to career transition (Taylor et al., 2006): (a) factors related to the quality of career transition, which included variables related to demographics (e.g., age, level of education), the extent to which the decision to retire was voluntary, injuries/health problems, career/personal development, sport career achievement, education status, financial status, athletic identity, control of life, disengagement/drop out, time passed after retirement, the athletes’ relationship with their coach, life changes and balance of life while competing; and (b) resources available during transition, comprising coping strategies, pre-retirement planning, social support, and involvement in support programmes. The potential for the variables/factors that influence adjustment in transition to combine in multiple different ways means that the quality of each individual athlete’s transition is unique to them. However, research often highlights three factors that have a particularly important influence on the quality of transition: athletic identity; pre-retirement planning; and the availability and quality of social support.

Athletic identity refers to individuals’ sense of self in relation to sport and is closely related to athletes’ roles, values, and social networks during their careers (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000). A strong athletic identity can be beneficial for athletes during their career as it has been associated with better performance (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Researchers have argued, however, that athletes who have a strong or narrowly defined identity, based around their participation and success in sport, may lack the developmental experiences and life skills that are typical of their peers who have not participated in sport to the same degree (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1993). As a result, athletes who have a strong athletic identity may experience a higher degree of difficulty in transition, and may lack the required skills, resources, and knowledge to deal with the changes that they experience in retirement (Park et al., 2013a).

Grove, Lavallee, and Gordon (1997), for example, reported that athletes with a stronger athletic identity were more likely to use more maladaptive coping strategies, such as denial and disengagement. Athletes with a stronger athletic identity also reported needing to seek more social support—most likely because they found transition was a more stressful experience. In contrast, several studies have found that a multidimensional identity can help athletes to adjust to life after sport (e.g., Cecić Erpič, Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014). In particular, athletes who follow a ‘dual career’ (defined as combining sport with other vocational/educational activities) tend to have more psychosocial resources to manage their transitions, such as stronger social networks to provide career guidance and opportunities (Debois et al., 2015). As a result, they find the process of adjusting to change much easier (Torregrosa, et al., 2015).

Pre-retirement planning refers to vocational/educational, financial, social, and psychological preparation for life following retirement (Alfermann et al., 2004). Planning is a proactive/preventive activity that has been found to be strongly associated with adjustment to a new career following retirement from sport (e.g., Coakley, 2006; Kucharska & Klopot, 2013). Conversely, a lack of planning can be an important factor in the poor quality of athletes’ adjustment during transition (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999). One of the reasons that planning may facilitate adjustment is because the setting of clear goals may give athletes a feeling of security and comfort, and gives them a sense of control in a time of dramatic change (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Planning for retirement can including thoughts and discussions around the changes in, and the availability of, social support. Indeed, athletes are often concerned about a lack of support when they are thinking about the decision to retire (Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006). Unfortunately, many athletes find that making arrangements for life after sport is a challenge, and many do not make adequate preparations for retirement (Ballie & Danish, 1992). Consequently, they are required to take remedial actions to deal with the changes and challenges they face (Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015). In this respect, research has shown that athletes often rely on social support as a coping resource, particularly support provided by family and friends (Park et al., 2013a).

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### Social support during transition

In general, empirical studies indicate that athletes who receive social support throughout the process of transition tend to adjust more quickly and easily (e.g., Park et al., 2013a). Existing research is, however, underdeveloped and suffers from a lack of detail and conceptual clarity.

**Overview of social support.** In the broadest sense social support refers to “social interactions aimed at inducing positive outcomes” (Bianco & Eklund, 2001, p.85). However, this simple description belies the subtlety and complexity of the construct. Social support has been referred to as a ‘multi-construct’ or ‘meta-construct’ comprising of three main dimensions: (a) a structural dimension that concerns the composition and quality of social support networks; (b) a functional dimension related to the social exchanges involved in providing and receiving support, including the type of support delivered and its intended outcomes; and (c) an appraisal dimension, which includes the belief that support is available if needed, and appraisals of the quality of support that is actually received (Chronister, Johnson, & Berven, 2006; Heller & Swindle, 1983; Vaux, 1988).

***Structural dimensions of social support.*** Previous research on the transition out of sport has indicated that the size and quality of athletes’ social support networks can influence the quality of their transition when they retire (Park et al., 2013a). The close social networks that athletes develop during their careers are often based on close relationships with coaches, teammates, and support staff. However, these networks are often disrupted when an athlete leaves sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Athletes simply have much less contact with their support networks, while at the same time coaches and teammates are still focused on their sporting goals (Fortunato & Merchant, 1999). If athletes lack alternative support systems they may become isolated and lonely and suffer significant difficulties and distress as a result (Lally, 2007).

Often the only stable aspect of athletes’ support networks is their close family (e.g., spouse/partner/parent(s) (Gilmore 2008; Stamulova et al., 2007; Park & Lavallee, 2015). Fortunately, research suggests that support from family members can help athletes to deal with the emotional impact of transition, adapt to new career roles, and experience a more positive transition (Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015; McGown & Rail, 1996; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Married athletes in particular tend to experience higher levels of support and less difficulty during transition than single athletes, highlighting the potential importance of a trusting, stable relationship during transition (Chow, 2001; Fernandez et al., 2006). Close family relationships are not immune from disruption, however, and can also come under pressure when athletes retire (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Hatamleh, 2013). Athletes have reported that close others often do not always understand what they are going through during transition. This lack of perceived understanding can be a source of tension and conflict in relationships that impacts athletes’ ability to manage their transition (Stambulova, 2010; Park, Lavallee, Tod, 2013b).

The finding that athletes can experience difficulties and disruption within their social networks suggests that that retirement from sport is not experienced by the athlete in isolation. Rather, transition is a shared experience that can have profound consequences for all those involved (Lally & Kerr, 2008). Therefore, it is perhaps surprising that little research has tried to understand transition out of sport from the perspective of the people in athletes’ social networks. This is in contrast to the expanding literature that has examined coaches and family members’ perspectives and experiences of athletes’ transitions *within* their sporting careers (e.g., Finn & McKenna, 2010; Jones, Mahoney, & Gucciardi, 2014; Morris, Tod, & Oliver, 2016). This work has suggested that athletes’ family members can help athletes to achieve successful outcomes during their transitions, with Morris et al. (2016) arguing that exploring transitions from the perspective of ‘stakeholders’ involved in transitions can add scientific rigour and broaden understanding of the process. However, as yet, this approach is rarely applied to transitions out of sport.

Research from the wider literature on social support suggests that having a large social network does not necessarily mean that social support will be available or offered when required (Uchino, 2009). Rather, it is more important that members of a social network recognise when support is needed, and are willing and able to provide it (Dakof & Taylor, 1990; Holt-Lunstad & Smith, 2012). It is, therefore, vital to consider the provider of supportwhen trying to understand how social support influences adjustment. This seems particularly important considering the number of athletes who turn to family members for support during the transition to retirement (Park et al., 2013a).

Research outside of sport suggest that providing support is a complex process and people often face a number of challenges when giving help, including feeling anxious about about giving inappropriate or ineffective support (Goldsmith, 1992; Wortman & Lehman, 1985). Providers of support can also experience deterioration in their own emotional wellbeing as they take on the burden of the recipient’s difficulties or distress (Coyne, 1976; Wortman & Dunkel-Schetter, 1979). These factors can act as barriers to the provider’s ability or willingness to offer appropriate social support, barriers that can have a negative effect on the provider and recipient of support, and the overall quality of the relationship (Hews, 2014). However, these potential barriers have not been considered in relation to the process of transition out of sport.

***The functional dimension of social support.*** The functional dimension of social support includes emotional, informational, and tangible assistance (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). Emotional support is perhaps the most widely studied aspect of social support within the literature on transition out of sport (Park et al., 2013a). This is simply because seeking and using emotional support is one of the main ways that athletes attempt to manage their transition (Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997). Evidence suggests that athletes who receive emotional support feel less distressed and more confident about being able to deal with their situation (Park et al., 2013a). For example, Park et al’s (2012) longitudinal study of elite Korean tennis players’ experiences of career transition reported that emotional support was useful throughout the process of transition, but was particularly important during the post retirement phase when athletes were trying to adapt to new vocational roles.

In contrast, evidence suggests that informational support, which can include the provision of advice, guidance and suggestions, is often more prevalent in the pre-retirement phase of transition (Park et al., 2013a). Specifically, evidence suggests that athletes who receive information about what to expect during transition often feel more prepared to deal with the process (Stephan et al., 2003). A pertinent example is provided by Fernandez et al., (2006) who found that athletes who did not receive information about transition were less secure and less positive about their future prospects compared to athletes who were more informed. This finding is supported by studies showing that athletes who receive career guidance and advice prior to leaving sport are more confident about identifying and developing a new career after they retire (Park et al., 2013b).

Tangible support, also known as instrumental support, refers to the concrete, direct ways that people assist others, often reflecting the provision of financial support, material goods, or services. During the transition out of sport tangible support is often related to the assistance that is provided to athletes to help them begin a new vocation/career. Leung et al., (2005), for example, found that athletes who received tangible support from national sporting agencies and central government, in the form of financial assistance and help finding employment, experienced a more positive transition. Furthermore, athletes whose family members could provide them with a job following retirement viewed their transition in a more positive light (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008).

**The appraisal dimension of support**

The appraisal dimension of social support refers to both beliefs about availability of support, and appraisals of the quality of social support that is actually enacted or received (Bianco & Eklund, 2001). The concept of perceived support is more commonly used to refer to the belief that adequate support is available should it be required, and is thought to influence appraisals of potential stressors. In this way, perceived support can be considered a personal resource that helps people to appraise potentially stressful events in a more positive way (Cohen & Wills, 1985).

There is relatively little research that has explicitly explored perceived support during transition, with the majority of the research in this area having been conducted from the perspective of received support (Park et al., 2013a). This is somewhat surprising given that perceived support often has a stronger relationship with health and wellbeing than does perceived support (Uchino, 2009). Notable exceptions, however, include two studies that found that married athletes tend to be higher in perceived support than single athletes and this was associated with less difficulty in transition (Fernandez et al., 2006; McKnight, 1996). Park et al., (2013b) conducted research on both received and perceived support finding that support received from colleagues helped former athletes to adjust to new work roles, while perceptions of the availability of support from partners helped former athletes to think more positively about their transition.

Park et al., (2013b) distinguished between different mechanisms that underpin received support versus perceived support. This was based on two different theoretical models of social support, referred to as the stress-buffering model and the main effect model (Cohen & Wills, 1985). The primary difference between these two models is that the main effect model predicts that social support is beneficial all the time (so that athletes with higher perceived support would experience a positive transition more generally), while the stress-buffering model predicts that social support is mostly beneficial when a person is experiencing stress, and support that is received acts as a coping resource.

Park and colleagues noted that social support is likely to have both a main effect on adjustment during transition and provide a buffer to stress (Park & Lavallee., 2015; Park et al., 2013b). However, a greater understanding of the contexts that influence perceived and received support is needed to better understand social support during transition. This includes exploring the nature of supportive relationships (e.g., relationship histories, previous experiences of support), what specifically helps athletes to feel supported, and how athletes interpret support and supporters in the context of their own sense of self (Lakey & Drew, 1990).

To summarise, research on social support during transition has often focused on describing the sources (e.g., organisations, family, friends) and basic types of social support (i.e., emotional, informational, tangible) that can influence adjustment. As such, existing research on social support during transition is often characterised by a narrow focus on the structural and functional aspects of support (Park et al., 2013a). In short, although the current literature has identified the basic types of social support that athletes receive during transition, it lacks detail on athletes’ beliefs about what makes support effective (or not), or how people who support athletes interpret and manage their role as supporters.

**Interventions and support programmes**

The evidence that athletes often experience difficulties making the transition out of sport has led to the development of interventions and support programmes to help athletes to manage their transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Two primary approaches have been used: (a) pre-retirement programmes designed to support athletes’ personal growth, development of life-skills, and help them to achieve a balanced life-style; and (b) post-retirement interventions designed to help athletes cope with the difficulties that they experience during transition (Lavaelle & Wylleman, 2000; Stambulova, 2010).

**Pre-retirement programmes.** Much of the early research on retirement found that the demanding nature of elite sport, with its intense focus on training and competition, could have a negative impact on athletes’ broader psychosocial and career development (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). On the basis of these findings, sporting organisations and governing bodies began to develop programmes to support athletes’ personal development, provide education and career development opportunities, and generally help them to become more ‘well-rounded’ people (Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992). The rationale underpinning these programmes is that planning and preparation before retirement can help to reduce athletes’ anxiety about the future, better equip them to meet the challenges that they may face in retirement, and in doing so, enable them to experience a smoother transition to other career roles (Danish, et al., 1993).

In the late 1980’s and 1990’s, career assistance programmes for Olympic level athletes were implemented in United States, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom under the guise of ‘Athlete Career and Education’ (ACE) programmes (Lavallee & Wylleman, 2000). At least 27 countries currently operate some kind of career assistance programme for their elite athletes (Reints, 2011). Many European programmes are geared toward supporting ‘dual’ careers by helping athletes to pursue their athletic goals alongside academic and educational training (Reints & Wylleman, 2013). It is hoped that athletes who access this support can attain qualifications and work experience to compete in the job market once they end their competitive sporting career (Stambulova, Engström, Franck, Linnér, & Lindahl, 2015). There is evidence to suggest that, in general, athletes who do follow a dual career path are more likely to adjust successfully once they retire from sport (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). For example, Torregrosa et al. (2015) interviewed former elite athletes in Spain and identified that, compared to athletes focused only on sport, those that followed a dual career path (i.e., that worked or studied alongside sport) had more multi-dimensional identities, were able to use more effective coping strategies, and experienced less emotional difficulties when they retired from sport.

However, each country’s sporting system is different and not all athletes are able to pursue dual careers. For example, Ryan (2015) evaluated New Zealand’s high performance athletes programme via a series of in-depth interviews with 17 elite athletes and found that those at the highest levels of competition were actively discouraged by coaching and management staff from engaging in dual career activity. Furthermore, many found it difficult to take part in the career and education programme due to the pressure posed by training and competition. There appears to be a contradiction, therefore: on one hand, organisations within elite sport appear to be committed to providing formal support to athletes, but, on the other hand, the practices within the system can prevent or discourage athletes from taking part.

The pressure to be (or appear to be) fully committed to sporting goals may account for why rates of participation in support programmes are relatively low. North and Lavallee (2004), for example, conducted a survey of 561 athletes who were part of the UK’s ACE programme and found that, although 92% of athletes were aware of the programme, only 35% of athletes used the service regularly, and 37% did not use the service at all. The UK’s ACE programme was rebranded in 2004 as the ‘Performance Lifestyle’ programme (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013c). Although athletes report that this programme has had a positive influence on their career development, many athlete still do not access the support available to them (Gilmore, 2008).

**Post-retirement interventions.** One of the limitations of support provided through formal programmes led by sporting organisations is that they are primarily aimed at current athletes (Reints & Wylleman, 2013). Thus, even if athletes are actively engaged in programmes they will likely lose the support shortly after they retire (Park et al., 2015). Given that transition typically happens over an extended period, and athletes may experience difficulties well after they leave the sporting system (Park et al., 2013b; Stronach et al., 2014), many athletes may not be getting the support that they need.

To the author’s knowledge, only one published study has designed and empirically tested an intervention delivered after athletes retired from sport. The study by Lavallee (2005) delivered an intervention to recently retired elite football players in the UK based on a life skills programme developed by Danish, Petitpas, and Hale (1992; 1993). The intervention programme was designed to improve athletes’ coping resources by offering counselling and help to identify transferable skills. Results indicated that, compared to controls, participants in the intervention group developed more coping resources, could identify more transferable skills, and experienced fewer difficulties following the intervention. Although the study concluded that the intervention was a success, the survey based experimental research design limits what can be said about the conditions, contexts, and circumstances in which post-retirement interventions work (Pawson & Tilly, 1997).

Furthermore, scholars have been critical of the ‘acquisition and transfer’ approach of life skill programmes because of a potential lack of sensitivity to the sociocultural context in which skills are developed, and the environment in which they are then redeployed (Barker-Ruchti & Schubring, 2016). Drawing on social cultural learning theory, researchers have argued that there is limited evidence that the acquisition and transfer approach to supporting athletes is effective (Barker et al., 2014). For example, Barker et al. (2014) argue that athletes cannot simply identify skills developed in a specific sporting environment and then transfer them to a different context. Instead, Barker et al. (2014) suggest that athletes should be supported to ‘reconstruct’ existing skills to fit their new setting, taking into account the beliefs, values, and dispositions that were developed in the previous learning environment.

In summary, support to help athletes manage their transition out of sport has focused on multidimensional life skills programmes delivered primarily before they retire (North & Lavallee, 2004). While this offers a proactive and preventive method to support athletes, there is evidence to suggest that many athletes are in need of support after their careers comes to an end (Stronach et al, 2014). Despite this, there is limited support for athletes once they retire and leave the sporting system (Reints, 2011), and few studies have explored the efficacy of potential programmes to fill this need. Studies that have evaluated post retirement support programmes have used a traditional experimental designs (e.g., Lavallee, 2005), which may not capture the complexity of intervention processes. More research is needed, therefore, to understand the mechanisms of change that can facilitate adjustment in transition and also the context in which they are effective (Pawson & Tilly, 1997).

### Summary of the literature review

The process that athletes go through to make the transition out of sport and adjust to other roles in life has received increased attention from scholars over the last 50 years. The majority of research has focussed on the causes and consequences of retirement and the factors that influences the quality of transitions. Although models of the process of transition (e.g., Taylor et al., 2006) have acknowledge the importance of support systems during transition, few empirical investigations have focused specifically on the role that social support plays in athletes’ transitions. The research on social support during transition is sparse considering that many athletes experience difficulties when they leave their competitive career behind (Park et al., 2013a). Those that do address issues around support (e.g., Lagimodiere & Strachan, 2015) do not capture the likely complexity of the relationships between the different functional, structural and perceptual dimensions of support processes.

Existing literature has generally focussed on the types of support that athletes receive and has identified the people or groups that provide support, but there is a lack of detail around the experiences and beliefs of the athletes receiving support. Research has rarely considered athletes’ perceptions of support, nor the challenges that athletes may face accessing the support they need. Furthermore, as social support is fundamentally a relational process, there is a need to understand more about experiences of transition and support from people in athletes’ close social networks. Athletes’ close family members, for example, often play a crucial role in the success of an athlete’s transition, but very little research has been conducted to understand the experiences of those providing support. Research of this kind may help us to gain a deeper, more nuanced account of the process of retirement from sport, and may guide the development of interventions that can promote positive transitions.

# Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the ontological and epistemological position of this thesis and how this informed the decision making processes within it. Specifically, this chapter will describe how the thesis was underpinned by a critical realist philosophy of science that unifies ontological realism and epistemological relativism; and how this approach facilitated the design and delivery of the empirical studies.

### Philosophical approaches and debates

Paradigms refer to a basic set of beliefs about the world and the nature of inquiry that guides the research process (Creswell, 2014). There are various, often competing, paradigms in research that are characterised by their different approaches to ontology (i.e., what is the nature of reality?), epistemology (i.e., what constitutes knowledge of reality?), and methodology (i.e., how is knowledge produced?) (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba 2011). Ontology, epistemology, and methodology have been described as the ‘building blocks’ of research that make it possible for a researcher to construct, understand, and defend the knowledge that they produce (Grix, 2002). Issues concerning ontology, epistemology, and methodology are important because they underpin fundamental claims to ‘truth’, which in turn, raises questions about the reach and impact of research (Wiltshire, 2018).

There is a long history of debate in psychology and the social sciences around issues relating to ontology, epistemology, and methodology (Lincoln et al., 2011). The debate about ontology is complex and nuanced, but at a fundamental level, centres on the distinction between *realism* and *relativism* (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).Realism is characterised by the belief that a single reality exists independent of human perception of it; whereas relativism is the belief that multiple, subjective realities exist ‘relative’ to prevailing culture, society, or historical context (Sparkes, 2015). A realist view of reality is often associated with the positivist paradigm and epistemological objectivism. That is, positivism supports the idea of a single reality that is directly observable, where the researcher is independent from what is being researched, and knowledge can be validated against an objective ‘truth’ (Sparkes, 2015). In contrast, relativist ontology is associated with epistemological interpretivism and the broad paradigm of constructionism. In this perspective, multiple realities are constructed based on subjective beliefs and individual meaning making, knowledge is socially produced, and the researcher cannot be separated from the phenomena being researched (Morgan, 2007).

Philosophical assumptions and commitments related to ontology, epistemology, and methodology influence the research process at the practical level by informing the choice of methods (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Specifically, researchers endorsing realism tend to be guided by a positivist paradigm that prioritises quantitative methods. The constructionist paradigm, in contrast, subscribes to a relativist ontology and tends to use qualitative methods (Sparkes, 2015). Scholars from these two broad approaches (realist-positivist; interpretivist- constructionist) have argued for the merits of their particular philosophies and methods as ways of generating knowledge. These debates have often become polarised to the extent that they have been referred to as ‘the paradigm wars’ (Gage, 1989). These disputes about claims to knowledge have often led researchers to work with narrow focus, using specific assumptions, while rejecting the approaches that guide other paradigms (Morgan, 2007). Working within closely defined paradigms has led to concerns that research has become detached from the challenges and context of the world (Wiltshire, 2018). Thus, there have been calls for researchers to develop pluralistic approaches to research that engage in dialogue between paradigms and theories (Creswell, 2014). This can help to inform methodologies and methods that reflect the multidimensional nature and complexity of experiences and phenomena, and help researchers to extend traditional paradigmatic boundaries in order to meet the challenges of everyday life (Wiltshire, 2018). It is in this spirit that the research within this thesis was conducted. However, in seeking methodological pluralism, it is important not to neglect the foundational issues of ontology and epistemology (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The aim of the remainder of this chapter is, therefore, to articulate how the different, often characterised as competing, perspectives applied in this thesis were unified by a critical realist approach.

### Critical realism

Critical realism is a series of philosophical arguments and positions related to a range of issues in science and social science including ontology, epistemology, structure, agency, and causation (Danermark, Ekstrom & Jakobsen, 2005). Critical realism became prominent in the 1970s and 1980s with a broad alliance of social researchers and theorists proposing a post-positivist social science. Critical realism is positioned as an alternative both to empirical forms of positivism, with its concern with experiments, statistics and, generalisation; and also to the strong interpretivist-constructionist paradigm, with its concern on language, culture, and subjective meaning (Sayer, 1999). Critical realism is not a unitary framework, set of beliefs, or methodology. Instead, it draws on a diverse collection of ideas from philosophical traditions related to the work of, for example, Karl Marx, Pierre Bourdieu, and Max Weber (Collier, 1994). In contemporary terms, critical realism is often associated with the work of Roy Bhaskar (1979; 1989) and the development of a philosophy of science based on ontological realism, epistemological relativism, and judgmental rationality ([Archer](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=kH8xsZQAAAAJ&hl=en&inst=1597255436240989024&oi=sra), Bhaskar, Collier, [Lawson](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=lAYEqBUAAAAJ&hl=en&inst=1597255436240989024&oi=sra), & Norrie, 2013).

**Ontological Realism**

At the heart of critical realism are concerns about ontology (Bhaskar, 1979). Critical realism asserts that much of the social world exists and operates independently of people’s awareness or knowledge of it, and reality does not always lend itself to scientific investigation (Bhaskar, 1989). According to Bhaskar, the difficulty in capturing reality has led social science to be troubled by what he refers to as the ‘epistemic fallacy’. The epistemic fallacy operates when questions about that nature of things (ontology) are answered with empirical knowledge of that thing (epistemology) (Collier, 1994). Equally problematic, for critical realism, is the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities. Although the meaning of objects or events in the social world can be unique, what people experience is typically conceptualised and defined on the basis of other people’s experiences and meaning (Danermark et al., 2005). In this way, social constructions are constructions of ‘something’ that exists independently of the version of reality that is created in people’s minds (López & Potter, 2005).

Critical realism resolves the distinction and conflict between the existence of independent reality, lived experience, and socially constructed knowledge by proposing a stratified ontology that differentiates between three domains of reality. These domains are labelled *the real, the actual, and the empirical* (Bhaskar, 1979). The real domain consists of relatively enduring physical, biochemical, economic, and social objects and structures that can produce events and phenomena. These objects and structures are ‘real’ because they have causal power (i.e., they connect one process or state with another process or state) and they interact with one another to shape events and experiences (Danermark et al., 2005). Although these social structures are constructed and reproduced by human activity, they exist and exert a causal influence irrespective of whether people are aware of them or not, and are thus ‘mind-independent’ (Archer et al., 2014).

The actual domain consists of events and phenomena that are generated by the structures, or mechanisms of the real (i.e., what happens if and when the causal mechanisms of the real are activated) (Archer et al., 2014). Structures and mechanisms are often contingent and unpredictable, such that they may be activated or manifest for different people in different contexts. Thus, mechanisms of the real do not determine reality, but because they are continually produced and reproduced, they do make some constructions of the world more readily available than others (Parker, 1992). These constructions form what is termed ‘lived experience’, in so far as they are the events or phenomena that people perceive and ascribe meaning to (Danermark et al., 2005). In the empirical domain, however, lived experience of events is conceived of as being separate from the actual events themselves. This is because critical realism argues that scientific activity is inherently fallible and the practices and methods that underpin scientific observation, whether they be sensory (e.g., phenomenological), experimental (e.g., randomised controlled trials), or discursive (textual analysis), are flawed and imperfect (Hood, 2016).

**Epistemological Relativism**

The stratification of reality, as outlined by the three domains of critical realism, maintains ontological realism, with its commitment to a reality that is independent and relatively autonomous from consciousness. At the same time it recognises that knowledge about that reality is always socially, historically, and culturally situated (Wiltshire, 2018). From the perspective of critical realism, it is impossible to fully access ‘true’ reality because sensory perceptions are imperfect, and people’s understanding of events and phenomena are based on subjective interpretations that are mediated by perceptions of the world laden with beliefs and values (Sayer, 1999). These beliefs and values are historically determined and shaped by the prevailing culture of the time. There is, therefore, a fluidity about people’s knowledge of the world that is mediated by the availability and salience of ideas, concepts, and theories used to frame and explore empirical questions (Danermark et al., 2005). As such, there is no way of knowing the world except under particular, more or less transient, historical and cultural descriptions.

This does not mean to imply that pursuit of knowledge is futile, or the possibility of ‘truth’ is impossible. Instead, critical realism shifts the goal of research away from detecting generalisable laws (positivism), or solely describing discourses, and the social construction of the world (interpretivism); and on to understanding and explaining events and phenomena at a deeper level (Danermark et al., 2005). In doing so, critical realism accounts for the multi-dimensional nature of the world in a way that recognises interactions between relatively enduring ‘real’ social structures and the ways that people engage with, interpret, and make sense of the world (Elder-Vass, 2012).

### Research Designs in Critical Realism

Critical realism offers a strong critique of both the positivist paradigm of science, which is often associated with quantitative research designs, and also of constructionist approaches that are characterised by qualitative methods. However, critical realism does not disapprove of any particular research method, and does not privilege any particular methodology (Archer et al., 2013). Rather, whether a method is appropriate depends on its role within the overall design of the study, and the extent to which it is used in line with critical realist principles (Pawson, & Tilley 1997). The application of critical realist philosophy has afforded a pluralistic approach to research that has integrated diverse approaches. For example, Danermark et al. (2005) proposed that combinations of quantitative and qualitative methods within a critical realist framework are the best way to understand the complexities of social phenomena. Elsewhere, researchers have drawn on critical realism to work with what have previously been regarded as conflicting paradigms. This includes interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) alongside critical discourse analysis, where qualitative data is interpreted both as lived experience and discursive practice (Hood, 2016).

Such approaches reframe the philosophical tensions between methodologies by seeing them as complementary ways to explore the different domains of reality, and the various ways in which the social world is experienced and constructed (Hood, 2016). Thus, a study that seeks to provide a detailed, idiographic account of lived experiences (e.g., Studies 1 and 2 of this thesis) does not compromise one that seeks to examine the discursive resource that shapes that experience; or one that attempts to identify the underlying mechanisms and context in which phenomena become activated (e.g., Study 3 of this thesis). Rather than the ‘either/or’ approach that has characterised the paradigm wars in social research, critical realism advocates for a ‘both/and’ approach that can explore research problems in a more nuanced way (Saukko, 2005).

### Critiques of critical realism

Like most philosophical approaches to science, critical realism is not without its critics. Critiques are often directed to inconsistencies in the definitions and applications of ontology, confusion on the relationship between structure and agency (Cruikshank, 2004), and rejection of philosophy as a prerequisite for empirical science (Kemp, 2005). Given this thesis applies critical realism as a meta-theory of science concerning the stratification of reality, it is with this issue that criticism of critical realism is most pertinent. This argument maintains that critical realism’s dual commitment to ontological realism and epistemological relativism is incompatible. This is on the grounds that subscribing to realist ontology suggests objective (theory free) knowledge, to some extent, can be achieved; whereas a belief in socially constructed knowledge does not (Smith & McGannon, 2017). As Smith and McGannon (p.5) argue, critical realists “cannot have it both ways”.

The counter argument, from a (critical) realist perspective, suggests that attempts to define constructionism, for example, or refute a stratified ontology, are realist statements in themselves (see, Potter, 1996, for a constructionist perspective on this paradox). Scientific practice itself, whether approached with positivist-realist or constructionist-relativist paradigms, is based on theories of ‘something’. For example, the constructionist claim that social objects do not exist outside of discourse suggests an objective condition of some sort, and privileges one type of knowledge over another. Thus, all theories deal with something that is independent of the theories themselves. This is the case whether that theory or paradigm adopts the position that objective knowledge is possible, or not (Denermark et al., 2005).

### Application of critical realism in this thesis

Ultimately, given its philosophical nature, there can be no definitive resolution to the debate on ontology and epistemology. The goal of this chapter is therefore simply to contextualise the research designs, methods, and findings described in this thesis within a particular ‘worldview’ (namely, the author’s worldview). Unlike research based on a pragmatic philosophy, which tends to prioritise a ‘whatever works’ approach (Creswell, 2014), the aims of this thesis was to ensure that the ontological, epistemological, and methodological positioning of the research remained congruent. The stratified ontology of critical realism made this possible by articulating the importance of both objective and subjective forms of knowledge, and advocating for different research approaches and designs to understand the complexity of the social world.

Critical realism, therefore, opened the possibility of using different forms of data collection, analysis, and interpretation; and using multiple theoretical perspectives on social support to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. Thus, throughout this thesis, multiple perspectives were used to describe, interpret, and construct knowledge. In Studies 1 and 2, IPA was used to explore the lived experience of social support and the relational conditions and context which made support effective. In Study 3, this knowledge was used in conjunction with existing perspectives on social support, transition, and support programmes to design an intervention to help athletes to manage and make sense of their transition out of support. This intervention was evaluated using a methodology grounded in critical realist explanatory research (Pawson & Tilly, 1997; Porter, 2015) and focused on the mechanisms that facilitated change, and the context in which these mechanisms were activated. The rationale for selecting these methodologies and how they were used to address the research questions in each study is described in more detail in the empirical chapters that follow.

### Research Quality Criteria

The nature of research quality is contested and different paradigms have argued for different markers, and employed a variety of techniques, to situate and defend the claims about knowledge made by their research (Porter, 2006). Researchers from the positivist tradition often refer to the reliability and validity of their research, and in doing so, imply that findings reflect an objective ‘truth’ (Lincoln et al., 2011). In contrast, researchers using qualitative methods have come to reject traditional views of reliability and validity on philosophical grounds (i.e., that there is no such thing as objective truth/knowledge) and methodological grounds (i.e., that different methods require different criteria for assessing their quality) (Smith & McGannon, 2017). As such, there is no universal recognition of the markers or methods of research quality. Critical realism maintains a judgemental rationality that accepts the possibility of multiple experiences, descriptions and explanations of the same phenomenon, but also acknowledges that it is possible that some theories regarding the nature of the world are closer to reality than others (Hammersley, 2004). Thus, while there is no perfect way to judge the quality, validity, or rigour of research, some procedures may be more applicable than others—and this will largely depend on the goals of the research and the methods used (Porter, 2015).

Validity was defined in this thesis, therefore, as the extent to which the findings reflect the social phenomena to which they refer (Hammersley, 1990). This approach acknowledges the different accounts of the participants involved, while at the same time maintaining that different perspectives relate to ‘something’ real (Porter, 2007). In methodological terms, research quality was defined in terms of rigor, specifically in the context of method (Smith & McGannon, 2017), and the extent to which the research represented an appropriate use and application of the methodologies used (i.e., IPA and Realist Evaluation). As such, a pluralistic and flexible approach was used to promote rigor, rather than a predefined ‘checklist’ that was applicable to all of the studies in this thesis, or research more generally. These procedures will be discussed in more detail in the methods section of the relevant empirical chapters.

### Ethical Considerations

The research described in this thesis was conducted in line with the ethical procedures of the University of Sheffield (see https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity), which ensured that all research was consistent with the [British Psychological Society’s Code of Human Research Ethics](https://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/bps-code-human-research-ethics-2nd-edition-2014) (British Psychological Society, 2018). Approval for each study was obtained from the Department of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. These applications included details of the nature and design of the research, recruitment procedures, and data collection and analysis methods.

Prior to data collection for each study, all participants were provided with information which explained the purpose of the study, what their involvement would entail, and the procedures for maintaining confidentiality and anonymity (Appendix A, C, and E). Participants were told that their involvement was voluntary and they were given instructions on what to do if they wished to withdraw from the research, and information about how the findings would be used afterwards. The aim of this information was to enable all of the participants to make an informed decision on their participation.

The specific procedures used to maintain ethical responsibilities included storing all data using anonymous labels on password-protected computer drives; using pseudonyms for each participant and for any person, group, or organisation referred to by name during the interviews; removing any details discussed by participants which could identify any person or organisation; and using information and debriefing sheets to suggest participants contact their primary care provider (i.e., their GP) if they were worried about their wellbeing (as a result of issues relating to their transition, their participation in the research, or otherwise).

### Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has described the ontological, epistemological, and methodological positioning of this thesis in order to explain how decisions were made during the research process and to situate claims about how the findings contribute to knowledge. The thesis adopts a critical realist philosophy that maintains both ontological realism (i.e., a belief in a mind-independent reality), and epistemological relativism (i.e., that all knowledge is socially produced). These approaches—often characterised as opposing views—are united within a stratified ontology that distinguishes between the (often unobservable) social structures and mechanisms that generate events, the actual events themselves, and people’s fallible knowledge of those events (Archer et al., 2013).

This stratified ontology allows the social world to be explored at different levels in a deeper and more nuanced way and necessitates the use of multiple methodologies, approaches, and methods (McEvoy & Richards, 2006). Accordingly, this thesis used IPA to explore the lived experience of social support and the social and relational context in which it was provided and received. The resulting findings were used to design and deliver a programme to support athletes to manage and make sense of their transition. This was evaluated in order to understand if the programme was effective, how any positive (or negative) consequences were achieved, and the different ways in which the mechanisms of change were activated for athletes in different circumstances.

The next three chapters present the findings of the empirical research that was designed to explore the research questions identified in this thesis. Chapter 4 explores the experience of social support during the transition out of sport in the accounts of eight former elite athletes. Chapter 5 takes a different perspective on transition and social support by examining the experience of seven parents and partners who were the primary supporters to athletes during their transitions. Finally, Chapter 6 presents the findings of a realist evaluation of an intervention designed to support athletes to explore, understand, and manage their transition.

# Chapter Four: Athletes' experiences of social support during their transition out of elite sport: An interpretive phenomenological analysis (Study 1)

### Introduction

It is widely recognised that athletes need to adjust to numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes when they end their sporting career (Erpič, et al., 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). As described in Chapters 1 and 2, while some athletes find adjusting to these changes relatively straightforward, others find it a long and emotionally distressing experience (Stambulova et al., 2009). Research suggests that individual differences in the quality of transitions are influence by numerous personal and contextual factors (Taylor et al., 2006). The way that these factors influence the experience of transition varies from person to person; however, several consistent findings have been identified, including those that suggest athletes who receive social support typically find it easier to adjust to life after sport (Park et al., 2013a). Nevertheless, findings also indicate that there is variability in the quality of the support that athletes receive and not all athletes feel like they are supported (e.g., Lally, 2007).

The stress and coping perspective on social support—the approach that tends to be applied to the transition out of sport—suggests that social support buffers the negative effects of stress. In this way, received support is thought to help people to cope and perceived support thought to alter perceptions of potentially threatening situations (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). In research on social support outside sport, however, 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. This is because feeling supported can provide people with regular positive experiences that can enhance wellbeing (Thoits, 2011). In summary, many researchers argue that perceived support has a stronger relationship with positive health and wellbeing than received support (Uchino, 2009).

Despite its importance for health and wellbeing research on perceived support during transition is limited. Instead, research 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., 2013a). For example, athletes reported that when they received information from organisations, 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 organisations experienced fewer difficulties following retirement than those athletes who did not receive support (Leung et al., 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 receive support 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 organisational 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). As a consequence, athletes may become lonely and socially isolated, hindering their ability to adapt to their new life (Park et al., 2013a).

Given the limited availability and quality of support from sporting organisations 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 recognised 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 organisations 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 (Park & Lavallee, 2015). 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 highlight (but do not specially refer to) the importance of the appraisal dimension of support, and appear to be related to the social cognitive perspective on social support (Lakey & Drew, 1990). The social cognitive perspective 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, the perceptions of social interactions and supportive relationships are deemed to create and sustain identity, and to influence subjective feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Thoits, 2011). For example, receiving support (successful or otherwise), or perceiving support is available, signals to the athlete that they are worth supporting.

**Study 1**

Social cognitive and symbolic interactionist perspectives on social support suggest novel ways of looking at the process of transition out of sport that have not yet been fully considered. For example, social support during transition is likely to involve athletes identifying and mobilising 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 overall purpose of Study 1 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.

### Methods

**Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

Study 1 was designed and conducted according to the principles of 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) that may make some constructions of the world more available than others (Parker, 1992).

The aim of Study 1, therefore, was not to describe objective reality, but to explore and understand each participant’s view of the world as related to their experience and perceptions of social support (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).

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., 2013a), 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). In this respect, 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). Furthermore, 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). Drawing on these related ideas made it possible to explore the experiential nature of support, while also considering how the participants’ perceptions of support and (potentially) supportive relationships influenced the meanings that they attached to their retirement and attempts to adjust to life after sport.

**Participants**

Eight former elite athletes from the UK (four males and four females) 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 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. The interviews were semi-structured but flexible so that participants were able to lead the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them. This included going beyond the specific 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 B). 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**

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, the four general guidelines offered by Yardley (2008) were used because 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, this PhD 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. This 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 used produced an 'audit trail' that was scrutinised by the supervision team. Supervisors acted as ‘critical friends’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This involved reading and, in some cases, ‘auditing’ passages of text that were presented to support particular themes; discussing the content of the transcripts one-to-one and in groups, and reflecting on 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., 2013a). 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 characterised 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 characterised 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 are presented in Table 1.

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 Trust

Support from within sport Shared understanding

Athletes as commodities

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

**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 (i.e., 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 tangible 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 from 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 emphasises 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 organisations 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 recognised 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 emphasises 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 recognise 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 organisation 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 realise your skills are transferrable, you realise everything that you’ve learned from sport, and you realise 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 who 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 realise, 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

Study 1 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 who 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 Study 1 complement and extend previous work which suggests that social support can help athletes to adjust to a life after sport. Specifically, Study 1 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 this effect, 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).

Study 1 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). Study 1 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, the findings of Study 1 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 Study 1 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 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 thatLuke’s initial sense of agency was strengthened through his experience of acting (Bayne, 2008). This finding 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., 2013a).

However, many of the participants in Study 1 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 internalised and remain a salient part of a former athlete’s identity long after retirement (Andersen, 2011; Barker et al, 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 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 Study 1 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.

On a theoretical level, the concept of ‘generativity’ may offer a way to understand the importance that participants placed on ‘giving back’ and supporting other athletes. Originally defined in [Erickson’s (1963)](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2701702/#R17) theory of the stages of psychosocial development as “an interest in establishing and guiding the next generation” (p. 103), generativity is viewed as an important part of healthy adult development. Generativity is thought to prevent ‘stagnation’, where individuals may feel detached from their social network, community and society as a whole (Erickson & Erickson, 1998). These feelings of stagnation are commonly reported by athletes during their transitions (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000) and generative acts may, therefore, help them to reengage with communities to which they have an import emotional connection.

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). However (to the author’s knowledge), the findings of Study 1 provide 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 conceptualised as a social process that can help athletes to flourish and act as a mechanism for growth (Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017; Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016).

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

Study 1 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. Study 1 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 dynamics between the male researcher and male participants during the interview 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.

Regarding the practical applications, 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 Study 1 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 programmes 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 andthe provider (Schwartz, 1999; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999) and this reciprocal relationship opens up the possibility of developing mutually beneficial support programmes that can help a relatively large number of athletes during transition, and create a self-sustaining community of supporters.

### Conclusion

Study 1 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.

# Chapter Five: Athletes’ retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners’ experiences (Study 2)

### Introduction

Study 1 of this thesis highlighted important relational aspects of transition and the different ways in which social support can facilitate adjustment following retirement from sport. In particular, Study 1 recognised the importance of understanding the interpersonal contexts and relationship dynamics involved in the process of transition. As such, the quality of athletes’ relationships can play a crucial role in their ability to manage and make sense of their transition. Although theoretical models of the process of the transition (e.g., Taylor et al., 2006) highlight the important role that the availability and quality of social support plays during transition, *inter*-relational aspects of transition have received little empirical attention. In particular, there is a lack of research on transition from the perspective of people in athletes’ close social networks, such as their parents and/or partners. Given that major life transitions are often shared social experiences (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993), more work is therefore needed in this area.

**Relationships and life transitions**

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

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

The features of these transitions are often related to the way that people (re)negotiate their personal and social identity, (re)define their role in close relationships, and manage the provision and receipt of social support (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Research suggests that these factors play an important role in adjustment to transitions by influencing the personal and relational well-being of those involved ([Schulenberg](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Schulenberg%20J%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=26473017) &  [Schoon](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/?term=Schoon%20I%5BAuthor%5D&cauthor=true&cauthor_uid=26473017), 2012). For example, poor interpersonal communication during transitions can lead relationships to fracture and break down, with both parties suffering as a result (Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010).

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

**Interpersonal aspects of the transition out of sport**

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

It is therefore critical to understand how people in athletes’ close social networks experience the process of transition out of sport to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon. However, there are few examples of such work. Two notable exceptions, include Kane’s (1991) doctorial research exploring the process of transition from professional sports in the USA; and Lally and Kerr’s (2008) study involving the parents of former elite gymnasts. Kane (1991) conducted interviews with the wives of eight former athletes following their husbands’ retirements. Findings suggested that much of the wives’ lives remained the same after their husband retired. They maintained the same social networks, and their sense of self continued to be focused towards caring for children. It was the retiring athletes who experience the majority of the challenges related to transition; although the couples often had to negotiate difficulties in their marriage, particularly around the loss of earning power.

To the author’s knowledge, Lally and Kerr’s (2008) qualitative study with the parents of former elite gymnasts is the only published study involving close family members of retired athletes. These findings indicated that parents experienced significant disruption in their lives when their child retired. This disruption was characterised by changes in the parents’ relationship with their child, and their relationship with the other parent. Parents also described a loss of purpose as family roles and responsibilities evolved. The difficulties that the parents experienced appear to be more profound than those experienced by the wives in Kane’s (1991) study. Both studies, however, demonstrate the importance of understanding athletes’ retirement from the perspective of family members, and they reveal important information about the challenges that close family members may face during transition.

Despite making a significant contribution to understanding relational aspects of transition, existing research on transition involving athletes’ close family members has limitations. First, studies have focused on the parents or spouses/partners of athletes separately. Although relationships between athletes and their parents and partners may differ in fundamental ways, exploring these relationships in a single study provides the opportunity to identify similarities and differences in the experiences of family members, and develop a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the process of transition (Noohi, Peyrovi, Goghary, & Kazemi, 2016). Second, existing research has largely focused on family members’ responses to their significant others’ (i.e., husbands’, daughters’) retirement and this leaves considerable scope to explore the interpersonal processes involved when athletes retire.

In this respect, the interpretive phenomenological approach (e.g., Smith, 1996) used in Study 1 might be of potential benefit. The phenomenological concept of intersubjectivity, in particular, can help to understand how shared experiences are characterised by interactive meaning-making that is *co-created* (De Jaegher & Di Paolo 2007). In addition, the phenomenological focus on agency and identity can expand our understanding of the personal meaning that transition can have for family members and positions them as important participants in the process of transition, worthy of study in their own right.

**Study 2**

The purpose of Study 2 was to explore the experiences of parents and partners of elite athletes during the athletes’ transition out of sport. Specifically, an interpretive phenomenological approach was used to explore the interpersonal nature of transition and the way(s) that retirement from sport can affect close relationships. Study 2 also aimed to understand how parents and partners of athletes managed and interpreted their role in the process of transition, including their possible role as providers of support.

### Method

**Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

As with Study 1, Study 2 was designed and conducted according to the theoretical principles of IPA (Smith, 1996), and the philosophical assumptions of critical realism (Bhaskar, 1979). To briefly recap, critical realism maintains that there is a reality that is independent of subjective perceptions of the world (Bhaskar, 1989). Access to this reality, however, depends on sensory perceptions and subjective interpretations that are limited and incomplete, such that people may understand and interpret reality in different ways (Parker, 1992). This is congruent with aspects of hermeneutic (interpretative) phenomenological philosophy that acknowledges a pre-existing social world that people are ‘thrown into’ (Heidegger, 1962/1927), but also accepts that understanding of the world is mediated through individual’s consciousness, and their own interpretations of their experiences (Finlay, 2009; Heidegger, 1992). Study 2 was conducted, therefore, from a perspective that recognises a pre-existing ‘real’ world, but acknowledges that it is impossible to describe objective reality (Danermark, Ekstrom, & Jacobsen, 2005). Rather, the aim was to explore and understand the nature of the participant’s experience and how they made sense of that experience as they engage with their social world (Smith, 1996; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

**Participants**

Purposive sampling was used to recruit parents and partners of seven former elite athletes. Studies using IPA typically use a homogenous sample; however, the nature of this homogeneity differs depending on the study and the focus is on selecting participants who can provide a particular perspective on the phenomenon of interest (Smith et al., 2009). For Study 2, potential participants were invited to take part if they had experienced all, or a significant part of, the former athletes’ career in elite sport and their subsequent transition. Given the paucity of previous research and the practical issues of gaining access to participants meeting the criteria, few other restrictions were applied.

Four long-term partners of former athletes (one male and three females) aged between 30 and 47 (*M* = 37.75, *SD* = 6.95) and three parents (one male and two females) aged between 55 and 67 (*M* = 60.66, *SD* = 7.50) volunteered to take part. All participants were from the UK, were employed at the time of the athletes’ careers, and lived with the athletes at the time of their transitions. The former athletes had all competed at an international level for between 5 and 15 years (*M* = 12.50, *SD* = 3.88), competed in individual summer Olympic sports, and had taken part in multiple major championships; six having competed at the summer Olympic Games. At the time of the interviews with their parents and partners, the former athletes had been retired for between 3 and 12 years (*M* = 6.42, *SD* = 3.90). Three participants were the parent or partner of the former athletes who participated in Study 1.

**Procedure**

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

Not all of the former athletes who were contacted wished to invite someone to participate. All the former athletes who did agree to approach someone nominated either their partner or a parents; however, several parents and partners who were approached declined to take part. In these cases, the former athletes and/or their parents and partners said that they wished this time to remain private, did not want to revisit a difficult time in their lives, and/or felt that discussing issues around transition may cause some distress.

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

**Data analysis**

As with Study 1, analysis of the transcripts followed the guidelines described by Smith et al. (2009) and focused on the idiographic account of each participant. The first stage of the analysis involved reading each transcript several times before a detailed set of notes and comments were recorded to capture salient features of the account. The notes focused on describing the experiential content of the account, the language that was used by the participant, and conceptual interpretations that aimed to provide a deeper understanding of the meaning that was attached to each person’s experience. These notes were used to develop emergent themes that served to condense the data and capture the structure of the participant’s account. Next, a process of abstracting and subsuming the themes enabled them to be clustered together to form superordinate themes that represented shared meaning or a central concept. This ‘cross-case analysis’ identified patterns, similarities, and differences across the themes and superordinate themes for each participant that were used to develop higher-order concepts. The aim was to provide a coherent account of the data, while still maintaining the idiographic focus that is central to IPA.

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

**Research quality and methodological rigor**

Study 2 drew on a pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the quality of the research, rather than a predefined ‘checklist’ that is applicable to all qualitative research (Smith et al., 2009). The aim was to produce research that is faithful to the theoretical principles of IPA using a rigorous and transparent method (for a full description of the criteria suggested to produce ‘good’ IPA, see Smith, 2011).

Qualitative research within sport and exercise psychology tends to describe rigor in the context of method (Smith & McGannon, 2017). Thus, we focussed on developing meticulous data collection and analysis procedures that were transparent and thorough. Specifically, applying guidelines for phenomenological interviews (Bevan, 2014; Smith et al., 2009) encouraged participants to recall and reflect on the key experiences that were relevant for them, and helped us to maintain an approach that was congruent with IPA. At the same time, the interview guide (Appendix D) was based on a thorough review of relevant literature, which aimed to ensure Study 2 was conducted with relevance to contemporary theoretical issues related to the transition out of sport (Tracy, 2010).

A reflexive approach during data collection and analysis was crucial to the pursuit of rigor. This included producing fieldnotes immediately following each interview to outline aspects of the interviews that could have been lost once the analysis was limited to the review of audio recordings. Fieldnotes included details of the interactions between the researcher and participants prior to interviews commencing, the participants’ body language and mannerisms, and the researcher’s initial reactions following the completion of the interview. Fieldnotes formed part of a research diary kept, which helped to highlight any prior assumptions and ideas about the research topic and any emotional reactions to the data during collection and analysis.

Throughout the analysis the supervisors acted as ‘critical friends’ (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). In this respect, the supervisors read and, in some cases, coded transcripts; discussed the context and meaning of the transcripts; and reviewed the process of developing the themes. This aim was not to reach consensus or achieve agreement (as is the case with ‘inter-rate reliability’), but to use critical dialogue as a resource for developing the interpretations being made (Smith & McGannon, 2017).

### Results

**Context**

Study 2 sought to explore the experience of transition out of elite sport from the perspective of the parents and partners of athletes, rather than the athletes themselves. However, some description of the athletes’ experience, as described by their parents and partners, is provided first in order to provide context.

Athletes’ experiences of transition were idiosyncratic and their reactions to retirement depended in part on the specific circumstances that surrounded their exit from elite sport. However, there were several common features of athletes’ transitions that related to issues such as disruption of identity, loss of self-esteem, difficulties establishing a new career, and the changing nature of their relationship with their parents and partners. Many of these have been described in previous research focusing on athletes’ experiences of transition (e.g., Park et al., 2013a) and so here the focus is on the experience of transition from the perspective of the parents and partners of the athletes.

**Overview**

The changes and difficulties in the athletes’ lives meant that parents and partners experienced changes in their own lives that were often difficult to navigate. In effect, parents and partners experienced their own transition. At times, parents and partners felt that their relationship with the athlete was distant or detached, with each person in the relationship experiencing a similar, but somewhat separate transition. However, parents and partners also described times when they felt close to the athlete and transition seemed to be more of a shared experience. During these times, they worked through challenges together and parents and partners were willing and able to offer support to the athlete. This interpretation of the parents and partners’ accounts is captured by an overarching theme that was labelled ‘parallel and shared experiences of transition’. This overarching theme provided the context for three other interwoven themes that form the structure of the analysis that follows: (a) initial experiences of transition, (b) experiences of being a supporter, and (c) integrating experiences into current life. Table 2 summarises these themes.

Table 2

*Table of themes pertaining to the parallel and shared experience of transition identified from the interviews*

Superordinate themes Subordinate themes Themes

Initial experience of transition Appraisals and reactions Intense emotional reactions

The impact of transition on the self Loss of identity

Loss of agency

Experience of being a supporter Providing support Being there

Negotiating support Mutual disclosure

Burden and costs of being a supporter Feeling ill-prepared to help

Stress of being a supporter

Integration of the experience into current life The ongoing process of transition Insecurity

Personal and relational growth New meanings

Becoming closer and stronger

**Initial experiences of transition**

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

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

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

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

**Interviewer:** What sort of emotions were you going through, what were you feeling when Dave retired?

**Dani:** Just nervous I think…I thought he would find it very, very difficult because it would be such a complete change of lifestyle and a completely different way of life. I wondered what he would do for a job and about how it would be, him being at home more, having had him not been at home very much.

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

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

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

It was hard because it had been a big part of our lives…we’d spent ten, fifteen years of going to competitions and enjoying the success, it was a cut off for us as well. So it was quite hard, it left a big gap in our lives really….it was just a void, you find things eventually, it takes a few months or a couple of years and then, you know, your life moves on.

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

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

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

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

**Experiences of being a supporter**

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

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

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

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

He’s never been a paperwork man, ever. ‘Cos he’s obviously just got up and trained all day. But all of a sudden he’s having to fill in forms and do CV’s and that kind of thing, so I’ve tried to help him with that…I looked on the internet for jobs and things for him, things he could do.

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

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

**Negotiating support.** The interpersonal processes and relational dynamics involved in transition were complex and not always easy for parents and partners to navigate. As Emily put it, “it’s just something that you muddle through”. Some of the parents and partners struggled to identify the appropriate type and amount of support to provide. They worried about striking the right balance between being supportive and caring, and being honest and realistic about what was happening. For example, despite wanting to provide unconditional support to his daughter, James was concerned about giving her space so that she could work through, and make sense of, her transition. Similarly, Jane provided emotional support to her son but she was also worried about “molly coddling” a grown man. Most of the parents and partners, in some way, felt uncertain and uneasy about their role as a supporter. For example, Jo’s life with her partner had been structured around sport for over 10 years and she was worried about how she would help her partner to negotiate transition. The quote below suggests that Jo understood the changes that retirement would bring, but this gave rise to a sense of uncertainty and worry around her perceived responsibility to provide support.

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

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

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

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

**Interviewer:** Did you think that you had a particular kind of role to play when he retired?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Integration of the experience into current life**

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

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

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

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

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

Dani also expressed concerns about her partner’s career.

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

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

**Personal and relational growth.** Despite ongoing challenges, the passage of time and the chance for reflection seemed to bring positive meaning to some parents and partners’ experiences and they expressed a sense of growth in themselves, the former athlete, and their relationship. The quote below highlights both the meaning that Jo ascribes to her experience of transition (i.e., a stronger relationship with her partner) and also the deliberate processes of meaning-making that were used to attain and maintain this feeling. For example, a key part of the strength of her relationship with her partner was being able to talk and communicate openly with each other and putting time aside to be together:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### Discussion

Study 2 sought to explore the transition out of sport from the perspective of parents and partners of former elite athletes. The interpretation of the participants’ accounts positions the transition out of sport as a process that not only impacts the athletes but also people in their close social network. That is, the findings suggest that parents and partners experienced their own transition when the athletes retired and the resulting changes in their own life had a negative influence on their wellbeing. At times, parents and partners also experienced difficulties in their relationships with the athletes, which reduced their capacity and willingness to provide support.

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

The findings of Study 2 suggest that the difficulties that parents and partners experienced were often magnified because the majority of the athletes experienced a difficult start to their transition. There is strong evidence to suggest that the extent to which athletes have control over their decision to retire influences their subsequent adjustment to retirement (Park et al., 2013a). That is, athletes who retire for unplanned reasons such as injury or de-selection are more likely to experience difficulties. Although the distinction between planned and unplanned retirement was often blurred (e.g., one athlete pre-empted the loss of funding, another retired due to a loss of form), parents and partners tended to report that athletes typically struggled, regardless of the manner in which they retired.

The difficulties that athletes’ experienced were often associated with a loss of self-esteem, which appeared to be related to uncertainty around their sense of self. These feelings of loss were mirrored by parents and partners, emphasising the idea that transition was a shared experience. Parents, in particular, described feelings of loss in the initial stage of transition and compared their experience to that of bereavement. This is similar to the way that many former athletes have described their transition (e.g., McKenna & Thomas, 2007) and also supports the findings of Lally and Kerr (2008), who reported that the parents of retired gymnasts struggled to fill the gap that their daughter’s retirement left in their life, even many years after they had retired.

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

Previous studies on transition from elite sport have reported that some athletes experiencing a difficult transition say that their parents and partners sometimes struggle to support them (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Gilmore, 2008). Study 2 extends these findings by exploring the process from the perspective of parents and partners directly and suggests that athletes’ reports of absent, or ineffective, support may be explained by what has been referred to as the ‘dilemma of helping’ (Coyne et al., 1990). That is, supporters often find it difficult to balance their own needs at the same time as attending to those of others. Research on life transitions outside of sport has found that supporters may find it difficult to listen to, understand, and act on another person’s distress while struggling with their own difficulties (Harris, Pistrang, & Barker, 2006). This reflects the findings of Study 2 which highlight the difficulties that some parents and partners faced when trying to manage their own transition while attempting to help to the former athletes with theirs.

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

Despite the challenges and uncertainty that parents and partners experienced, on the whole they felt that they had played a positive role in the athletes’ transitions. Effective support seemed to be underpinned by a sense of trust, open communication, and the feeling that parents, partners, and athletes were working through issues together. These factors played a stronger role as transition progressed as opportunities for mutual disclosure became more frequent. Research suggests that disclosing thoughts and emotions regarding a stressful experience to a supportive other can facilitate post-traumatic growth (Prati & Pietrantoni, 2009). Furthermore, studies have found that self-disclosure can contribute to growth by enhancing feelings of closeness in relationships (Manne et al., 2004) and can also help people to form shared narratives of survival from which they draw further strength (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). Consistent with this idea, the findings of Study 2 suggest that, as time went by, parents, partners, and the athletes came to see transition as a shared experience, became more comfortable talking about issues that they were facing, and took comfort and pride in the way that they had reorganised and renegotiated their lives together.

At a theoretical level, the findings of Study 2 suggest that much can be learned by examining the experience of transition from the perspective of those close to the person, as well as from the perspective of the individual themselves. The majority of existing research on the transition out of sport places relationships in the background, often characterising relationships simply as resources that facilitate successful adjustment for the athlete. For example, in describing social support as an ‘available resource’, Taylor et al’s (2006) model of adaption to retirement locates the process of transition within the individual athlete. This does not recognise the possibility that transition may be a shared experience that involves changes in close relationships and has consequences for the athletes *and* for the people in their close social networks. There is a need, therefore, for more complete theoretical approaches that can help us to understand the complexity of the interpersonal processes that are involved in the transition out of sport.

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

The most simple and fundamental unit in family systems theory is the relationship between two people, for example, the relationship between romantic partners or a parent and child (Brown, 1999). The findings of Study 2 support the basic premise of family systems theory that suggests that the quality of these dyadic relationships, and their ability to reorganise and adapt to change, is based on open communication, successful resolution of conflict, and the reciprocal nature of social support (Cox & Paley, 2003). These characteristics are important for athletes’ relationships with both parents and partners. It is important to acknowledge, however, that previous research has outlined that the nature of romantic and parental relations differs in important ways, including the level of closeness and intimacy within a relationship, style and strength of attachment, and sources of stress and conflict (de Jong Gierveld & Dykstra, 1993). Further research on the interpersonal aspects of transition could, therefore, choose to focus more closely on dyadic ‘sub-units’ in athletes’ social networks to take into account these differences, while at the same time recognising that dyadic relationships form part of a larger, interconnected system.

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

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

The conclusions above should be taken in the context of a number of limitations to Study 2. First, it was only possible to conduct a single interview with each parent or partner, which may not be sufficient to explore and understand the complex experiences that are involved in transition. Furthermore, it is important to note that some of the parents and partners became emotional during the interview and clearly found it difficult to revisit some of their experiences. IPA relies on the participants’ willingness to disclose and explore their experiences and it is possible that some parents and partners were reluctant to do so in order to avoid reliving any unpleasant emotions associated with their transition. Consequently, interesting and meaningful experiences and narratives may have been lost. In order to address these limitations, future research could consider longitudinal designs to explore patterns of support as the process of retirement unfolds. This may also give the researcher the opportunity to build rapport with participants and facilitate disclosure.

As previously discussed, a systems approach may be a useful theoretical framework to inform the design and delivery of future research. Such a framework might point to the use of dyadic (joint) interviews that invite parents, partners and athletes to explore their experience(s) together in order to provide a more detailed understanding of transition out of sport; ideally, within a longitudinal design as suggested above. A family systems/dyadic approach may also be useful for designing interventions to support athletes and their partner/parent during transition. According to theories and models of dyadic coping (e.g., Berg & Upchurch, 2007), people in close relationships interdependently and mutually influence each other’s adjustment to stress. In ‘common dyadic coping’ (Bodenmann, 1997) both members of a partnership participate in the coping process in order to find problem-focused or emotion-focused solutions to stressful situations. Research suggests that couples experiencing a life transition are more likely to maintain the quality of their relationship and their own wellbeing if they engage in common dyadic coping (Rottmann et al., 2015). As such, interventions designed to promote adjustment during transition could aim to support athletes *and* those close to them; for example, by encouraging problem solving, joint information seeking, self-disclosure and sharing of emotions. Such interventions may help athletes and their parents or partners to recognise the personal and shared aspects of transition and help them to work through issues together for the benefit of all those involved.

**Conclusion**

Study 2 used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore parents and partners’ experiences of athletes’ transition out of elite sport, and so provided insights into the interpersonal nature of the transition. In particular, parents and partners often experienced uncertainly and upheaval in their own lives as they adjusted to changing roles and dynamics in their relationship with the former athlete and renegotiated their own identity. Providing support to the former athlete was complicated by parents and partners’ own difficulties during transition and they often felt unsure about their role as a supporter. Most parents and partners felt that, to some extent, their transition was still an ongoing process. However, opportunities for mutual disclosure and sharing emotions increased as time went by and this helped parents and partners to gain a positive perspective on the transition and a sense that their relationship with the former athlete had strengthened and grown. Taken together, these findings highlight the way that the transition out of sport can be explored at the level of the family or partnership and presents a more complex conceptual view that may offer a basis for future research.

# Chapter Six: A realist evaluation of a pilot programme to promote adjustment during the transition out of sport (Study 3)

### Introduction

The findings of Studies 1 and 2 highlight the important role that social support can play in the process of transition, and the importance of considering transition as a shared social experience. Consequently, Chapters 4 and 5 suggested several recommendations that may help applied practitioners and sporting organisations to support athletes to make the transition out of sport. Previously, researchers have pointed to the crucial role that programmes to support athletes can make in helping athletes to adjust to the changes that they experience when they retire from sport (e.g., Baillie & Danish, 1992; Danish, Petitpas, & Hale, 1992; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Indeed, programmes to support athletes to plan and manage the process of transition have been in existence in several countries for more than 20 years (Reints & Wylleman, 2013). Despite this, few studies have evaluated these programmes, and, in general, there is surprising little research on interventions designed to support athletes during transition.

Typically, any support that athletes receive in regards to their transition out of sport has formed part of on-going career assistance programmes (CAPs) implemented by, for example, national governing bodies, high performance centres/national institutes, and professional sport associations. In general, the approach to CAPs has focused on education, career planning/guidance, life skills training, and pre-retirement planning (Gordon, Lavallee, & Grove, 2005). The focus of CAPs, therefore, has been on *preventive* interventions designed to enhance athletes’ awareness of the demands they may face in transition and help them to develop resources and skills that may help them to manage any challenges that they face.

This approach supports the holistic life-span perspective on transitions (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) by integrating athletic, psychological, psychosocial, and educational/vocational aspects of athletes’ development. This preventative and educational approach to CAPs is often done within ‘lifestyle’ development programmes. This holistic approach is used to combine personal and sporting development and can take advantage of existing institutional support structures to help organisations (e.g., National Sport Institutes) to maximise the resources that they have available to support athletes during transition (Gordon et al., 2005). Although formal evaluations are rare, there is some evidence to suggest that CAPs can have a positive impact on the career development and transition process by helping athletes to develop their life skills (e.g., leadership and communication skills) and enhance career decision making and planning abilities (Goddard, 2004; Mateos, Torregrosa, & Cruz, 2010).

However, there are several potential issues with a strategy to support career transition out of sport based on CAPs that are delivered before retirement. First, research suggests that athletes do not always access CAPs even when they are available (North & Lavallee, 2004). Indeed, athletes have indicated that they did not take part in formal support programmes because they think that transition planning could distract from their sporting performance; a view that is often reinforced by coaches and support staff (Ryan, 2015). Second, due to financial constraints, support is often limited to the period immediately following retirement (Park et al., 2013a). Given that many athletes experience a ‘honeymoon’ period following retirement (Stronach et al., 2014), CAPs may not be delivered at the most appropriate time for everyone. Third, CAPs delivered by organisations are predominantly limited to those athletes at the very highest level of the sporting pyramid (e.g., Professional/International level), this is in spite of evidence to suggest that athletes at lower levels of sport are just as susceptible to difficulties following retirement (Lavallee et al., 2000).

Taken together, this evidence suggests that there is a need to continue to develop and provide support to athletes after the point of retirement. Researchers have proposed a number of therapeutic approaches in this respect, including cognitive-behavioural techniques (e.g., cognitive restructuring, goal-setting), counselling, and career mentoring (Lavallee et al., 2000). Interventions delivered after athletes have retired are seen as a way to help them make sense of their transition, understand and develop transferable skills, and promote the use of coping resources and social support (Lavallee & Andersen, 2000). Furthermore, ‘account-making’ and narrative therapy have been recommended as a way of helping athletes to describe, explain, and process transition difficulties, while at the same time encouraging athletes to renegotiate a new sense of self (Grove et al., 1998).

Despite calls to conduct research to assess the efficacy of interventions designed to promote adjustment following retirement from sport (e.g., Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Brewer, 2013), little progress has been made in this respect. In a notable exception, Lavallee (2005) designed, implemented and assessed the impact of a life development intervention on career transition adjustment among retired professional football players. This intervention was reported as having a positive influence on athletes’ adjustment because it helped them to develop appropriate coping skills, self-efficacy, and self-worth. However, scholars and applied practitioners have continued to highlight the need for further research on career transition support programmes. In particular, there have been calls to develop process and outcomes evaluations that draw on multiple methods to assess the factors that influence successful implementation of support and to determine the components and mechanisms by which programmes are effective (Petitpas, et al., 2013). The purpose of Study 3, therefore, was to evaluate the effectiveness of a program designed to support athletes to manage and make sense of their experience of retirement.

**Study 3**

The specific aims of Study 3 were to: i) develop an [intervention program](https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/psychology/intervention-program)me based on the findings of Studies 1 and 2, and existing research on the transition out of sport; ii) to implement the program with a group of athletes who volunteered for the study; and ii) to evaluate the effects (positive and/or negative) of the programme, and the different ways in which the programme components brought about change for the people who took part. The programme recognised that transitions are not linear ‘events’. Rather, they are dynamic processes—often experienced in very idiosyncratic ways—that can extend far beyond the immediate point of retirement (Park et al., 2013. Indeed, Study 3 recognised that many athletes are still attempting to deal the changes they experience as a result of retiring many years after their sporting career has ended (Douglas & Carless, 2009). This is reflected in the composition of the people that volunteered to take part in the programme, who were athletes quite recently retired and athletes that had retired many years previously. Given the different ways in which transitions unfold and the multiple personal and relational context that influence adjustment processes, Study 3 employed a realist evaluation methodology.

**Methodological approach**

The evaluation used critical realist assumptions about causality, which argue that events and outcomes are rarely the result of single and/or isolated causal mechanisms (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Rather, interventions are introduced into complex social systems and it is the interaction of the intervention within this context that produces outcomes. Study 3, therefore, draws on Pawson and Tilley’s (1997) original work on realist evaluation, which proposes that context + mechanisms = outcomes. Context is described as the pre-existing circumstances in which an intervention is introduced. This can include psychological, social, organisational, economic, and cultural factors that influence mechanisms and outcomes (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Mechanisms can be described as the interpretations, reflections, choices, and actions of participants (Pawson, 2003). A mechanism can enable or present a barrier to change, but mechanisms do not act in isolation. They are, instead, ‘activated’ by the context in which they operate. Mechanisms are not the intervention itself, but the ‘underlying entities, processes, or [social] structures which operate in particular contexts to generate outcomes of interest” (Astbury & Leeuw, 2010, p. 368). These outcomes can be defined as the tangible results of a programme (e.g., a reduction of offending rates as a consequence of a programme delivered in prisons), or more subtle changes in personal and relational circumstances (e.g., changes in levels of trust or self-esteem as a result of taking part in a programme).

Study 3 also integrates the critical realist approach to evaluation proposed by Porter (2015a; 2015b). This approach expands on the classic context + mechanisms = outcomes formula to offer a more precise account of why a programme may or may not be successful. Therefore, context refers to the combination of mechanisms that sustains the original problem, including social rules, norms, values, and interrelationships that pre-exist the introduction of the programme. Furthermore, mechanisms are separated into two components. One, the resources, activities or practices embedded in the programme itself that are designed to address the original context. Two, mechanisms related to the participants’ reasoning and agency (i.e., how they interpret and respond to the programme). This approach recognises the power of contextual, programme, and reasoning mechanisms to produce outcomes in combination, in a way that is congruent with the generative account of causation in critical realism (Porter, 2015a). Thus, the classic realist evaluation formula becomes contextual mechanisms + programme mechanisms + agency/reasoning = outcomes.

Based on this expanded evaluation formula, Study 3 proposed that programmes work (i.e., have successful outcomes) when participants respond positively (agency / reasoning) to the ideas and opportunities (programme mechanisms) embedded within the programme design. This process is influenced by the different circumstances that each individual (or group) finds themselves in prior to the programme being introduced (context). Context may facilitate or hinder outcomes because it influences how people think and act when they engage with programme mechanisms. Therefore, it is not the programme itself that drives change, but rather, how the participant(s) responds to the programme given the context in which it is embedded.

### Methods

**Design**

The study followed three broad phases (Pawson & Tilly, 1997). According to realist approaches to evaluation, any programme designed to drive change will include, even at an implicit level, a theory of how that change is to be attained. The first phase of the evaluation, therefore, involved developing a theory of change that contained hypotheses about how the programme was expected to work. The programme hypotheses are referred to as Context–Mechanism-Outcome configurations (CMOs) and specify the relationships between the different components contained within the theory. The combination of multiple CMOs contribute to the overall programme theory. The second phase then collected data to test these hypotheses using a concurrent mixed-methods design, with qualitative and quantitative data collected independently and then integrated during analysis (Creswell, 2014). Finally, Phase 3 involved using the empirical findings to refine and develop the initial programme theory.

**Developing the programme theory (Phase One)**

The process of developing the programme theory began with a comprehensive review of previous research on athletes’ transition out of sport. This review is described in detail in Chapters 1 and 2 of the thesis and is therefore only briefly summarised here.

The programme theory integrated several theoretical frameworks, including the Conceptual Model of Adaptation to Retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994) and the Development Model of Career Transitions in Sport (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Drawing on these approaches, transition was conceptualised as a multi-faceted process where athletes need to manage and adjust to numerous, psychological, psychosocial, and vocational changes in their life. The design of the programme recognised that various interrelated factors have the potential to influence the way that athletes adjust to life following retirement, including individual differences in age, socio-economic status, the level of perceived control over life and the transition decision making process, and ability to access and develop resources to manage transition demands.

The design of the programme also applied the findings from Study 1 (see Chapter 4) and Study 2 (see Chapter 5). The findings from Chapter 4 suggested that athletes often felt most comfortable discussing their experience of transition with other retired athletes, primary because they felt that other athletes understood what they were going through. Therefore, it was decided that the programme would be delivered by facilitators and speakers who were retired athletes. It was hoped that this would foster a non-judgemental learning environment where participants would feel comfortable sharing their experiences.

The findings from Chapter 4 also suggested that athletes benefitted from the opportunity to support other athletes as this increased their own sense of self-esteem and self-worth. Thus, the participants were allocated to smaller ‘Action Learning Groups’ (ALG) to encourage contact beyond the formal delivery of the programme and offer the participants the opportunity to provide social support to the other group members.

The findings from Chapters 4 and 5 indicated that athletes’ close support networks often play a crucial role in the process of transition. However, athletes can find it difficult to access appropriate help (Chapter 4) and their close support networks often have difficult providing support (Chapter 5). Furthermore, parents and partners, in particular, may experience their own transition when the athletes retire and this can impact their own wellbeing, place stress on their relationship with the athlete, and reduce their capacity to provide support. With this in mind, the programme emphasised the relational aspects of transition and included activities that focused on understanding transition from the perspective of people in the participants’ support network and how to effectively communicate with these people.

The overarching aim of the programme was to promote and facilitate the adjustment process and the well-being of retired athletes. The programme was designed around five CMO configurations that state the relationship between the circumstances in which the programme was delivered (context), the activities used to address/ improve issues of concern (programme mechanisms) and the desired results of the programme (outcomes). The detailed CMOs that formed the initial programme theory are presented in full in Table 7.

CMO1: The first CMO was based on the idea that in order for athletes to be able to manage and make sense of their transition (outcome), they need to be supported to acquire skills and knowledge in an environment that is credible, relevant, open, and accessible (programme mechanisms). It was therefore predicted that engaging with the programme would be influenced by contextual factors related to participants’ ability to commit to and complete the programme, willingness to engage in group based learning, and individual learning preferences.

CMO2: The second CMO was framed around the idea that transition is inherently a process of change that can often have difficult and challenging consequences (context). By helping athletes to recognise, understand, and manage changes in their own life—and see the process of change from the perspective of their peers (programme mechanisms)—it was hoped that they would recognise transition as a ‘normal’ process. In turn, it was hoped that this increase in self-awareness would facilitate the participants’ overall sense of wellbeing and adjustment (outcome).

CMO3: The third CMO proposed that athletes often experience difficulties related to the loss of their (athletic) identity when they retire and may have difficulties forming a new or reshaped sense of self (context). Assisting athletes to understand their athletic identity, deal with issues around the loss of identity, and explore possible future selves (programme mechanisms) may help athletes to become more self-aware, give them a clearer idea of their beliefs and values, and help them to develop a plan for their personal development (outcomes).

CMO4: The fourth CMO recognised that athletes often feel that they are ill equipped to manage their transition and find it difficult to recognise how their skills and experiences could apply in other environments (context). By identifying transferable skills, values, and relevant experience gained in sport (programme mechanisms) athletes may become more confident about the future and may be more likely to adjust to their life after sport (outcomes).

CMO5: The fifth CMO proposed that athletes may find it difficult to access the support that they need during transition (context). Reflecting on the types and sources of support and developing the athletes’ skills to engage with their social networks (programme mechanisms) is therefore likely to improve their close relationships and increase their feelings of being supported, in turn it was predicted that this would improve their overall sense of wellbeing (outcomes).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CMO** | **CONTEXT** | **PROGRAMME MECHANISMS** | **OUTCOMES** |
| 1.Programme delivery and content | * Few transition support services available for retired athletes. * Participants received little support to help adjust to changes in transition. | * Delivery by experienced facilitators with their own transition experiences. * Group interaction and sharing of experiences. * Evidence based content / knowledge / activities to frame personal experiences. | * Participants will provide high feedback scores for each workshop. |
| 2.Understanding and managing change. | * Poor understanding of the transition process. * Feelings of uncertainty/denial/loss. | * Provide information on the processes of change involved in transition. * Recognise changes in their own life. * Share experiences of transition with others. * Process emotions related to transition. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |
| 3.Exploring identity. | * Identity developed and defined by sport. * Difficulty defining a new identity. | * Identify the activities and people that may have supported their identity as athletes. * Explore the goals, beliefs and values that they believe are important to them. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |
| 4.Building personal resources. | * Lack of pre-transition planning. * Uncertainly about future career. | * Identify the transferable skills, knowledge and experience acquired through sport. * Identify how these skills can be used in life now and in the future. | * Increased psychological capital. * Development of goals/plan for the future. |
| 5.Building support networks/ relationships. | * Disruption/loss of social networks. * Reluctance to seek help. | * Recognise the different types and sources of support. * Acknowledge the support they may need. * Identify social support networks. * Highlight good communication skills/practice. | * Increased willingness to seek help seeking intentions/behaviours. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |

Table 3

*Initial Programme Theory*

**The Programme**

The programme consisted of three full day group workshops delivered approximately four weeks apart in the latter part of 2017. The workshops were structured around the key CMOs developed in the initial programme theory. Each workshop had an overall theme. Workshop one was focused on developing the participants’ awareness and understanding of the process of transition and their own experiences. Workshop two was focused on exploring and developing skills and resources to support personal development and wellbeing. Workshop three focused on identifying the participants’ values and goals, and on developing a plan of action beyond the end of the workshops. An outline of the programme structure and content can be found in Table 4.

The workshops were structured but flexible and the aim was for an informal atmosphere that encouraged the participants to take an active role in shaping their own learning. Typically, the workshops were split into several sessions that began with a relatively formal introduction to the session topic, an activity to make the topic relevant for individual participants, and time for personal and/or group reflection.

The programme was delivered by staff at Lane4 Management Group. Lane4 is a management consultancy focused on people and team development, leadership development, and skills training. The company has a long history of working with sports teams and organisations and many of its employees are former athletes. The primary facilitator of the programme was a senior consultant at Lane4. At the time of delivery, the primary facilitator —male, aged 44—had been a learning and development professional for over ten years with considerable experience of delivering group based training and personal development programmes in corporate and sport settings. The primary facilitator was a former athlete, having played an elite level, amateur, team sport for over 20 years.

The primary facilitator led the majority of the sessions during the programme and was assisted by colleagues from Lane4. A session on each of the three days of the programme was delivered by a guest speaker. All three guest speakers were male, aged between 45 and 60, and part of the senior management team at Lane4. Each speaker was a former elite level athlete in Olympic sports with over 20 years experience working as consultants and senior managers in the learning and development industry. Each session also had three assistant facilitators—two males, one female, aged 25-30—from Lane 4. The assistant facilitators also had a background as athletes in national level sport and their role was to co-ordinate ‘breakout’ sessions and small group discussions.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Table 4. *An overview of the programme structure and content* | | | | |
|  | | | | |
| **Workshop** | **Title** | **Learning Objectives** | **Workshop Content** | **CMOs** |
| **1** | Awareness and Understanding | The objectives of this workshop were to help participants:   * Become more aware of the process of change involved in transition. * Recognise and understand change and reactions to change in their own life. * Share experiences of transition with others if they wanted to. | * Introductions to the design, content, and delivery of the programme. * Discussion on the importance of support and sharing within the group. * Exploration and discussion of the process of transition, dealing with ‘threat’ and managing change. | 1,2,3 |
| **2** | Exploring and Developing | * Recognise transferable skills and personal qualities. * Develop effective strategies to navigate and manage transition. * Identify, access and manage support networks. | * Identify the transferable skills, knowledge and experience acquired through sport. * Developing a personal resilience framework. * Exploring possible types and sources of support. * Looking at transition from the perspective of supporters e.g. close family members. | 1,3,4,5 |
| **3** | Moving Forward | * Understand how motivations and needs may have driven performance in sport. * Explore how motivations and needs may be met by other means, or in other environments. * Develop a sustainable plan for personal development, happiness and fulfilment. | * Exploring and developing self-determined motivation/values. * Introducing goal setting frameworks and developing an action plan. | 2,3,4,5 |

As well as acting as the primary facilitator, Rick led the process of designing the programme. This was based on his own experience of transitioning from the sport of Lacrosse, working as a learning and development professional, and being part of the research team for this PhD. The author’s role during the project was to assist in the design of the programme by integrating the findings of Studies 1 and 2; and to carry out the data collection and analysis for the evaluation.

**Participants.**

Participants were recruited by advertising on social media and through existing contacts within sporting organisations. The programme was open to athletes from any sport who had been retired for 12-months or more. The 12-month restriction was intended to give precedence to athletes who were unable to successfully transition and therefore prioritised those in greatest need of support. Given that issues around retirement from sport can affect athletes from amateurs to professionals, and transition can be extended process, no restrictions were placed on the length of time since retirement or the level at which the athletes competed. Over 20 enquiries were received and 12 athletes were able to commit to participate in the whole programme and were therefore invited to take part. However, two people had to withdraw close to the start of the first workshop and the programme began with ten participants.

The ten participants (three male and seven female) who volunteered to take part in the research were from the UK and were aged between 26 and 58 years (*M* = 40.66, *SD* = 11.27). Eight had previously competed at an international level and two at national level in numerous sports: rowing (*n* = 3), canoeing (*n* = 1), para-swimming (*n* = 1), para-sailing (*n* = 1), athletics (*n* = 1), gymnastics (*n* = 1), and diving (*n* = 1). They had been involved at the highest level of their sport for between 6 and 18 years (*M* = 8.95, *SD* = 6.12) and five 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 their participation in the programme the participants had been retired for between 1 and 35 years (*M* = 16.53, *SD* = 15.47).

**Procedure**

Participants were asked to complete a questionnaire that assessed key constructs thought to directly or indirectly influence wellbeing and adjustment. Items on the questionnaire were gathered from existing measures and were selected based on their theorised relationship to the process of transition. The participants completed the questionnaire between seven and three days prior to the first workshop and again between one and three weeks after the end of the final workshop.

Participants were also asked to complete an evaluation form following the conclusion of each workshop. This contained questions related to, for example, their perceptions of the quality of the sessions, how well the workshop met the stated learning objectives, and ratings of the facilitators’ delivery of the workshops. These questions were scored on a 7-point Likert scale. These questions were supplemented with qualitative questions that asked participants to provide a rationale for their scores. An example of an evaluation form is presented in Appendix G.

A focus group was held immediately following the completion of the final workshop and lasted around an hour. The focus group was supplemented by further semi-structured interviews four to six weeks later with the seven participants who completed the whole programme. The interviews were conducted using video conferencing software and lasted between 58 and 98 minutes (*M* = 77.43, *SD* = 13.11). The focus group topic guide (Appendix H) and interview topic guide (Appendix I) were developed to reflect the programme theory and to explore how the participants experienced the programme in practice.

**Questionnaire measures.**

***Wellbeing.*** Wellbeing was measured using the seven-item short version of the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS). The SWEMWBS combines hedonic and eudemonic elements of wellbeing in seven positively worded items that were measured on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = None of the time; 2 = Rarely; 3 = Some of the time; 4 = Often; 5 = All of the time). A higher score indicates a higher level of mental wellbeing. The SWEMWBS is a widely used measure in the general population and internal consistency is high (α = 0.87; Hunter, Houghton, & Wood, 2015).

***Self-esteem.*** The Single-Item Self-Esteem Scale is a one-item measure of global self-esteem. Participants answered the single item on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (not very true of me) to 7 (very true of me). The scale has demonstrated similar predictive validity as the much long Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Robins, Hendin, & Trzesniewski, 2001).

***Adjustment in retirement.*** Adjustment in retirement was measured using a scale adapted from the Healthy Retirement Project (Wells, de Vaus, Kendig, Quine, & Petralia, 2006), which looked at adjustment to retirement in later life. The questions were slightly modified to reflect the specific context of retirement from sport and participants were asked to rate their agreement to six items on a scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. A higher score indicates a higher level of adjustment. Muratore and Earl (2014) provided evidence of the internal consistency of the original scale, reporting an alpha coefficient of .90.

***Support seeking***. The extent to which participants were willing to seek support was measured using the General Help-Seeking Questionnaire (GHSQ; Wilson, Deane, Ciarrochi, & Rickwood, 2005). The measure asked participants to rate the likelihood that they would seek help from a range of potential sources of support (e.g., a spouse/partner, friend, family, general practitioner) if they were experiencing difficulties related to their transition. Participants rated their intentions to seek help on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (extremely unlikely) to 7 (extremely likely). The reliability of the GHSQ is strong, with 3-week test–retest reliability ranging from *r* = .86 to *r* = .92 (Cusack, Deane, Wilson, & Ciarrochi, 2006).

***Career planning.*** Career planning was measured with the career planning scale (Gould, 1979). The scale consists of six items to which participants responded on a 7-point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Internal consistency of the scale is high (e.g., α = .87; Hirschi & Valero, 2015). A higher score indicates a higher level of career planning. Career planning has shown positive relationships with adjustment after retirement from sport (Park et al., 2013a) and the scale was used to assess whether the programme had any impact on the participants’ planning efforts.

***Psychological capital.*** Psychological capital was measured using the 12 item Compound PsyCap Scale (Lorenz, Beer, Pütz, and Heinitz, 2016). Psychological Capital is conceptualised as a higher order construct encompassing hope, optimism, efficacy and resilience. The PsyCap Scale measures each of these lower order constructs via subscales with three items, to which participants respond on a 7-point Likert type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). The Compound PsyCap Scale shows good reliability with an alpha coefficient for the compound measure of .80, and for each dimension of .76 (hope), .88 (self-efficacy), .79 (resilience) and .74 (optimism).

**Data analysis.**

Analysis of the quantitative data was conducted using SPSS and included calculating the descriptive statistics, mean scores, and standard deviations for each of the questionnaire measures and the questions on the workshop feedback forms. The small sample precluded multivariate analysis and therefore the focus was on analysing general trends in the data and changes between the scores on the measures before and after the delivery of the programme.

The audio recordings from the focus group and the interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed, along with the qualitative responses from the workshop feedback forms, using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a flexible approach to qualitative research that can take a ‘bottom up’, inductive approach that is driven by the data, a ‘top down’, deductive approach that is led by theory, or a combination of both. The qualitative analysis in Study 3 was a hybrid approach using both inductive and deductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). After the transcripts were thoroughly read several times, an initial process of open coding was carried out. This aimed to identify the basic units of data related to the outcomes, mechanisms and context of the programme. This led to primarily semantic codes with explicit meanings in the data; however, latent content that moved beyond what was explicitly said was also identified (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Codes were clustered around a central organising concept to form themes, before a second level of abstraction produced higher-order themes. The second stage of the analysis was more deductive. This involved developing a coding framework by combining the codes and themes generated from open coding and a-priori codes generated from the programme theory. The coding framework was then applied to each transcript with the data organised under higher-order headings related to the outcomes, mechanisms and context of the programme.

The final broad phase of a realist evaluation compares the actual ‘reality’ of the delivery and experience of the programme against the initial programme theory (Pawson & Tilly, 1997). During this phase of the analysis, the insights from the qualitative and quantitative data were integrated in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the outcomes, mechanisms and context patterns generated by the programme. This involved identifying reoccurring mechanism-outcome patterns (i.e., the relationship between mechanism and outcome that occur in a variety of contextual situations), negative cases (where no evidence is found for CMO configurations, or there is evidence of unplanned or unwanted outcomes), and feedback loops (where outcomes feedback to interact with, and reinforce, the original mechanism). This enables the analysis to move beyond the separate and linear CMO configurations to gain a more holistic and complete view of the data (Byng, Norman, Redfern, & Jones, 2008).

**Assessing the quality of the research.**

Consistent with the pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the quality of research used throughout this thesis, procedures for promoting quality were selected in accordance with the design and objectives of the study rather than using a predefined ‘checklist’ (Smith et al., 2009). Although there is no perfect or absolute way to judge the quality of research, the approach used in realist evaluation aims to assess the utility of the finding(s) for policy makers and practitioners. In this respect, Pawson et al. (2003) have developed questions that aim to encourages researchers to engage with a number of important aspects relayed to the rigour of their research: These questions were applied to Study 3:

* Transparency: Is the process of knowledge generation open to outside scrutiny?
* Accuracy: Are the claims made based on relevant and appropriate information?
* Purposively: Are the methods used fit for purpose?
* Utility: Are the knowledge claims appropriate to the needs of the practitioner?
* Propriety: Has the research been conducted ethically and legally?
* Accessibility: Is the research presented in a style that is accessible to the practitioner?

### Results

**Testing programme theory (Phase Two)**

In Phase 2 of the evaluation, the data from the evaluation feedback forms (quantitative and qualitative questions; see Table 5), questionnaires that participants completed prior and at the end of the programme (see Table 6 and 7), a focus group, and individual interviews were used to test the initial programme theory. These data were integrated and the findings were compared and contrasted to the CMO configurations outlined in the initial programme theory. The integration of data during the analysis served a complementary function, such that general trends from the quantitative data were explored and elaborated by the qualitative data (Creswell, 2014). Verbatim quotes are provided to illustrate and support the analytical claims. Quotes are from the participants’ individual interviews unless stated otherwise. Questionnaires scores are reported for those participants that completed all three days of the programme.

**CMO1: Programme delivery and content**

The first CMO was based on the quality of the programme content and the style and setting in which it was delivered. The theory stated that the content needed to be appropriate/relevant for the participants and presented in an environment that was credible, open, and accessible.

In support of the programme theory, several participants suggested that the programme content enabled them to understand and make sense of their transition:

I think for me, a lot of the models that we went through helped me to place meaning on why things were happening that I didn’t understand at the time. The tools and the models helped everybody to understand themselves and maybe to help other people. It went deeper than I thought it was going to do and that really helped me to understand myself (Edward).

One participant suggested that the programme content provided a language that they could use to describe their experiences. This enabled them to make more sense of their transition and helped them to articulate their experiences to others:

I’ve sought out help lots of times but not with the right language because I didn’t understand it (the way transition had affected her)…if you’ve got something wrong with the car it helps if you say the clutch is feeling very funny, you know, rather than just go ‘oh something’s wrong with it’, it’s easy if you’ve got something to diagnose, to talk about, to look at (Kay).

However, there were differences in the extent to which the participants’ engaged with the content of the programme, which seemed to be related to their learning preferences and individual differences in education. For example, some of the participants found some of the content and activities were difficult to understand: “I didn’t understand it all” (Workshop 2 feedback form). This concern was particularly directed towards the second workshop and is reflected in the lower scores for this module on the workshop feedback forms. In a discussion in the focus group, the participants felt that they did not have enough time to reflect on and process some of the activities, which may account for the difficulty that some of them had understanding the content:

There’s been a lot of information in the three sessions and I think in some ways it might be that things are thinned down a bit, you know, I think that would be hard to do, but at the same time I think it would be helpful because I think a lot of learning comes from interactions with other people or being able to spend time to work on your own or think about it (Amanda – Focus group)

Several of the participants discussed in their interviews the importance of being motivated and open minded in order to fully engage with the programme. This willingness to engage was an important mechanism that facilitated learning and included devoting time to reflect on the sessions in their own time and understanding what the programme content meant for them:

When we finished the workshop I went straight back to my car and probably spent an hour reinterpreting everything into my language, my interpretation of certain models, what that means to me. I know this is exactly what you’re supposed to do because the majority of the benefits happen outside the actual workshop, right? (Felicity).

The majority of the participants felt that the facilitators and speakers played an important role in the delivery of the workshops and the way that they engaged with the participants facilitated their learning. Indeed, the question on the evaluation feedback forms concerning the ability of the speakers to support the participants’ leaning received some of the highest scores (see Table 4). The qualitative responses on the workshop feedback forms described the primary facilitator as “non-judgmental”, “approachable” and “authentic”. These qualities appeared to facilitate the open learning environment that was a key mechanism in the participant’s ability to engage with the programme: “Rick was able to coach ideas out of me” (Workshop 1 feedback form) and “Rick is really good at making everyone feel listened to, whist keeping the whole group engaged” (Workshop 2 feedback form).

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| Table 4  *Scores from the quantitative component of the workshop feedback forms* | | | | | | |
| Question | Module 1  *N* = 9 | | Module 2  *N* = 8 | | Module 3  *N* = 7 | |
|  | Mean | SD | Mean | SD | Mean | SD |
| Achieved objectives | 6.89 | .33 | 5.75 | 1.07 | 6.57 | 1.03 |
| Content was appropriate | 6.22 | .67 | 6.13 | .64 | 6.69 | .61 |
| Facilitators supported learning | 6.56 | .52 | 6.63 | .51 | 6.86 | .87 |
| Overall satisfaction | 6.77 | .74 | 6.38 | .87 | 7.00 | .00 |

All of the facilitators and the speakers were former athletes and had been through their own transition. This appeared to give them credibility because they shared an identity with the participants. For example, participants commented that they were able to relate to the speakers’ stories and hearing about their transitions helped them to normalise their own experiences. Particularly for those participants who were closer to the start of their transition, the facilitators and speakers provided them with a living example of what a successful transition can look like:

It was great to have Rick, he’d come in and give his perspective on his (transition), and we’d have those various speakers on each of the points of the course and that actually opened up a lot for me. I gained a lot from their insights into their whole journey (Amanda).

The participants’ motivation to engage with the programme seemed to be an important mechanism that facilitated numerous positive outcomes. For several participants this mechanism was activated by taking part in the Action Learning Groups. These were smaller groups of three that were encouraged to make contact outside of the workshops to discuss issues and progress. The Action Learning Groups seemed to be an important programme mechanism that activated and solidified commitment to the programme:

It forces you to go through the previous workshop and say “what did I say I was going to do off the back of it?” and “what did that workshop mean to me?” Now I need to interpret it, and probably, if I’ve said I’m going to do something, I’ve probably needed to have done it by now (Felicity – Focus Group).

The Action Learning Groups also maintained the participants’ connection to other group members and contributed to a strong group identity. The bond that formed between the participants during the programme is a likely mechanism that influenced their commitment to the programme and desire to complete the course.

It is important to acknowledge, however, that some people did drop out during the programme. Twelve people originally signed up to take part in the programme but three withdrew shortly prior to the first workshop because of work demands. One person withdrew after the first workshop and another after the second workshop. These people cited personal reasons and not being able to give the time and emotional investment that they deemed necessary to engage fully with the programme. The attrition rate does suggest that the structure and timing of the programme can be an important contextual factor that can influence the ability of some people to commit. Indeed, the participants who did complete the whole programme were able to take time off work, or were currently assessing their career plans, and were therefore able to commit to the programme.

**CMO2: Understanding and managing change.**

The ‘Understanding and managing change’ CMO proposed that increasing the participants’ knowledge of the processes involved in transition would provide context to their own experiences, increase their self-awareness, and help them to make sense of changes in their own lives. This programme theory was supported by the data. Indeed, it seemed that a key psychological mechanism that was activated by a deeper understanding of transition was the participants’ recognition that transition was a ‘normal’ process of change that is experienced, to some extent, by all athletes:

It meant a lot to me to have transition recognised as ‘something’ and that people were aware of it, studying it, and were able to deliver it as Lane4 have. It was confirmation for me. It was an affirmation of things that I’d experienced, and it has been useful because for me to work out that I’ve struggled, but it’s not just me being difficult, to have all of that sort of validated if you like, that’s been really important (Paul).

For the participants who had been retired for some time, framing transition as a normal process of change seemed to help to legitimise and justify some of the negative emotions and difficulties that they had faced. This facilitated emotional processing and, as a result, engendered a greater sense of emotional wellbeing. Overall, there was an increase in scores on the measures of adjustment and wellbeing (See Table 6). The data from the interviews suggest that the participants’ ability to process their emotions contributed to this increase:

I think it [the programme] helped to shift the big emotional baggage that had probably been lingering for quite a lot of years. Moving from being quite angry about it to accepting it and owning it (Julie)

I think it has allowed me to let go of a lot of anger and resentment that I had towards the end of my career, I think it definitely helped on that front. I think at the same time it’s also allowed me to appreciate my time competing more than I probably did before (Amanda).

Expressing and processing somewhat repressed emotions seemed to be more important for the participants who had been retired for some time. The participants who had been retired for a shorter time had not experienced as many difficulties related to transition and, therefore, did not seem to need to process emotions in the same way. Instead, highlighting the *possibility* of difficult experiences and emotions to come helped to prepare these participants should they encounter them:

I think probably one of the most valuable things is seeing some other members of the group how hard they were finding it, how profoundly it had affected them, and how it had continued to affect them. It was still kind of a huge wound and I thought ‘wow’. And I suppose it made me think, I feel great right now, but that could happen to me later? I was like okay I feel good now, but what can I find out about it? Where is the weakness in my approach? Is my approach addressing what’s going on? (Edward).

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| Table 6  *Scores from the pre-post questionnaire* | | | | | |
|  | Pre-program *N* = 7 | |  | Post-program *N* = 7 | |
| Measure | Mean | *SD* |  | Mean | *SD* |
| Wellbeing | 2.47 | .91 |  | 3.10 | .91 |
| Adjustment | 3.29 | 1.48 |  | 3.92 | 1.46 |
| Self-esteem | 3.74 | 1.74 |  | 5.29 | 1.49 |
| Support seeking | 4.29 | 1.02 |  | 5.70 | 1.02 |
| Career planning | 3.38 | 1.23 |  | 4.24 | 1.44 |
| PsyCap | 5.20 | 1.24 |  | 5.36 | .68 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |

Helping the participants to increase their knowledge about transition and themselves was a key objective of CMO2. However, the extent of the participants’ prior learning and understanding (context) seemed to influence outcomes. For example, one participant stated that she had taken time out from her career as an athlete in order to reflect on and process her feelings about a life outside sport. Having done this emotional processing, having to revisit her feelings was an uncomfortable experience:

After the first workshop, I ended up being in an emotional space for quite a long period of time with a lot of questions, which actually, when I sat down and thought about it I was like ‘hang on a minute I’ve been through this, I’ve been through this’. It [the programme] sort of made an assumption that everyone was in the same sort of emotional space (Felicity).

**CMO3: Exploring identity.**

Research on the transition out of sport suggests that that one of the most significant challenges that retired athletes face is the search for a new sense of self after the loss of their athletic identity. This was the context in which the programme was expected to be delivered. Indeed, for many of the participants, their participation and success in sport shaped their identity and this often led to difficulties when they left their sporting careers behind. Indeed, several athletes commented that they never fully felt satisfied with their life after sport and in many ways felt unfulfilled:

I struggled with finding something to replace sport. I probably made the mistake of having my identity around my sport and I thought that that was all I could do. That was just my whole identity, so when things were going well I was feeling good, when things were going badly I wasn’t feeling so good. When [sport] ended it was very hard. I just felt there was a massive gap in my life, and it’s very hard to fill that gap of having a purpose and a daily goal and a daily challenge, which I used to thrive on (Paul).

A primary goal of the programme was to help the participants explore their identity in relation to their career as athletes, help them to deal with any issues around the loss of identity, and encourage them to connect with the beliefs and values that may support their sense of self in the future. This process seemed to help some of the participants to reflect on and gain new insight into their career as athletes, their relationship with sport, and what this meant for who they were as people:

I’ve understood now why I was doing sport, why I got into it, why I proved to be so good, and what was awful for me when it ended. It was just raising an awareness and a deeper understanding of myself. And then from there the ability to go and find something, or finds things, that I can do so I can be more in touch with myself (Edward).

By engaging in the programme several of the participants reported that they were able to recognise that constantly striving for success as athletes had compromised their ability to be content and happy in life, both during and after their career in sport. For these participants, the programme seemed to help them to acknowledge and explore the need for balance in their life:

Most people who have been involved in sport have been conditioned to always be striving for that next improvement and never to feel happy and content and I’d never really experienced life being fulfilled. That resonates with me a lot and now I’m making a conscious effort to not always just look for the next improvement but also balance that with being happy and being grateful (Julie).

This recognition of the need for balance in life seemed to help the participants to see the possibility for multiple identities and multiple solutions to the issues they were facing in transition:

I’ve been looking for one solution to satisfy me, to replace sport for another thing. So that’s everything all in one, “there you go, you’ve got your solution”. But actually now I’ve sort of seen that there can be a few different things in life, your life needs to be balanced. You can actually balance your life out a bit better to look for different things that you miss from sport. Like friends, if you have a group of friends that you connect with, or you can have a job which makes you money and you’re successful, even coaching part time so you’ve still got the link to your sport (Kay).

**CMO4: Building personal resources.**

An anticipated outcome of the programme was that participants would be helped to build on and develop their personal resources so that they could better manage their transitions and the challenges they were facing in their lives. To this extent, the participants’ responses to the questionnaire suggested that there was an increase in their psychological capital (resilience, hope, and self-efficacy). Helping the participants to recognise their skills, experience and personal attributes seemed to give them a greater sense of confidence that they could manage and makes sense of their transition:

It was useful to realise that actually I do have some good stuff that’s part of me as a person, and what’s so important is having that confidence to use it. It just makes you realise what you’ve got and that you can still do things and achieve things, and you know, there’s still a lot of hope ahead. That is something that John [a fellow participant] mentioned the way that he thinks he has still got his best days to come and I think that’s true (Paul).

Encouraging the participants to place greater value on the skills and experiences that they had gained through sport was a key mechanism that seemed to underpin a greater awareness of their personal resources. In essence, the programme helped many of the participants to reframe their time in sport from a negative to a positive experience:

I think I look at it now as what a great foundation it has given me, whereas before I looked it and saw it as a failure. I now look at it and think what a great foundation that it gave me with regards to work-ethic, motivation, determination, continuing when things aren’t really going your way, all of that. So it’s given me a very good grounding whereas before I would have just looked at it and gone ‘well that was a waste of time’ (Julie).

One mechanism likely to be involved in the positive changes that many of the participants experienced is an increase in their feelings of empowerment and the sense that they could make and maintain changes in their life. For several of the participants, highlighting their skills and personal strengths seemed to give them more confidence and determination to pursue their goals:

I think I’ve probably stuck at what I’m doing a bit more. So many people are really struggling to find what they are passionate about, whereas I think I actually know what I’m passionate about, and maybe it (the programme) gave me a little bit more confidence to stick at it a bit longer, to try and attain that (career goal). I think it’s made me a bit more resolute. I guess the good thing about the workshops is that I’m valuing my skills a bit more, and then also giving me a bit more of an ability to potentially plan around them (Amanda).

**CMO5: Building support networks / relationships.**

A number of mechanisms and outcomes related to social support were evident throughout the evaluation. During the course of the workshops, small interactions between the participants often seemed to impact on their sense of being supported by and connected to the group:

(At the first workshop) I jumped in and I said all sorts of things I hadn’t dared to say, talking about marriage, depression, all sorts of stuff. Then I stopped speaking and I was absolutely gutted because I thought you only get one chance to make a first impression and you’ve just completely blown it because you spouted all this psychobabble. I was quite ashamed for the rest of the morning and then at lunch time two people came over to me and said “I really loved what you said” and that was an absolute gift (John).

Several of the participants said that they often felt that other people did not understand them or what they experienced during their transition and that, in many ways, they felt different. For these participants, the programme helped them to feel connected to a group of “like-minded” people. This seemed to foster feelings of relatedness, acceptance, and emotional comfort, which may have contributed to the apparent increase in scores on the measure of wellbeing indicated in participants’ responses to the questionnaire:

I’ve met some people who I can continue to talk to and talk my ideas over with. I feel more like the others now (other participants). I’ve been put in a room with people and I know I’m not alone. I feel better knowing people are there and I’m not alone. It’s been very good for feeling part of a community (Kay).

The bond within the group was likely to have been promoted by the participants’ shared background as athletes. This seemed to invoke a feeling of trust within the group and a non-judgmental culture, which enabled the participants to share their experiences openly. In turn, disclosing struggles and fears via the mutual sharing of personal stories and experiences seemed to reinforce the participants’ feelings of shared identity:

Just talking about stuff again because over the years I’ve always dealt with things mostly on my own and being able to feel like you were freely being able to talk about stuff to other people who could understand you, it was really nice. Normally group talking is not really my thing, it’s not something that I would necessarily feel comfortable doing but I did there. So it just felt good to feel like myself I suppose.... I could relate to everybody’s stories, there was still similar things going on, we still totally understand each other, there is definitely some kind of bond there (Paul).

On the whole, the participants were positive about the delivery of the programme in a group setting and the dynamic created with people at different stages of transition. However, a small number of participants expressed frustration with the group dynamics, perhaps because they considered their transition to be unique and desired different outcomes from the programme. For example, emotional processing seemed to be an important part of the programme for athletes who had struggled with their transition for an extended time; whereas, acquiring knowledge and skills to proactively manage future challenges seemed to be more important for athletes who had retired more recently:

It’s that weird balancing act between it being a ‘support group’ and actually coming away with real objectives and I think that balance was quite hard. I think that the emotional bit is needed but at the same time I kind of felt that maybe it was too emotional.… I think it’s great having a range of athletes over a range of times (since transition) but I think for athletes who are in kind of immediate transition, I would imagine that they are looking for more kind of concrete deliverables, whether that’s because we are still so close to sports I don’t know (Amanda).

One of the main benefits of the programme, reported by several participants, seemed to be the positive impact that it had on some of their close relationships. Based on the findings described in Chapters 4 and 5, the programme focused on raising awareness of the types and potential sources of social support, sought to help the participants to recognise and acknowledge the need for support, and normalise the process of asking for help. This appears to have had a significant impact on the participants’ willingness to seek help from a number of potential sources (e.g., partner, family, friends) as indicated by the increases in the scores on the measure of help-seeking (see Table 7). This increased willingness to seek help seemed to translate to changes in behaviour and several of the participants reported that they had begun to discuss their transition with loved ones for the first time. These interactions were facilitated by the knowledge and skills acquired during the programme. Specifically, skills related to approaching and managing potentially challenging conversations:

It made people realise what support they might need and from whom and the conversations that they might have with people…when I left my sport it had a big impact on the relationship I had with my mum, because when I was doing my sport I think she was living vicariously through me and expecting me to achieve things that she wishes she had done when she was a kid. She was very harsh on me and I think from that moment on (retiring) I just didn’t really have a relationship with her, which was a shame. So as a result of the workshop what it enabled me to do was put in place a kind of structure where I could go and talk to her and say “look, this is my experience from my perspective” and “this is what actually happened” (Julie).

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| Table 7  *Scores from the pre-post questionnaire for the measure of help-seeking* | | | | | |
|  | Pre-program *N* = 11 | |  | Post-program *N* = 7 | |
| Measure | Mean | *SD* |  | Mean | *SD* |
| Intimate Partner | 4.86 | 2.41 |  | 6.29 | .75 |
| Friend | 5.71 | 1.38 |  | 6.00 | .81 |
| Parent | 2.71 | 1.98 |  | 3.20 | 2.30 |
| Other Family | 3.00 | 2.31 |  | 3.86 | 2.79 |
| Retired Athlete | 4.71 | 1.60 |  | 5.57 | 1.61 |
| Doctor/GP | 3.14 | 2.20 |  | 2.90 | 2.51 |
| Mental Health Professional | 4.29 | 1.50 |  | 5.43 | .97 |
| Phone Helpline | 1.29 | .76 |  | 2.00 | 1.91 |
| Would not seek help at all | 3.43 | 2.23 |  | 2.71 | 1.70 |

Chapter 5 of this thesis described how the family members of athletes may also experience a transition when someone close to them retires from sport. Based on these findings, part of the programme encouraged the participants to think about the impact that their transition may have had on their family members. After taking part in the programme, one participant reported that he had realised that what he had been through during his transition must have been difficult for those around him. Taking part in the programme encouraged him to talk to his wife and their relationship had improved as a result:

What came out of it was the recognition that my wife had been there through my transition, so she had had just as big a journey over those years as I have. So that recommitment to my partner and kids was really surprising, a really surprising outcome, a very welcome outcome. I think the opportunity for me is to kind of ask her how it was for her, rather than to talk anymore about me. I haven’t done that very well yet but the process has started (John).

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| Table 8 | | | | | | |
| Refined Programme Theory | | | | | | |
| **CMO** | **CONTEXT** | | **MECHANISMS** | | **OUTCOMES** | |
| **Existing context** | **Participants’ context** | **Programme Mechanisms** | **Agency/Reasoning** | **Planned** | **Unplanned** |
| 1.Programme delivery and content | * Few transition support services available. * Participants received little support to help adjust to changes in transition. | * Availability to attend workshops and balances other commitments e.g., work / family. * Differences in learning preferences. | * Delivery by experienced facilitators with their own transition experiences. * Group interaction and sharing of experiences. * Evidence based content / knowledge / activities to frame personal experiences. | * Motivation and willingness to engage. * Ability and time to reflect between sessions. | * Participants provided high feedback scores for each workshop. * Developed a ‘language’ to frame experiences. | * Some difficulty understanding some of the more ‘academic’ models and content. * Some frustration with balance between content and time to reflect. |
| 2.Understanding and managing change. | * Poor understanding of transition as a process. * Feelings of certainty, denial and loss. | * Different levels of pre-transition support and focus on preparation for retirement. * Different stages of transition and levels of emotional processing. | * ‘The Transition Curve’: Provided information on the processes of change involved in transition. * Provided opportunities to share experiences of transition with others. | * Transition perceived as ‘normal’ process. * Processing of emotions. * Being listened to and feeling heard. * Peer learning and modelling. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | * Some participants felt they had to go over issues they had already reconciled. |
| 3.Exploring identity. | * Identity developed and defined by sport. * Difficulty defining a new identity. | * Different levels of previous emotional processing. * Different pre and post-transition career histories. | * Identified the activities and people that may have supported their identity as athletes. * Explored the goals, beliefs and values to support ‘healthy self-concept and balance in life. | * Self-acceptance. * Self-affirmation. * Identified with fellow participants. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of psychological capital. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | * Some participants felt anger, sadness and regret towards sport for restricting their self-development. |
| 4.Building personal resources. | * Lack of pre-transition planning. * Uncertainly about future career. | * Different levels of pre-transition support and focus on preparation for retirement. | * Identified the transferable skills, knowledge and experience acquired through sport. * Identified how these skills can be used in life now and in the future. | * Empowered to make changes. * Recognising personal strengths. * Established importance of a ‘growth mindset’. * Reframed existing knowledge. | * Higher levels of psychological capital. * Development of goals/plans for the future. | N/A |
| 5.Building support networks/ relationships | * Disruption/loss of social networks. * Reluctance to seek help. * Availability of support. | * Type and strength of existing personal relationships. * Individual perceptions of previous and exiting institutional support. * Developed a ‘language’ to frame experiences. | * Recognised the different types and sources of support. * Identified social support networks. * Presented communication skills and techniques. | * Emotional openness/sharing. * Acknowledged the support they may need. * Increased willingness to communicate with close family. | * Increased help-seeking intentions/behaviours. * Increased social integration. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | N/A |

### Discussion

**Refining the programme theory (Phase three)**

The third and final phase of the evaluation process involved comparing the delivery and experiences of the programme with the initial theory. The CMO configurations presented in the initial programme theory were intended to be a conceptual model of what would make the intervention work and represented the presumed relationships between contexts, mechanisms and outcomes. The data from the testing phase was then used to develop and refine the programme theory to describe what worked, for whom, and in what circumstances (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). The following section provides a summary of the findings and a description of how they were used to refine the initial programme theory. The revised programme theory is presented in Appendix K.

**Summary of findings.**

***Outcomes.*** The analysis of data provided broad support for the proposed CMO configurations and suggested that the programme was delivered as intended. Evidence from the workshop feedback forms suggested that all three workshops met their aims and objectives. In general, the results of the questionnaire provided some encouraging results, with a general trend for improvements across the different measures following participation in the programme, including increased adjustment and wellbeing, career planning, and psychological capital. The success of the programme was largely supported by the qualitative data with all of the participants reporting that they had experienced benefits from taking part in the programme. Overall, the participants were more confident and hopeful about the future and felt that they were better equipped to pursue their goals and deal with setbacks. Participants seemed to learn a lot about themselves and by the end of the programme they had a deeper understanding of their relationship with sport, what motivated them, and how their goals and values could be harnessed to help them to thrive in the future.

As well as greater self-awareness, the programme also seemed to help participants with relational aspects of their lives. There was a sense of support from within the programme cohort and there was also an increase in willingness to seek out support; in particular, from partners, family, and friends. Several participants also talked about how their close relationships had improved after they had instigated conversation with their loved one about their experience of transition, something that many of the participants did not feel able to do prior to the programme. Participants were also able to recognise that people within their social network may also have experienced a transition of their own when the participant retired from sport.

***Mechanisms.*** There was often a clear relationship between the mechanisms embedded within the programme and mechanisms associated with the participants’ reasoning and agency.The participants reported that the workshops contained appropriate content and that this increased their understanding of transition and, crucially, normalised their experiences. A deeper understanding of transition legitimised the difficulties they experienced and reframed their attributions for their negative experiences (i.e., it wasn’t them being difficult, but rather, the situation was difficult). Just the fact that a programme existed and that transition was being recognised as a potentially challenging process, seemed to be comforting and helped the participants to make external, rather than internal, attributions for their difficulties.

A deeper understanding of the process of transition helped the participants to place challenging experiences into context and facilitated processing of difficult and sometimes repressed emotions. For the most part, the group based nature of the programme activated these mechanisms and the common identity of the groups facilitated the sharing of experiences and enabled the participants to support each other.

The speakers and facilitator’s own careers as athletes and first-hand experiences of transition also seemed to be an important mechanism by which the programme facilitated an open and non-judgemental environment. This, in turn, encouraged the participants to engage with and commit to the programme. Specifically, the speakers helped the participants to feel more positive about themselves and their experience by articulating, legitimising, and validating that transition could be a challenging experience. Speakers and facilitators also acted as role models that enabled the participants to see what successful transitions can look like, helping them to be more positive and hopeful about the future.

Additional programme mechanisms included helping the participants recognise, reframe, and build on the skills and experiences that they gained through sport; and these mechanisms were generally linked to higher levels of self-confidence and positive expectations about the future. Furthermore, the activities, practices, and dialogue embedded within the workshops related to the understanding of beliefs and values seemed to help the participants to understand what they wanted from their transition, what was important to them in life, and open up the possibility of an identity beyond that of an athlete.

Some of the most powerful mechanisms activated by the programme were related to social support. In particular, highlighting the types and sources of support and normalising the need for help meant that athletes were more willing to engage with potential supporters. Furthermore, actually engaging with supporters using their new understanding and language of transition had a big impact on the quality of some the participants’ relationships with their family members.

***Context.*** The majority of the anticipated contextual mechanisms that preceded the introduction of the programme and influenced its impact were supported during the testing phase. In particular, negative emotions related to the loss of identity, the struggle to redefine a sense of self, and uncertainty about the future were prominent. However, the prevalence and strength of these issues varied depending on the stage of the participant’s life and time since retirement. The mechanisms related to the processing of emotions seemed to be activated with greater strength and impact for participants who had been retired for some time. This may be because they had retired at a time when there was relatively little understanding of transition within the sporting community and they had received little, if any, support to manage and make sense of their experiences.

For those participants who had retired more recently, there was less evidence of troubling emotions; however, hearing the difficulties experienced by other participants highlighted the potential challenges ahead and they reported that they were better prepared to recognise and deal with them. For many of the more recently retired athletes, who were more used to the concept of transition and personal development, the programme seemed to reinforce and emphasise existing knowledge rather than instigate new learning. However, this seemed to be helpful and many recently retired athletes valued and felt comforted by knowing that they were on the right track.

**Developing a more complex understanding of CMO relationships.**

A crucial part of refining the initial programme theory involved moving beyond the relatively simple linear CMO configurations to explore the possibility of connections and relationships between the various contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes (Byng, Norman, Redfern, & Jones, 2008). Specifically, there was some evidence that CMO configurations were interlinked and influenced each other. For example, the participants’ greater understanding of the process of transition enabled them to develop a language to frame and articulate how they were thinking and feeling. This outcome of CMO1 then became an important mechanism for CMO5 because the participants could use this new understanding and language to engage with their support network and improve their close relationships.

There was also evidence of positive and negative feedback loops in which an outcome interacts with the original mechanism to strengthen or weaken it (Byng, Norman, & Redfern, 2005). An example of a positive feedback loop was the way that the sharing of experiences encouraged and enabled participants to recognise and process some of the negative emotions they had experienced during their transition. This processing of negative emotions seemed to facilitate adjustment and improve wellbeing, which then encouraged the participants to open up and share more about themselves and their transition.

An example of a negative feedback loop relates to the group based nature of the programme and participation in the Action Learning Groups. Specifically, some participants reported that they became frustrated with the way that the groups focused on the emotional side of transition and felt that this prevented them from developing clearer practical steps to progress. These feelings of frustration seemed to make participants more reluctant to engage with the group process and may have presented a barrier to achieving potentially positive outcomes.

Possibly the most important variation from the basic CMO configurations are relationships between mechanisms and outcomes that occur regardless of individual context (Pawson, 2003). These relationships can be particularly important because they are likely to be the processes that enable a programme to be successful in a variety of situations and groups (i.e., regardless of context). In this respect, all of the participants seemed to connect with the part of the programme related to exploring their beliefs and values. By helping the athletes to understand their relationship with sport, what needs and motivations were satisfied by competing, and how this may have influenced their subsequent transition, the participants seemed able to gain a powerful sense of self-awareness. Due to the nature of sport, many of the participants had been focused on very narrow, externally defined measures of success (e.g., winning races and medals) and the programme introduced the importance of a more balanced life. Specific needs and definitions of success in life varied from person to person but there was a general recognition that there was a need to focus on being fulfilled in a variety of domains in life. This knowledge seemed to help the participants to focus on what was important in the present and enabled them to begin to understand what a successful transition meant to them.

### General Discussion

Study 3 provided a novel approach to the design, delivery and evaluation of a psychoeducational programme to support retired athletes to manage and make sense of their transition out of sport. At a methodological level, Study 3 was the first (to the author’s knowledge) to use a realist approach to evaluation. The rationale for this evaluation was not to determine whether the programme ‘worked’ but to explore and explain how it worked (or not), for whom, and in what circumstances. This approach was particularly useful for evaluating an intervention related to the transition out of sport because it is difficult to identify, measure, and/or control all relevant psychological variables that are involved. Park et al. (2013), for example, identified 63 correlates related to the quality of athletes’ career transitions—notwithstanding the individual context in which these variables may be prevalent. The complexity of each transition and each individual’s social world, therefore, lent itself to an evaluation approach that explicitly acknowledged and incorporated this complexity in a more holistic account of change.

Although experimental designs have been used to highlight the success of post-retirement interventions, these designs do not always provide sufficient detail about the mechanisms or circumstances that brought about changes. For example, Lavallee’s (2005) study to evaluate the effectiveness of an intervention to support athletes’ adjustment in transition found that the intervention group was significantly higher in perceived social support following completion of the intervention. However, given the limited data provided by self-report measures in isolation, the author was only able to speculate that the intervention led these individuals to develop a better understanding of how to use their existing support networks. In contrast, the realist evaluation approach used in Study 3 was able to identify that participants became more willing to access and utilise support networks, *as well as* the underlying mechanism that made this possible (i.e., by enabling them to develop a language to articulate their transition experiences). Therefore, the findings of Study 3 suggest that realist approaches to the evaluation of transition interventions (both within and out of sport) can provide novel findings and warrants further use within applied setting.

At a theoretical level, the findings from Study 3 emphasise the importance of social integration in the process of social support. Conceptually, it is important to distinguish between social integration and social support. Integration refers to the existence or quantity of social relationships (House, Umberson, & Landis, 1988) and logically precedes the receipt or perception of the emotionally sustaining quality, or practical assistance, of the support those relationships provide (Berkman, Glass, Brissette, & Seeman, 2000). The participants’ accounts in Study 3 suggest the group based nature of the programme helped them to feel (re)connected with people they felt understood them, and several of the participants felt part of a ‘community’ as a result. This social integration provided the basis for the sharing of experiences and emotions that seemed to foster a sense of mutual support and understanding. This was particularly evident for the participants who had been retired for sometime, for whom the need to connect and share fulfilled a particular emotional need that had been unmet until they participated in the programme.

One of the mechanisms that seemed to facilitate mutual sharing and support was the normalisation of difficulties in transition. In effect, the group based nature of the programme allowed the participants to compare their experience with those of other retired athletes. The noted similarities then validated their own struggles and difficulties. Indeed, researchers have suggested that social influence/social comparison is a pathway linking social integration with health and wellbeing outcomes (Berkman et al., 2000; Stroebe & Stroebe, 1996). People tend to gain guidance on normative behaviour by comparing themselves with other people they regard as their reference groups (Festinger, 1954). This enables people to evaluate the appropriateness of their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours against those that are discussed and/or demonstrated by their peers. Thus, in Study 3, the opportunity to engage with people who had experienced similar difficulties and challenge allowed them to see new social norms related to transition and empowered them to shift their own attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours as a result. In short, the group made it ‘okay’ to have found, and be finding, transition a tough experience.

One of the most prevalent and powerful mechanisms that underpinned positive outcomes (e.g., increased optimism and hope for the future) in Study 3 was related to the participants’ ability to identify the beliefs and values that could support their sense of self. In this respect, theoretical and empirical research on self-affirmation theory offers a strong grounding for this finding. Research has shown that identifying and reflecting on important values can be a potent way to increase self-worth and reduce the perception of threat to the integrity of the self (Steele, 1988). Essentially, affirming values, beliefs, and roles that are important to an individual's identity shifts attention away from threat in one particular domain of life toward a wider context of what is important and meaningful in life (Cohen & Sherman, 2011). Thus, in encouraging the participants to focus on their core values and how they could be applied beyond sport, the programme enabled some of the participants to gain a stronger sense of who they were and the roles and goals that could maximise their wellbeing, help them to flourish, and contribute to a positive transition.

**Future research and applied implications.**

Given that the loss or disruption of identity is widely reported as a primary reason for athletes’ difficulties during transition, self-affirmation theory offers potential to inform research on future interventions related to transition out of sport. Future research could be even more explicit in focusing on values based activities as part of intervention programmes. For example, a widely used intervention used in research and applied practice on self-affirmations provides the opportunity for people to (re)assert the importance of core values through writing exercises. This involves people selecting a core value (or values) that is personally meaningful for them and then writing a short essay on why that value is important to them, and a particular time/situation when it was important (McQueen & Klein, 2006).

Research has consistently shown that these types of interventions provide opportunities to gain perspective on life and to think explicitly about and articulate what really matters to them in life (Crocker, Niiya, & Mischkowski, 2008). The challenging events that they are experiencing often feel less threating, stressful, and difficult when viewed from this new perspective and people feel generally better about themselves. This wider and deeper perspective can also highlight psychosocial resources that minimise perceptions of threat.

It is interesting to note that people often write about friends and family in affirmation essays, possibly bringing to mind the positive benefits of social integration, social ties, and social support (Cohen & Sherman, 2011). Furthermore, when people feel affirmed, they tend to see adversity as an isolated, temporary event and they are more likely to engage in remedying the threat and stress they are experiencing (Cacioppo & Patrick 2008). In the context of the programme evaluated as part of Study 3, self-affirmation essays could be used as an activity to be completed between the workshops and could provide a powerful way to frame the activities and discussions, that already seemed to resonate with the participants, within the sessions.

One limitation of Study 3 relates to the nature of the sample. Specifically, the participants self-selected and it could be argued that in actively choosing to take part in an intervention they had already made an important step toward change (see [DiClemente](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=ZR9yL0wAAAAJ&hl=en&inst=1597255436240989024&oi=sra) & [Prochaska](https://scholar.google.com/citations?user=vT9583MAAAAJ&hl=en&inst=1597255436240989024&oi=sra), 1998, for one explanation on the concept of readinessfor change). As a result, many of the participants may have been receptive to the programme regardless of the specific content and structure. Future research may wish, therefore, to assess participants’ readiness for change before they take part in the intervention and monitor how this influences outcomes.

The self-selected nature of the sample also brings to mind a further important consideration and opportunity for future research. As the programme was widely publicised, presumably people had the opportunity to take part, but consciously decided not to. Although this may be practically difficult, it would be useful to engage with these people to find out more about their reasons for this. There is evidence to suggest that some athletes refrain from talking part in interventions related to transition before they retire, often due to fears this will distract them from their sporting goals (e.g., Ryan, 2015). There is evidence, also, that former athletes are reluctant to seek help for transition related difficulties because this is a threat to their sense of self (see Chapter 4). These issues remain underexplored, however, and more research is needed to understand why people may not engage with interventions (and social support in general) and what can be done to encourage them to do so. Being armed with best intentions and great interventions is little use if people do not access the support available.

In an applied context, the findings of Study 3 highlight the need for and efficacy of interventions to support athletes after they have retired from sport. Previous research has focused on interventions to support athletes prior to their retirement. Although these interventions are often valued by athletes, there is evidence to suggest that the content and timing of these programme may not be suitable everyone (North & Lavallee, 2004). For example, those athletes who prioritise sporting goals ahead of pre-retirement planning. As indicated by some of the participants in Study 3, it is also possible that athletes do not realise the challenges they may face during their transition until the time comes. It is likely, therefore, that there will always be a demand for interventions tailored for athletes after they have retired.

The implementation of post-retirement intervention programmes presents both challenges and opportunities. Programmes such as the one evaluated in Study 3 require time and resources to design and deliver and would be expensive to implement on a large scale. One possible solution to this would be to train the participants of programmes to become facilitators. The findings from Chapter 1 indicated that people often gain benefit from providing support and that peer-to-peer support appears to be helpful because of the sense of trust between former athletes who have shared similar experiences. Consequently, engaging with the alumni of support programmes could help them to continue to understand their own transition and provide opportunities to expand the reach of programmes in order to engage with a greater number of athletes. Clearly not all alumni would be willing or able to act as facilitators, but informal conversations with the participants who took part in Study 3 indicated that many of them were interested in providing support to other athletes on a local level. With the relevant support and training this could be a cost effective way to research more people.

### Conclusion

Study 3 is, to the author’s knowledge, the first to develop, implement, and evaluate a theory driven transition programme for retired athletes. Realist evaluation of the programme demonstrates the importance of interventions to support athletes once they have retired from sport. The participants reported a number of positive outcomes of their involvement with the programme, including more awareness of their own personal strengths, increased psychological capital, and greater willingness to engage with support networks. Study 3 also aimed to establish how these outcomes were related to the mechanisms contained within programme design and delivery, the participants’ responses to the programme, and how this was related to the different contexts which shaped the participants’ life and transition. As a result, it was established that the programme contained a variety of mechanisms that operated in different ways for different people.

Different people derived benefits from different elements of the programme but, overall, the effectiveness of programme and, therefore, recommendations for the development of programmes in the future, can perhaps be summarised best with three broad messages. First, there is a need to support athletes’ transition on an emotional level that helps them to place their experiences within the context of greater understanding of the process of transition as a ‘normal’ response to change. Second, transition programmes should provide the opportunity for people to explore their sporting career, transition, and life in a way that encourages them to (re)affirm beliefs and values that can support their sense of self beyond sport. Third, transition programmes should be conceptualised as ‘social support’ in three distinct but interrelated ways: (a) the knowledge and practical assistance participants receive from programme content; (b) emotional support and social integration gained from being a member of a programme cohort; and (c) providing awareness of the importance of wider support networks (e.g., family members), and skills to access these networks (e.g., a language to articulate their experiences of transition).

# Chapter Seven: General Discussion and Conclusions

### Introduction

The purpose of this final chapter is to recap the main findings of the research in this thesis, summarise the theoretical and practical contributions of the research, and present suggestions for further work.

### Summary of findings

Overall, this thesis had three aims: First, to explore former athletes’ experiences of social support during their transition out of sport; second, to explore the experiences of parents and partners of athletes during transition; and, third, to evaluate the effectiveness of a programme designed to support athletes to manage and make sense of their transition. In order to address these aims, three studies were conducted.

Study 1 (presented in Chapter 4) explored retired athletes’ experience of social support during the process of transition using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The findings highlighted that it was the sense that supporters were simply *there* for them that seemed to provide the participants with the strongest sense that they were being supported. Close family members and other retired athletes were particularly important supporters because the participants felt that these people understood them and what they were going through.

The findings also suggested that the ability to seek out and ask for support facilitated the process of adjustment to retirement, particularly in relation to supporting athletes to develop a career beyond sport. However, some participants found asking for help difficult because they believed that potential supporters may not understand what they were going through and that asking for help might threaten their already fragile sense of self (i.e., these participants feared being perceived as ‘weak’). As the participants progressed through their transition, providing support to others offered them a way to use the knowledge and skills that they had gained through sport. This enabled them to rediscover their self-esteem and sense of self-worth and facilitated personal growth and the reappraisal of their athletic identity in a positive way.

Study 2 (presented in Chapter 5) aimed to investigate the experiences of this group of people. Semi-structured interviews with parents and partners of retired elite athletes suggested that they experienced a transition of their own when the athlete that they were associated with retired from sport. Parents and partners had to deal with uncertainty and upheaval in their own lives and, not unlike the experiences of some of the athletes, had to renegotiate their identity as they adjusted to the changes in their life. The provision of support by parents and partners was often complicated by their own difficulties and was not simply an exchange of resources. The findings of Study 2 suggested that the interpersonal dynamics during transition were complex and support was negotiated and provided in the context of the unique circumstances of each close relationship. Partners in particular had a difficult time in transition and this placed pressure on their relationship with the former athletes. However, over time, opportunities for mutual disclosure and the sharing of emotions related to their transitions enabled parents and partners to feel that they had grown because of their experience and they perceived their relationships to be closer and stronger as a result.

Finally, Study 3 (reported in Chapter 6) used existing theoretical and empirical knowledge of transition, and the findings of Studies 1 and 2, to design a psychoeducational programme to support athletes’ adjustment in transition. The programme was delivered as a series of three workshops over a 12-week period to a group of retired athletes. A realist evaluation highlighted the outcomes of the programme, the mechanisms of change that generated outcomes and the context in which these mechanisms were activated.

The findings of Study 3 suggested that the programme was effective in helping the participants to manage and make sense of their transition. Specifically, the participants’ wellbeing, self-esteem, psychological capital, and willingness to seek support increased as a result of taking part in the programme. These positive outcomes were likely achieved because the programme facilitated participants’ reasoning and agency, such that they gained a deeper understanding of the process of transition that enabled them to normalise their experiences and process difficult emotions.

The findings of Study 3 also suggested that the programme enabled participants to recognise, reframe, and build on the skills and experiences that they gained through sport. This permitted them to gain a deeper understanding of how their beliefs and values can support their personal development. There was also evidence that they also developed the confidence and skills needed to mobilise and manage their support networks. The findings of the evaluation also described the different context in which mechanisms were triggered, with mechanisms related to the processing of emotions seemingly greater in strength and impact for participants who had been retired from some time.

### Theoretical and methodological contributions

The findings of the studies presented within this thesis offer a number of contributions to the understanding of the process of transition out of sport. Previous research on transition has highlighted the importance of social support, but has tended to characterise support simply as a resource that aids the coping process (Park et al., 2013a). This approach emphasises identifying the different types and sources of support that promote adjustment during transition and often defines social support in terms of the specific behaviours that convey support (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). In contrast, the findings in this thesis emphasise the value of taking a relational approach to social support where support is defined by the quality of relationships. In this view, social support is an interpersonal process built through a shared history and multiple, often relatively mundane, or every day, interactions (Leatham & Duck, 1990).

The findings of this thesis offer a more nuanced way of understanding the factors that influence transition experiences, and help to link, explain and contextualise existing theoretical models. For example, the findings of this thesis highlight the need to move beyond the relatively linear and static relationships between variables contained with the conceptual model of adaptation to career transition (Taylor et al., 2006). The conceptual model (Figure 2 in Chapter 2) places variables that influence the quality of career transitions into three categories: Factors that initiate the process of transition (e.g., age, injury); the personal and contextual factors related to adjustment (e.g., perceptions of control and social identity); and the resources that athletes have available to help them to manage the process (e.g., planning, social support).

The finding of this thesis suggest several ways in which these categories could be modified to place a greater emphasis on relational process. First, the instigation of career termination may involve negotiation between an athlete and their primary supporters. Decision making process around the timing of retirement may rest on a complex interpersonal and family influences that extend beyond the factors related to aging and performance that are currently outlined in the model. For example, developmental experience involving other transitions (e.g., parenthood/marriage) may influence the decision to continue as an athlete. This factor could manifest in very different ways depending on the individual athlete-supporter relationship dyad. For one dyad, parenthood may raise issues around financial security, which influences the decision to continue in sport. For another, parenthood may emphasise the need for greater child rearing responsibilities and influence a decision to retire.

Regarding the personal and contextual factors related to adjustment outline in the conceptual model of adaptation to career transition (Taylor et al., 2006), there is, again, a need to recognise the role of relational process in the way that these factors play a role in shaping experiences of transition and the way that these factors interact with the ‘available resources for adaption to career transitions’. By applying a relational view of social support, Study 1was able to highlight how the participants’ interpersonal interactions and evolving sense of self influenced the quality of their close relationships, willingness to seek out and ask for help, and their perceptions of the availability and quality of support from a variety of individuals and organisations. This thesis argues that it is through examining these dynamic contexts that social support during transition is best understood; rather than through the relatively static psychological constructs labelled as ‘received’ or ‘perceived’ social support.

Adopting a relational view of support makes it vital to explore the experiences of both the receiver *and* the provider of support (Buunk & Hoorens,1992). Therefore, a particularly novel contribution of this thesis was to explore the transitions of the people in athletes’ close social networks (as the providers and potential providers of support). Study 2 supported the idea that a significant life transitions, such as retirement from sport, are likely to have a range of impacts, including an impact on the athlete’s close relationships (Chow, 2001). Indeed, Study 2 highlighted that parents and partners of athletes experience a transition of their own that can influence the quality of their relationship with the athlete, the way that social support is negotiated, and ultimately, the overall quality of transition for both parties. These findings suggest complexity in transition experiences that is not currently captured in exiting theoretical models. In this respect, family systems theory (Broderick, 1993) may offer theoretical insights to better explore the dynamic relational process involved in transition experiences. By viewing athletes as part of an interdependent system of complex relationships, it is possible to gain a more holistic understanding of how the challenges of change are managed and the effects that transitioning out of sport influences athletes and their social network. Thus, research which starts from a theoretical position that transitions occur within the context of complex relational interactions has the potential to offer a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the process and the opportunity to develop more effective interventions.

Regarding interventions, the studies reported in this thesis offer a number of methodological and theoretical contributions to research and applied practice. One of the main contributions of this thesis has been to illustrate the role that theory-led evaluations can play in uncovering ‘how’, ‘why’, and ‘for whom’ interventions work (or don’t work) in real-world settings. Given the finite resources that are available to support athletes during transition, theory-led evaluations, such as the realist approach used in Study 3, can provide an understanding of which specific components of an intervention’s content and process are most effective. This approach may inform policy and can assist organisations to design interventions that meet the needs of the diverse population of athletes who retire from sport (Nielsen & Miraglia, 2017). Given that transitions in sport are complex social processes, realist evaluation may also help to investigate the different transitions that occur across an athlete’s career and can potentially overcome the reliance on quantitative and experimental designs that often fail to explain the complex ways in which intervention outcomes have been achieved (i.e., Harwood & Swain, 2002; Lavallee, 2005).

Building on this point, another methodological contribution of this thesis has been to illustrate the value of multiple methods and a pluralistic approach to data collection and analysis when investigating different aspects of the transition out of sport. For example, Studies 1 and 2 used an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore people’s experiences of social support and social relationships. These in-depth accounts revealed the complexities and context that shape interpersonal interactions during transitions. In so doing, the research in this thesis moved beyond descriptive accounts of social support that focus on delineating the types and sources of support that are received by athletes during transition (e.g., Park et al., 2013a). The findings of the first two studies then contributed to a mixed methods evaluation that again recognised the complexities, context, and situational factors that shape experiences of transition. In summary, the methodological pluralism of this thesis enabled a more nuanced approach to the research questions by focusing on the unique experiences of participants, while also recognising the multiple personal, cultural and social factors that influence experiences of transition.

### Applied Implications

Previous studies, and those in this thesis, have indicated that transition is often a challenging time for athletes and they do need, and benefit from, social support (Park et al., 2013a). Therefore, the challenges tend to be around getting the right support to the right people at the right time. For example, although considerable progress has been made in providing pre-retirement support for athletes (e.g., through the personal development programmes provided by national supporting organisations for elite level athletes), these programmes can only be effective if athletes engage with them (Wylleman & Reints, 2013). Pre-retirement planning for a life after sport is one of the strongest predictors of successful transition (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999 Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), but studies have reported that athletes are often reluctant to engage with pre-retirement support programmes due to a fear that this will distract from sporting commitments and goals (Ryan, 2015). Therefore, although ‘prevention is better than cure’ and sporting organisation should continue to invest in programmes to support athletes during their careers, it is likely that there will still be athletes who need support after they retire.

Although increased investment is being made, sporting organisations only have the capacity to support athletes in the immediate few months following retirement and do not have sufficient resources to provide support in the longer-term (Wylleman & Reints, 2013). It is in this context that the findings from this thesis potentially have much to offer. For example, by conceptualising transition as a shared experience, athletes can be encouraged to identify and develop sources of support that can provide them with stable, long-term help. Specifically, exiting support programmes could be modified to include information and skills that enable athletes to recognise the support that they may need and engage with potential supporters in their close networks. Existing support programmes could be expanded to include a component similar to that in the programme evaluated as part of Study 3 in this thesis. More specifically, athletes could be encouraged to identify potential supporters, develop the communication skills necessary to engage with them, and crucially, given the shared nature of transition, to understand the changes and challenge that supporters may face when athletes retire.

To expand this relational approach further, given that athletes’ family members are likely to experience a transition of their own (as shown in Study 2 of this thesis) existing/future support programmes could also include a focus on ‘supporting the supporter’ (Faw, 2015; Kirby, Holmes, & Amoroso, 2010).). That is, close family members such as parents and partners could be included in interventions and provided with information and skills to help them to manage their own transitions, and provide support to the athlete. There is strong evidence for this approach from research on social support in other context, which has shown that empowering people to provide help can have a positive impact for both the provider and receiver of support (Beaudet et al., 2015).

‘Supporting the supporter’ interventions are based on models of dyadic coping (e.g., Bodenmann, 1997) that suggest that joint coping efforts are greater than the sum of each individual’s ability to deal with stress. As described in Chapter 5, studies have shown that dyadic interventions can help the recipients of support to deal with negative emotions, identify and solve problems, and develop a more positive orientation toward stressful situations (Stahl et al., 2015). Previous research has also shown that dyadic interventions can have similar benefits for the providers of support, and can also help them to feel confident that they can deliver the support that their close others need in the most appropriate way (Faw, 2015). In summary, dyadic interventions may offer a cost effective and efficient way to help athletes and the people in their close social networks to manage and make sense of their experiences, strengthen their relationships, and adjust to the numerous changes and challenges that are common in transition.

Dyadic interventions may not be suitable for everyone, however. Just as athletes can be reluctant to engage with support programmes prior to retirement, it is likely that some may be reluctant to engage in them after retirement. Indeed, Study 1 reported that some of the participants did not seek help because of the potential threat to their ‘mentally tough’ athletic identity. There is also the issue of athletes who retire when they are not part of a funded programme. Currently, support for transition is only provided for athletes at the highest level of sport (Wylleman & Reints, 2013), but there are perhaps hundreds more athletes who invest the same time, effort, and commitment, and make the same personal and relational sacrifices, who are not eligible for support.

It is also important to consider that there can be barriers to initiating and maintaining participation in support programmes. As reported in Study 3, these may relate to the participants (e.g., work commitments), as well as the organisation delivering the programme (e.g., considerable time and expertise required to plan and deliver the face-to-face interventions). There is, therefore, a need to provide support that is accessible, both in a practical sense of delivery, and in a way that is not perceived as being a threat to athletes’ sense of self.

In this respect, the delivery of psychoeducational interventions through digital or web-based methods is becoming increasing popular in sport. Web-based methods have the potential to decrease the logistical and practical barriers that often prevent participants from talking part, and to offer more cost and time effective solutions for organisations (Thrower, Harwood, & Spray, 2018). In support of this method of delivery, research suggests that online methods can increase participation rates by engaging a larger numbers of people, while maintaining outcomes comparable with more traditional face-to-face methods (Breitenstein, Gross, & Christopherson, 2014; Thrower et al., 2018). Furthermore, learning outcomes may even be enhanced because participants can work at their own pace and access learning at the most convenient time for them (van Duijin, Swanick, & Donald, 2014). Taking this into consideration, it would appear that online interventions offer a potentially useful approach that could be used to address some of the practical limitations of face-to-face education programmes and increase the reach of support.

It should be noted that online interventions do have disadvantages; for example, the structured way that content is delivered may not meet the needs of each individual, and, research has shown, that people often have negative perceptions of online delivery methods that may deter them from taking part (Andersson & Titov, 2014; Colvin, Chenoweth, Bold, & Harding, 2004). Furthermore, much of what made the programme evaluated in Study 3 successful (i.e., peer interactions, group sharing and support) would be lost with online delivery.

The challenges of web-based interventions bring to mind the need for multiple forms of support, and methods of delivery, that could form a suite of intervention options. Each one matched to the needs and context of the individual athlete. Group-based face-to-face workshops could be used for those athletes who require emotional social support, the need to connect with peers who have shared a similar experience, and the chance to help and support others. While online approaches could be tailored towards athletes who value a more focussed, anonymous, and flexible approach. Another possible approach is to use ‘blended learning’ to maximise the strengths and minimise the limitations of single methods. For example, online learning could be used to provide more formal aspects of informational and practical support that is developed and reinforced with relatively short (and therefore cost effective, convenient, and accessible) group workshops, peer mentoring sessions, and/or dyadic interventions. There is some evidence to suggest that blended approaches can enhance outcomes compared with online learning alone (see Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010), and this avenue of delivery offers an interesting direction for future research to explore.

### Future directions

Despite the contributions of this thesis and the theoretical, methodological, and practical implications that it provides, there are a number of research areas and challenges related to the process of transition, and the role of social support within it, that would benefit from further study.

Research on the transition out of sport has identified a number of different variables that are associated with adjustment to retirement (e.g., pre-retirement planning, control over the decision making process, strength of athletic identity (Park et al., 2013a). However, the majority of research to date has been cross-sectional survey based research (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004) or retrospective qualitative studies (e.g., Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Given that transition is inherently a dynamic process that can extend over a long period (Park et al., 2013a), the cross-sectional and retrospective studies need to be expanded with longitudinal designs that can better explore the complexities involved in transitions as they unfold.

In support of this idea, research on the junior-to-senior transition in sport (e.g., Franck, Stambulova, & Ivarsson, 2016) has identified different patterns of adjustment during transition ­­as they develop over a number of years (e.g., stable, increasing, decreasing levels of adjustment). Furthermore, Franck et al. (2016) found that different patterns of junior-to-senior adjustment were related to the athletes’ personal characteristics and circumstances during transition. Similar designs could be used to explore the transition out of sport in order to further understand how transition develops over time, and how important variables, such as athletic identity, planning, and social support, interact to determine adjustment. Crucially, given that transition begins prior to the point of retirement (Fernadez et al., 2006), longitudinal studies should begin when athletes are still competing. This may elucidate, for example, the extent to which athletes engage in pre-retirement planning and preparation, including if, and to what extent, they access social support, and how this influence subsequent adjustment.

It is important, however, that research is not limited to a ‘variable centred’ approach, where transition is simply conceptualised as the interaction of psychological constructs. As described in Study 3, an individual’s context influences the success of interventions to support athletes, and the overall success of any particular transition. Thus, future research concerning the transition out of sport still has the challenge of exploring how the personal context of athletes interacts with respective systems within and outside sport and the broader cultural context, to influence the process and outcomes of transition. Thinking about social support in particular, research that uses a systems approach (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to explore the interactions of micro (e.g., close relationships), meso (availability of organisational support programmes), and macro (e.g., societal and cultural attitude to sport/transition) aspects of transition may be useful (Kuettel, Boyle, & Schmid, 2017).

Despite the significant steps forward provided by the studies reported in this thesis, there are a number of avenues for further research specifically concerning the role of social support during transition. Although not strictly a limitation, the participants in the studies contained in this thesis were drawn from a small, relatively homogenous, group of athletes. It is possible that experiences of social support and the need for support may differ for other groups of athletes (e.g., athletes competing at a level below ‘elite’ standard). Therefore, in order to ensure that athletes get the right support at the right time, future research should endeavour to explore and understand the role of, and need for support, in a range of athletes. Furthermore, a more detailed understanding of the timing of support would be useful to understand how, for example, what kind of support is most helpful at what stage of the transition process. There is some evidence that athletes may experience a relatively benign transition before encountering greater difficulties further into the process (Stronch et al, 2014). Therefore, a deeper understanding of potential pressure points may assist the development and implementation of interventions. In this way, Longitudinal designs, such as that previously mentioned in relations to the junior-to -senior transition, could include measures of athletes’ perceived need for, and willingness to access, social support.

It may also be useful to explore the possibility of multiple interconnected transitions under the umbrella term of transition out of sport. Retirement from sport is often referred to as a ‘career’ transition (e.g., Park et al., 2013a). Even if unintended, this implies that the transition is from one vocational pursuit (i.e., competitive sport) to another (e.g., traditional employment). However, the findings from this thesis, and from other research (e.g., Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), have emphasised a more complex set of changes and challenges during retirement, related to vocational transitions, but also emotional transitions, identity transitions, and relational transitions. This thesis does not endorse reducing social support to its constituent parts or types (c.f., Cutrona & Russell, 1990); however, a deeper understanding of how social support and relationships play a role in these specific domains of transition could be useful for designing interventions.

Specifically related to interventions, any existing, modified or new support programmes should be subject to systematic evaluation. As this thesis advocates, a realist approach to evaluation research can help to reveal the mechanisms that produce outcomes and in what context they are activated. In Study 3, the evaluation was focused largely on the account of the participants, but it is also possible to conduct realist evaluations that involve a range of stakeholders (Pawson & Tilly, 1997). Therefore, future research may wish to take into account the experiences and perceptions of the people who deliver and facilitate programmes to gain a deep insight into what services are working well, why they are working well, and how they can be improved. Participatory forms of evaluation that involve the end-users of a programme (in this case athletes) in the design and delivery of interventions may also provide further insight into what programme mechanisms can help athletes to manage and make sense of their transition.

### Concluding Remarks

The aim of this thesis was to explore the role of social support during the transition out of sport. The findings underline the importance of social support as a basis for successful transition. This finding also expand on the oversimplified, interactionalist, and behavioural view of social support by exploring the complexities of social life and relationships during the process of transition. Although the findings of the studies have been presented as discrete pieces of research, a core message running throughout is that ‘context’ matters. That is, social support is not simply an abstract psychological variable, a resource to be exchanged, or a strategy to relieve the presence or effects of stress. Social support *may* take those forms and functions, but the nature and role of social support is shaped by personal goals, beliefs and values, relational histories, and cultural attitudes. Profound transitions in life are often shared experiences and social support is a product of intersubjective experiences and sense-making. Viewing social support as a shared process, set within the context of complex social systems, opens up new ways of thinking about the transition out of sport and offers the potential to develop innovative interventions to ensure the right athletes get the right support at the right time.

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**Appendices**

Appendix A: Information Sheet and Consent Form (Study 1)

**Information Sheet**

Dear

I am a researcher from the University of Sheffield and I am interested in finding out more about athletes’ transition to retirement. In particular, I am trying to understand how we can help athletes to experience a more positive transition. In order to do this, I am conducting interviews with former athletes to talk about their perceptions and experiences of transition. Specifically, I would like to know about the support people received and how this helped them to make the transition out of sport.

This sheet is to provide you with further information about the research so you can decide if you want to take part.

**The Research Team:**

The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield. The research is being conducted by:

Chris Brown ([cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Thomas Webb ([t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Mark Robinson ([M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk)),

Rick Cotgreave ([rick.cotgreave@lane4.co.uk](mailto:rick.cotgreave@lane4.co.uk))

**Questions about the interview:**

***Why do we want to talk to you?***

The transition to retirement is an under researched area in sports psychology. Retiring from sport can be a challenging time for many athletes and they often find it difficult to adjust to their new life after many years focussed on achieving their sporting goals. We would like to interview high performance and professional athletes to talk about their perceptions and experiences of transition, and get their ideas on the best way to support athletes when they retire.

***What will happen during the interview?***

The lead researcher, Chris Brown, will meet with you to talk about your own experiences. Chris will ask you some prepared questions - nothing should make you feel uncomfortable but you don’t have to answer anything if you’d rather not, and you can end the interview at any time. Interviews will be recorded on a digital voice recorder.

***How long will it take?***

It’s hard to say as everyone is different but usually interviews last between 45-90 minutes.

***Do I have to take part?***

No. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and you can change your mind about participating at any time. Even if we start the interview and you change your mind, you can say so and we’ll stop the interview.

***Will what I say be confidential?***

Yes, everything is confidential. All information we hold will be held securely and your responses to the questions will not be identifiable to anyone outside the research team. It is hoped the findings of the study will be published in academic journals, but any findings will be reported as themes from the whole sample so no individual is identifiable.

**What happens next?**

If you agree to take part you will be asked to fill in a consent form to indicate you have understood the details of the study and that you are happy to take part.

**Questions?**

If you would like to talk to any of the research team about any aspect of this project then please feel free to get in touch - we would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns that you may have.

Thank you and best wishes

Chris Brown

Doctorial Researcher

Department of Psychology

University of Sheffield

**Participant consent form**

|  |
| --- |
| **Title of Research Project:** Social support during transition.  **Name of Researcher:** Christopher Brown  If you understand the study procedures and the information given to you in the information sheet and are happy to participate in the study, then please read the following information, initial the boxes and sign the consent form at the bottom. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and this consent form, signed and dated, for your records. If you would like more time to consider your participation you are welcome to take as much time as you need.  Participant Identification Number for this project: Please initial box   1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet   explaining the above research project and I have had the  Opportunity to ask questions about the project.   1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. 2. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and not shared outside the research team. 3. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. 4. I agree to take part in the above research project.   \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of Participant Date Signature  (*or legal representative*)  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of person taking consent Date Signature  (*if different from lead researcher*)  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant* |

Appendix B: Interview Guide (Study 1)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **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? |

Appendix C: Information Sheet and Consent Form (Study 2)

**Information Sheet**

Dear

I am a researcher from the University of Sheffield conducting a PhD on athletes’ retirement from sport. I am interested in learning more about how athletes might be supported through the process of retirement. Previous research has found that people within athletes’ social network, such as their partner, or parents can play an important role in supporting transition. The aim of this research is, therefore, to understand how you have experienced the process of transition and to understand how, as a family member, you saw your role during this time.

This document is to provide you with further information about the research so you can decide if you want to take part.

**The Research Team:**

The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield. The research is being conducted by:

Chris Brown ([cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Thomas Webb ([t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Mark Robinson ([M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk)),

Rick Cotgreave ([rick.cotgreave@mobiusperformance.com](mailto:rick.cotgreave@mobiusperformance.com))

**Questions about the interview:**

***Why do we want to talk to you?***

Retiring from sport can be a significant time for many athletes and they may find it difficult to adjust to their new life after many years focussed on achieving their sporting goals. Athletes often look to their coach, partner, or close family and friends for support during this time, and they have reported that these people can help them to deal with the challenges they face. Therefore, we would like to interview people that are involved in athletes’ transition to understand more about their experiences.

***What will happen during the interview?***

I will ask you some prepared questions about your perceptions and experiences. Nothing should make you feel uncomfortable but you don’t have to answer anything if you’d rather not, and you can end the interview at any time. Interviews will be recorded on a digital voice recorder and transcribed so I can analyse them.

***How long will it take?***

It’s hard to say as everyone is different but usually interviews last between 45-90 minutes.

***Do I have to take part?***

No. Participation in the interview is voluntary, and you can change your mind about participating at any time. Even if we start the interview and you change your mind, you can say so and I will end the interview.

***Will what I say be confidential?***

Yes, everything is confidential. All information we hold will be held securely and your responses to the questions will not be identifiable to anyone outside the research team. It is hoped the findings of the study will be published in scientific journals, but any findings will be reported as themes from the whole sample so no individual will be identified.

***What happens next?***

If you agree to take part you will be asked to fill in a consent form to indicate you have understood the details of the study and that you are happy to take part. I will then get in touch to arrange a convenient time to meet to do the interview.

***Questions?***

If you would like to talk to me, or any of the research team, about any aspect of this project then please feel free to get in touch - we would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns that you may have.

Thank you and best wishes

Chris Brown

Doctorial Researcher

Department of Psychology

University of Sheffield

**Participant consent form**

|  |
| --- |
| **Title of Research Project:** Social support during transition.  **Name of Researcher:** Christopher Brown  If you understand the study procedures and the information given to you in the information sheet and are happy to participate in the study, then please read the following information, initial the boxes and sign the consent form at the bottom. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and this consent form, signed and dated, for your records. If you would like more time to consider your participation you are welcome to take as much time as you need.  Participant Identification Number for this project: Please initial box   1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet   explaining the above research project and I have had the  Opportunity to ask questions about the project.   1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. 2. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and not shared outside the research team. 3. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. 4. I agree to take part in the above research project.   \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of Participant Date Signature  (*or legal representative*)  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of person taking consent Date Signature  (*if different from lead researcher*)  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Lead Researcher Date Signature  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant* |

Appendix D: Interview Guide (Study 2)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **Possible follow up questions and prompts** |
| 1. Can you tell me about your life when x was competing | * Can you describe a typical week? * Was there anything you (dis)liked about your lifestyle? |
| 2. How did you see your role in your relationship with x when he/she was competing? | * What was the reason for your retirement? * Who was involved in the decision making process? |
| 3. Can you tell me about the circumstances around x’s retirement from sport? | * What did you think about x’s decision to retire? * 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? |
| 4. What was it like for you when x retired? | * Did you experience any changes in your life? * Did you know what to expect? * Did you feel prepared? |
| 5. Can you tell me about your relationship during the transition? | * Did you experience any changes in your relationship? |
| 6. Can you tell me about the role you played in your relationship with x when he/she was going through the process of retirement? | * Did you feel that x needed support? * What did you do to provide help/support? Was that effective? |
| 6. Can you tell me more about your life right now? | * How is your relationship now? * What is important in your life? Why is this important? |

Appendix E: Information Sheets and Consent Form (Study 3)

**Information Sheet**

Dear

The University of Sheffield is interested in finding out more about athletes’ transition to retirement. In particular, we are trying to learn more about the ways that athletes can be supported through the process. We understand that you are taking part in a programme of workshops designed to support athletes in transition and we would like to invite you to take part in research to assess the effectiveness of the programme.

**What is the purpose of the research?**

The purpose of the research is to evaluate a programme of support to athletes that are in the process of transition out of elite sport. The programme has been developed on the basis of previous research on athletes’ transition to retirement. The research aims to test the effectiveness of the programme in achieving the following goals:

Provide participants with information about the transition out of sport and the factors that may influence the process of their transition.

Develop and strengthen the participants’ knowledge and skills to proactively manage change in their life.

Empower participants to develop and maintain healthy relationships that can provide the basis for effective long term support.

**The Research Team:**

The study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee in the Department of Psychology at the University of Sheffield and is being conducted by:

Chris Brown (lead researcher) ([cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:cjbrown1@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Thomas Webb ([t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.webb@sheffield.ac.uk))

Dr Mark Robinson ([M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk](mailto:M.Robinson@lubs.leeds.ac.uk))

Rick Cotgreave ([rick.cotgreave@mobiusperformance.com](mailto:rick.cotgreave@mobiusperformance.com))

**Who can take part in the research?**

We are inviting everyone taking part in Lane 4’s support programme to take part in the research.

**What is involved in the research?**

The aim of the research is to evaluate the objectives of the support programme described above. To do this we will ask you to fill in a questionnaire before and after the programme. This will include questions on things like identity, support networks and wellbeing. This can be done online and will take around 10 minutes. We will also ask you to complete evaluation sheets after each workshop to understand how you feel about the workshop content and delivery. These can be completed on paper or online and will take around 5 minutes to complete. After the final workshop you will be invited to take part in a group discussion with the other participants. This will be led by an independent researcher from the University of Sheffield and is designed to get your feedback on the programme as a whole. This will take around one hour and time will be allocated for this at the end of the third workshop. You may also be invited to take part in a telephone call with the independent researcher to follow up with you a couple of weeks after the end of the programme.

**What do I get for participating?**

There are no material benefits from taking part in the research, but you will help us to understand how the programme can improved and made it better for other athletes in the future.

**Do I have to take part?**

We are inviting all participants taking part in the programme to help with the research but participation is voluntary. Helping with the research is not a condition of taking part in the programme. Even if you agree to help with the research you change your mind and still continue with the programme. You can withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and you will not be asked to explain your reasons for withdrawing.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

Yes, everything will be kept confidential. The group discussion and telephone interviews will be audio recorded in order to analyse content but these recordings with be stored securely and will only be accessed by the lead researcher. All of the other information that we collect from you will be held securely and your responses (e.g., to questionnaires) will be recorded in such a way that they are not identifiable to anyone outside the research team (e.g., you will be referred to using a number, not by name). It is hoped the findings of the study will be published in scientific journals, but any findings will be reported as themes from the whole group so that no individual is identifiable.

**What happens next?**

If you agree to take part, then you will be asked to give your consent when you complete the first online questionnaire. This is to indicate you have understood the details of the study and that you are happy to take part.

**Questions?**

If you would like to talk to any of the research team about any aspect of this project then please feel free to get in touch - we would be happy to discuss any questions or concerns that you may have.

Thank you and best wishes

Chris Brown

**Participant consent form**

|  |
| --- |
| **Title of Research Project:** Supporting Athletes During Transition.  **Name of Researcher:** Christopher Brown  If you understand the study procedures and the information given to you in the information sheet and are happy to participate in the study, then please read the following information, initial the boxes and sign the consent form at the bottom. You will be given a copy of the information sheet and this consent form, signed and dated, for your records. If you would like more time to consider your participation you are welcome to take as much time as you need.  Participant Identification Number for this project: Please initial box   1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet   explaining the above research project and I have had the  Opportunity to ask questions about the project.   1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline. 2. I understand that my responses will be kept strictly confidential and not shared outside the research team. 3. I give permission for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses. I understand that my name will not be linked with the research materials, and I will not be identified or identifiable in the report or reports that result from the research. 4. I agree to take part in the above research project.   \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of Participant Date Signature  (*or legal representative*)  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Name of person taking consent Date Signature  (*if different from lead researcher*)  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_  Lead Researcher Date Signature  *To be signed and dated in presence of the participant* |

**Appendix F: Pre/post Intervention Questionnaire (Study 3)**

**Measure of career planning**

Gould, S. (1979). Characteristics of career planners in upwardly mobile occupations. *Academy of Management Journal*, *22*(3), 539-550.

Thinking about your career after you retire from competing at elite level of sport, to what extent do you agree with the following statements?

1. I have a strategy for achieving my career goals.
2. I have a plan for my career.
3. I know what I need to do to reach career goals.
4. My career objectives are not clear.
5. I have not really decided what my career objectives should be yet.
6. I change my career objectives frequently.

Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree.

**Compound Psychological Capital-12 Scale**

Lorenz, T., Beer, C., Pütz, J., & Heinitz, K. (2016). Measuring psychological capital: construction and validation of the compound PsyCap scale (CPC-12). *PloS one*, *11*(4), e0152892.

Below are statements that describe how you may think about yourself **right now**. Use the following scales to indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

1= Strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=Neither disagree nor agree 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, 7=strongly agree)

1. If I should find myself in a jam, I could think of many ways to get out of it. a

2. Right now, I see myself as being pretty successful. a

3. I can think of many ways to reach my current goals. a

4. I am looking forward to the life ahead of me. b

5. The future holds a lot of good in store for me. b

6. Overall, I expect more good things to happen to me than bad. c

7. Sometimes I make myself do things whether I want to or not. d

8. When I’m in a difficult situation, I can usually find my way out of it. d

9. It’s okay if there are people who don’t like me. d

10. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events. e

11. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort. e

12. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities. e

Notes: a State Hope Scale (SHS), b Affective Valence of the Orientation towards the Future-Questionnaire (AFF), c Life-Orientation-Test (LOT-R), d Resilience Scale (RS-13), e The General Self-Efficacy Scale (GSE)

**Measure of adaptation to retirement**

Wells, Y., de Vaus, D., Kendig, H., Quine, S., & Peteralia, W. (2006). *Healthy retirement project: Technical report*. Latrobe University.

Thinking about your life right now, to what extent do you agree with the following statement?

1. I enjoy being retired from sport.
2. I am well adjusted to the changes I have experience after retirement from sport.
3. Retirement from sport has not lived up to my expectations.
4. I miss the stimulation that sport gave me.
5. Retirement from sport has been better than I expected.
6. I wish I had started to plan for retirement earlier.

Scale ranges from 1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree)

**Single-Item Measure of Self-Esteem**

Robins, R. W., Hendin, H. M., & Trzesniewski, K. H. (2001). Measuring Global Self-Esteem: Construct Validation of a Single-Item Measure and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 27, 151-161.

Thinking about your life right now, to what extent do you agree with the following statement?

I have high self-esteem.

1 = Not very true of me, 7= Very true of me.

**Measure of help-seeking**

Wilson, C. J., Deane, F. P., Ciarrochi, J., & Rickwood, D. (2005). Measuring help-seeking intentions: Properties of the general help-seeking questionnaire. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, *39*(1), 15-28.

If you were having a personal or emotional problem related to your retirement from sport, how likely is it that you would seek help from the following people?

1. Intimate partner (e.g., girlfriend, boyfriend, husband, wife, de facto)
2. Friend (not related to you)
3. Another retired athlete
4. Parent
5. Other relative/family member
6. Mental health professional (e.g., psychologist, social worker, counsellor)
7. Phone helpline (e.g., Samaritans)
8. Doctor/GP
9. Minister or religious leader (e.g., Priest, Rabbi, Chaplain)
10. I would not seek help from anyone
11. I would seek help from somewhere or someone not listed above

(Please list in the space provided

(e.g., work colleague. If no, leave blank) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

|  |
| --- |
| 1 = Extremely Unlikely 3 = Unlikely 5 = Likely 7 = Extremely Likely |

**Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale**

Tennant, R., Hiller, L., Fishwick, R., Platt, S., Joseph, S., Weich, S., ... & Stewart-Brown, S. (2007). The Warwick-Edinburgh mental well-being scale (WEMWBS): Development and UK validation. *Health and Quality of life Outcomes*, *5*(1), 63.

Thinking about your life right now, how often do the following statements apply you?

Scale ranges from 1 = None of the time; 7 = All of the time)

1. I’ve been feeling optimistic about the future.
2. I’ve been feeling useful.
3. I’ve been feeling relaxed.
4. I’ve been dealing with problems well.
5. I’ve been thinking clearly.
6. I’ve been feeling close to other people.
7. I’ve been able to make up my own mind about things.

**Appendix G: Example Workshop Feedback Form (Study 3)**

**Evaluation feedback form – Workshop 1 (Awareness & Understanding)**

We would appreciate it if you could take a few minutes of your time to complete this evaluation form. It really is important that we get honest feedback, both good and not so good, so if you think that the workshop, or parts of the workshop, were not helpful for you then please indicate this.

**The objectives of this workshop were:**

* To help you become more aware of the process of change involved in transition.
* To help you recognise and understand change and reactions to change in your own life.
* To give you the opportunity to share your experiences of transition with others if you wanted to.

Please circle the most appropriate number to indicate the extent that you agree with the statements below. The higher the number the more you agree with each statement. Please provide additional information to support your answers in the space provide if you feel this is appropriate.

**1. The workshop achieved its objectives (outlined above).**

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Please support your answer with additional information

**2. The content of the workshop was appropriate for me.**

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Please support your answer with additional information

**3. The workshop facilitators/speakers were able to effectively support my learning during the workshop.**

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Please support your answer with additional information

**4. Overall, I’m satisfied with the workshop.**

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Please support your answer with additional information

**5. If you found the workshop useful, can you describe why this is the case.**

**6. In your opinion, how could the workshop be improved?**

Please support your answer with additional information

**7. Additional comments**

**Thank you for your help**

Appendix H: Focus Group Interview Guide (Study 3)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Questions** | **Possible follow up questions and prompts** |
| 1.How did you originally hear about the programme? | * What made you want to take part? |
| 2. How would you describe your overall experience of the programme? | * Was the programme what you expected it to be? * Did the programme meet your expectations? |
| 3. Can you tell me about the programme structure/content | * Was the programme format right for you? * What aspects of the programme did you find most/least useful? * Can you tell me more about workshops 1/2/3. * Is there anything in the programme you would change? |
| 4. How would you rate the facilitators and speakers who delivered the programme? | * Is there anything they could have done to improve your experience? |
| 5. Do you have any suggestion on how the programme can be improved? | * How would you describe this programme to someone else that was considering taking part? * What advice would you give them to make the most out of it? |
| 6. Have you made any changes in your life as a result of the programme? | * Do you feel like you have a plan to move forward? Are there any barriers to you implementing this? |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 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 think the programme might help you? |
| 4. How would you describe your overall experience of the programme? | Overall, has the programme been of benefit to you?  Did anything about the programme have a negative impact? |
| 5. Can you tell me about the programme structure/content | Was the programme format right for you?  What aspects of the programme did you find most/least useful?  Can you tell me more about workshops 1/2/3.  Is there anything in the programme you would change? |
| 6. How would you rate the facilitators and speakers who delivered the programme? | Is there anything they could have done to improve your experience? |
| 7. Have you made any changes in your life as a result of the programme? | Do you feel like you have a plan to move forward? Are there any barriers to you implementing this? |

Appendix J: Initial Programme Theory (Study 3)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **CMO** | **CONTEXT** | **PROGRAMME MECHANISMS** | **OUTCOMES** |
| 1.Programme delivery and content | * Few transition support services available for retired athletes. * Participants received little support to help adjust to changes in transition. | * Delivery by experienced facilitators with their own transition experiences. * Group interaction and sharing of experiences. * Evidence based content / knowledge / activities to frame personal experiences. | * Participants will provide high feedback scores for each workshop. |
| 2.Understanding and managing change. | * Poor understanding of the transition process. * Feelings of uncertainty/denial/loss. | * Provide information on the processes of change involved in transition. * Recognise changes in their own life. * Share experiences of transition with others. * Process emotions related to transition. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |
| 3.Exploring identity. | * Identity developed and defined by sport. * Difficulty defining a new identity. | * Identify the activities and people that may have supported their identity as athletes. * Explore the goals, beliefs and values that they believe are important to them. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |
| 4.Building personal resources. | * Lack of pre-transition planning. * Uncertainly about future career. | * Identify the transferable skills, knowledge and experience acquired through sport. * Identify how these skills can be used in life now and in the future. | * Increased psychological capital. * Development of goals/plan for the future. |
| 5.Building support networks/ relationships. | * Disruption/loss of social networks. * Reluctance to seek help. | * Recognise the different types and sources of support. * Acknowledge the support they may need. * Identify social support networks. * Highlight good communication skills/practice. | * Increased willingness to seek help seeking intentions/behaviours. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. |

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| [Appendix K:](#_Toc352855061)Refined Programme Theory (Study 3) | | | | | | |
| **CMO** | **CONTEXT** | | **MECHANISMS** | | **OUTCOMES** | |
| **Existing context** | **Participants’ context** | **Programme Mechanisms** | **Agency/Reasoning** | **Planned** | **Unplanned** |
| 1.Programme delivery and content | * Few transition support services available. * Participants received little support to help adjust to changes in transition. | * Availability to attend workshops and balances other commitments e.g., work / family. * Differences in learning preferences. | * Delivery by experienced facilitators with their own transition experiences. * Group interaction and sharing of experiences. * Evidence based content / knowledge / activities to frame personal experiences. | * Motivation and willingness to engage. * Ability and time to reflect between sessions. | * Participants provided high feedback scores for each workshop. * Developed a ‘language’ to frame experiences. | * Some difficulty understanding some of the more ‘academic’ models and content. * Some frustration with balance between content and time to reflect. |
| 2.Understanding and managing change. | * Poor understanding of transition as a process. * Feelings of certainty, denial and loss. | * Different levels of pre-transition support and focus on preparation for retirement. * Different stages of transition and levels of emotional processing. | * ‘The Transition Curve’: Provided information on the processes of change involved in transition. * Provided opportunities to share experiences of transition with others. | * Transition perceived as ‘normal’ process. * Processing of emotions. * Being listened to and feeling heard. * Peer learning and modelling. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | * Some participants felt they had to go over issues they had already reconciled. |
| 3.Exploring identity. | * Identity developed and defined by sport. * Difficulty defining a new identity. | * Different levels of previous emotional processing. * Different pre and post-transition career histories. | * Identified the activities and people that may have supported their identity as athletes. * Explored the goals, beliefs and values to support ‘healthy self-concept and balance in life. | * Self-acceptance. * Self-affirmation. * Identified with fellow participants. | * Increased self-awareness. * Higher levels of psychological capital. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | * Some participants felt anger, sadness and regret towards sport for restricting their self-development. |
| 4.Building personal resources. | * Lack of pre-transition planning. * Uncertainly about future career. | * Different levels of pre-transition support and focus on preparation for retirement. | * Identified the transferable skills, knowledge and experience acquired through sport. * Identified how these skills can be used in life now and in the future. | * Empowered to make changes. * Recognising personal strengths. * Established importance of a ‘growth mindset’. * Reframed existing knowledge. | * Higher levels of psychological capital. * Development of goals/plans for the future. | N/A |
| 5.Building support networks/ relationships | * Disruption/loss of social networks. * Reluctance to seek help. * Availability of support. | * Type and strength of existing personal relationships. * Individual perceptions of previous and exiting institutional support. * Developed a ‘language’ to frame experiences. | * Recognised the different types and sources of support. * Identified social support networks. * Presented communication skills and techniques. | * Emotional openness/sharing. * Acknowledged the support they may need. * Increased willingness to communicate with close family. | * Increased help-seeking intentions/behaviours. * Increased social integration. * Higher levels of wellbeing /adjustment. | N/A |