



A champion out of the pool? A discursive exploration of two Australian Olympic swimmers' transition from elite sport to retirement



Suzanne Cosh^{a, b, *}, Shona Crabb^c, Phillip J. Tully^d

^a Department of Psychiatry II, Ulm University, Günzburg, Germany

^b School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

^c Discipline of Public Health, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

^d Freemasons Foundation of Men's Health, Discipline of Medicine, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 24 December 2014

Received in revised form

23 February 2015

Accepted 24 February 2015

Available online 5 March 2015

Keywords:

Career transition

Transition difficulties

Elite athlete

Mass media

Discursive psychology

Identity

ABSTRACT

Background: The transition out of elite sport can be distressing and many athletes experience a range of transition difficulties. However, the socio-cultural and discursive contexts which shape experiences remain largely unexplored in the transition literature.

Objective: To explore retirement and transition difficulties in a cultural context through an analysis of Australian newsprint media.

Design and methods: A discursive analysis of 121 media articles reporting on post-retirement experiences of two Australian swimmers 7 and 5 years (respectively) into retirement. Data were analysed for repeated representation of transition difficulties, specifically how the cause of difficulties was attributed. The identities that were ascribed to athletes and what these functioned to accomplish were also examined.

Results: The identities of both individuals were repeatedly constructed in terms of an athlete identity, to the exclusion of other identities. The responsibility for transition difficulties was depicted as located solely within the individual and, thereby, the sport setting and the broader socio-cultural context were overlooked.

Conclusions: In this cultural context (Australian news media), the repeated construction of limited identity positions for retired athletes and the construction of former athletes as the sole locus of transition difficulties have implications for their psychological well-being. Despite this, the role of the sporting and cultural context is rendered invisible in these accounts and more broadly, and interventions remain targeted at the individual level.

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Athletes' retirement from elite-sport has received widespread research attention (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013), especially given that the retirement from elite-sport can constitute a significant risk to athletes' psychological health and well-being (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004; Wylleman & Lavalley, 2004). Upon retirement, athletes are vulnerable to experiencing depression, anxiety, identity crises, alcohol/substance abuse, decreased self-confidence and eating disorders (Stambulova,

Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009; Wylleman, Alfermann, & Lavalley, 2004). Post-retirement, athletes are also vulnerable to difficulties integrating into new professions (Dubois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2014) and to anxiety due to a lack of career certainty (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007), which has been attributed to the prioritisation of sport over their educational achievement during their sporting careers (Cosh & Tully, 2014; McGillivray, Fearn, & McIntosh, 2005). Additionally, athletes' bodies can be integral to their identity, signifying their physical strength, fitness and ability to perform (Phoenix & Sparkes, 2006). Thus, retiring athletes can be vulnerable to experiencing decreased self-esteem and self-worth as their bodies change (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Schwenk, Gorenflo, Dopp, & Hipple, 2007; Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007). Athletes are further at risk of depression associated with

* Corresponding author. School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide, Adelaide, Australia.

E-mail addresses: suziecosh@gmail.com, suzanne.cosh@adelaide.edu.au (S. Cosh).

long-term chronic pain resulting from injuries sustained during their careers (Schwenk et al., 2007).

Several key mediators of the negative outcomes often accompanying athlete retirement have been identified, such as social support during transition (Park et al., 2013) and the circumstances surrounding retirement (Lavallee, Grove, & Gordon, 1997). Retirements that occur suddenly and/or without choice are typically more distressing (Lotysz & Short, 2004; Wylleman et al., 2004), whereas the transition post-sport is facilitated by planned retirements in which athletes have a prepared alternate career to engage in after sport (Dubois et al., 2014; Lally, 2007). A further pivotal mediator of transition difficulties is the athlete's identity (Lally, 2007; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007; Moshkelgosha, Tojari, Ganjooee, & Mousav, 2012; Park et al., 2013). Athletes who have an exclusive or strong athlete identity take longer to adjust to and experience more difficulties (such as depression) into retirement (Horton & Mack, 2000; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007).

The socio-cultural context of retirement

The importance of examining psychological phenomenon within a broader socio-cultural context - that is, the cultural norms, common-sense understandings of the world, and discursive contexts, as well as the prevailing structural, social and economic conditions - is increasingly being recognised within sport research. Culture shapes the way in which individuals think, feel and act (Smith, 2010). Moreover, people's experienced 'realities' are shaped and reshaped through social and cultural practices and discourses (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2014) and certain ideas become taken for granted as common-sense knowledge or 'truth' within different cultures at different historical periods in time (Edley, 2001). Likewise, it has been repeatedly argued that our identities are shaped in and through cultural and discursive practices (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998) and that these constructed identities, in turn, constrain people's actions and behaviours (Burr, 1995). Therefore, psychological phenomenon cannot be viewed as isolated from the culture within which they are located (Blodgett et al., 2014).

Athletic career transitions, therefore, need to be understood within the cultural context. It has been shown that within a specific cultural context (Australian news media), certain conditions around retirement are privileged or problematized, ultimately constraining the choices that are available to athletes (Cosh, Crabb, & LeCouteur, 2013; Cosh, LeCouteur, Crabb, & Kettler, 2013). Additionally, the choice to return to sport following retirement can also be understood to be constrained through depictions of returning athletes as driven by emotionality and a compulsion, with alternate motivators and reasons for competing reproduced as inappropriate (Cosh, LeCouteur, et al., 2013). Accordingly, career transitions cannot be viewed as something that are chosen and experienced in isolation from their cultural context. Rather, the cultural and discursive contexts surrounding these events necessarily shape and regulate the options and behaviours available to athletes. To date, little of the extant retirement literature, especially literature examining transition difficulties, explores the dominant socio-cultural discourses through which athletes are spoken about and understood.

Examining the mass media is one means through which insight into culture can be gained (McGannon & Smith, 2015). The media functions to produce and reproduce culturally-shared understandings of the world, people and events (Lyons, 2000), thus providing insight into the cultural assumptions and values that have come to appear as 'common sense' knowledge (Wachs & Dworkin, 1997). Exploration of this forum, then, allows for insight into dominant cultural understandings of sporting retirements and

constructions of athlete identities. In addition to the media analyses exploring career transition (Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013; Cosh, LeCouteur, et al., 2013), a growing body of research in sport has turned to examination of the mass media. For instance, Gardiner (2003) examined how Indigenous Australian identity was constructed within discourses of national unity and reconciliation in mass media reporting of Indigenous athletes. The ways in which exercise is constructed and women are positioned within women's health media reporting has also been examined (McGannon & Spence, 2012), as has the ways in which the psychological implications of sporting concussions are overlooked in media accounts (McGannon, Cunningham, & Schinke, 2013). Motherhood within elite sport has also been examined via the media (Cosh & Crabb, 2012a; McGannon, Curtin, Schinke, & Schweinbenz, 2012), demonstrating how motherhood and elite sport participation were constructed as incompatible. This construction functioned to essentialise sporting culture, and make its potential role in facilitating the combination of motherhood and elite sport participation invisible (Cosh & Crabb, 2012a).

Study aims

The present paper aims to examine the career transitions and post-career wellbeing of two athletes - Ian Thorpe and Grant Hackett - within a socio-cultural context, as evidenced by the mass media. Through examining the post-career experience, a better understanding of post-career wellbeing and the contributing factors can be garnered (Dubois et al., 2014). Thorpe and Hackett were selected for analysis given their high profile careers and widely reported difficulties post-retirement. Both athletes were highly successful from a young age, and in the media it was reported that they struggled for several years into retirement. Thorpe is decorated as Australia's most successful Olympian, having won five Olympic gold medals, as well as 11 World Championship gold medals and breaking 13 individual world records. He controversially retired in 2006 (see Cosh, Crabb, et al., 2013), before a brief comeback attempt in 2011 in which he failed to qualify for the Australian Olympic team for 2012 and, subsequently, he again retired. In 2012 Thorpe released an autobiography in which he detailed his battles with depression, alcohol abuse and suicidality (Thorpe & Wainwright, 2012). Following this, many news articles appeared detailing Thorpe's depression, with the mass media reporting that he attended 'rehabilitation' for depression in January 2014 (see e.g. Murphy, 2012; Rothfield 2014a, 2014b). In his career, Hackett won three Olympic gold medals, 10 World Championship gold medals and held several world records. He announced his retirement following the 2008 Olympic Games. In the mass media, it was alleged that Grant Hackett had an addiction to alcohol and prescription medication (for which the media reported that he attended a rehabilitation centre in the US in 2014). Post-retirement, his marriage ended under public scrutiny amidst media reports of several incidents including reportedly 'trashing' his apartment and being barely clothed searching for his four-year old son late at night in a casino (see e.g., Byrne, 2011; Coster & Hurley, 2014; Wilson, 2014).

The current paper aims to examine the media reporting around these post-retirement incidents in order to gain insight into the cultural understandings around athletes and transition, especially transition difficulties. In doing so, the goal is to expand our knowledge of the context in which athletes report experiencing difficulty and distress around career transition. Specifically, this paper aims to examine the following:

- How post-career difficulties are depicted in the media
- The dominant cultural understandings around athletes who experience post-retirement difficulties

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