



## Athletes' retirement from elite sport: A qualitative study of parents and partners' experiences<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

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

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

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

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

### 1. Introduction

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

disorders, and substance abuse many years after they retired (Gouttebauge, Aoki, & Kerkhoffs, 2015; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007).

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

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### 1.1. 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). Shared transitions can take place in a variety of close relationships, such as those involving romantic partnerships, parents and children, siblings, and grandparents and grandchildren (Cowan & Hetherington, 1991).

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

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

### 1.2. Interpersonal aspects of the transition out of sport

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

others did not understand what they were going through (Brown et al., 2018).

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

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

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

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

### 1.3. The present research

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

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