

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

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

26 **Abstract**

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

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

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

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

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

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

50

51 **Introduction**

52 Retirement from elite level and professional sport, often referred to as the transition
53 out of sport, is the process of ending a competitive career as an athlete and beginning a new
54 life (Park, Lavalley, & Tod, 2013). It is widely recognized that athletes need to adjust to
55 numerous psychological, social, and vocational changes when they stop competing (Erpič,
56 Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007). Furthermore,
57 evidence suggests that, while some athletes find adjusting to these changes relatively
58 straightforward, others find it a long and emotionally distressing experience (Stambulova,
59 Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). Extant research has highlighted numerous personal and
60 contextual factors that influence the process of adjustment including the athlete's age, gender,
61 nationality, level of education, financial status, relationship status, reason for retirement, self-
62 concept, level of pre-retirement planning, social support, use of coping strategies, and
63 satisfaction with career achievements (for reviews, see Knights, Sherry, & Ruddock-Hudson,
64 2016; Park et al., 2013).

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

76 receive and not all athletes get the support that they need (e.g., Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick,
77 1993). Furthermore, while social support has been studied primarily as a resource to aid
78 coping, the complexities involved in support exchanges and social relationships during the
79 transition out of elite sport have received less attention (Park et al., 2013).

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

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

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

108 Despite these findings, research on perceived support during transition is limited.
109 Researchers who have studied perceived support have operationalized it as a coping resource
110 (e.g., Clowes, Lindsay, Fawcett, & Zoe Knowles, 2015; Stambulova et al., 2007), but this
111 may fail to fully account for the complex nature of supportive relationships (Lakey & Drew,
112 1990). Research on transition has tended to focus on the structural and functional dimensions
113 of social support by highlighting the types of support that athletes have received, and from
114 whom (Park et al., 2013). For example, athletes reported that when they received information
115 from organizations, former teammates, and coaches they were better able to manage their
116 transition (Park et al., 2012; Stephan, 2003). Furthermore, athletes who received tangible
117 support to develop their career as part of a formal support program from national sporting
118 organizations experienced fewer difficulties following retirement than those athletes who did
119 not receive support (Leung, Carre, & Fu, 2005). The importance of emotional and esteem
120 support has been discussed most widely, with findings suggesting that these types of support
121 can help with account making, reducing emotional distress, and fostering positive self-regard
122 (Lavalley, Gordon, & Grove, 1997; Lavalley, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000;
123 Perna et al., 1996).

124 In general, the evidence suggests that athletes who feel supported during transition
125 experience fewer difficulties; however, there is variability in the quantity and quality of

126 support that they receive. Indeed, athletes have reported a lack of organizational support,
127 leading them to feel used and abandoned as they struggled with their transition (Brown &
128 Potrac, 2009). Furthermore, athletes' social networks tend to be related to their involvement
129 in sport. However, without the shared connection of sport, retired athletes may quickly lose
130 contact with network members (e.g., coach, teammates), and thus receive little support from
131 them (Lally, 2007; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). As a consequence, athletes may become lonely
132 and socially isolated, hindering their ability to adapt to their new life (Park et al., 2013).

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

146 These findings appear to support a social cognitive perspective on social support (Lakey
147 & Drew, 1990). This approach suggests that, once beliefs about the supportiveness of others
148 are formed, they influence current thinking and experiences of support (Lakey,
149 McCabe, Fisicaro, & Drew, 1996). Social support can, therefore, be understood in the context
150 of the recipient's evaluations of supporters, and potential supporters, rather than by the

151 support itself (Lakey & Cohen, 2000). The social cognitive view of social support shares
152 some assumptions with symbolic interactionism, which explicitly links knowledge of the self
153 to social roles and interactions with others (Stryker, 1987). Thus, social support is deemed to
154 create and sustain identity and to influence subjective feelings of self-esteem and self-worth
155 (Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Thoits, 2011).

156 **The present research**

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

170 **Method**

171 **Methodology and philosophical underpinning**

172 The study was designed and conducted according to the principles of Interpretative
173 Phenomenological Analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996). IPA is a detailed examination of subjective
174 experience and how people make sense of that experience. It is often described as falling on
175 the mid-point of the realist-relativist ontological continuum and shares philosophical

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

194 IPA was considered appropriate for investigating athlete's experiences of social
195 support because it subscribes to a phenomenological approach that explicitly attends to the
196 intersubjective nature of the world and the temporality of a phenomenon as experiences
197 unfold (Smith et al., 2009). IPA was well-suited therefore to the fundamentally interpersonal
198 nature of social support during the *process* of transition. Furthermore, given that retirement
199 from sport is an idiosyncratic process that likely varies considerably from person to person
200 (Park et al., 2013), it was hoped that IPA's focus on idiography would allow us to highlight

201 the divergent, as well as the convergent, aspects of the participants' experience. An
202 idiographic approach is more explicit in IPA than in other approaches to qualitative research
203 (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). For example, thematic analysis is predominantly focused on
204 identifying shared patterns of meaning across participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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

226 relationships influence the meaning that they attached to their retirement and attempt to
227 adjust to life after sport.

228 **Participants**

229 Eight former elite athletes from the UK (four male and four female) aged between 29
230 and 46 years ($M = 36.75$, $SD = 6.18$) volunteered to take part in the research. All of the
231 participants had taken part in multiple major championships, and seven had competed at the
232 Olympic Games. Seven had competed in (different) summer Olympic sports and one in a
233 winter Olympic sport. Seven had competed in individual sports and one in a team sport. They
234 had been involved at an international level of sport for between 5 and 16 years ($M = 9.75$, SD
235 $= 4.02$) and seven of the participants were full-time athletes during this time (i.e., did not
236 have another career/were not in education). At the time of the interviews the participants had
237 been retired for between 2 and 12 years ($M = 6.75$, $SD = 3.99$).

238 **Procedure**

239 After obtaining institutional ethical approval, a purposive sample was recruited
240 through social media and the authors' existing contacts. IPA is best suited to data collection
241 methods that afford participants the opportunity to offer in-depth, first person accounts of
242 their experience (Smith et al., 2009). As such, face-to-face interviews were conducted by the
243 first author. The interviews were semi-structured, but flexible such that participants were able
244 to lead the conversation in ways that were meaningful to them including going beyond topics
245 addressed by the interview guide. Questions and probes were developed according to
246 guidelines on conducting interviews from a phenomenological perspective (e.g., Bevan,
247 2014; Smith et al., 2009) and explored the context, structure, and meaning of participants'
248 experiences; for example, "Can you tell me about your sporting career?" and "Can you tell
249 me about the circumstances regarding your retirement?" (the interview guide can be found in
250 Appendix 1). Participants were interviewed for between 65 and 180 minutes ($M = 83.12$, SD

251 = 17.30). All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim and participants were given
252 pseudonyms to protect confidentiality.

253 **Data analysis**

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

271 These notes were then used to develop emergent themes that served to condense the
272 data and capture the essential features and meaning of the account. Emergent themes were
273 then clustered together according to a shared meaning or a central concept in order to develop
274 superordinate themes. The whole process, from initial notes to developing superordinate
275 themes, was conducted for each participant separately. Finally, a cross-case analysis was

276 conducted, in which the themes and superordinate themes for each participant were assessed
277 for patterns, similarities, and differences. Identifying higher order concepts made it possible
278 to link the participants' experiences, yet still reflect divergence and maintain the idiographic
279 focus that is central to IPA.

280 **Research quality and methodological rigor**

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

289 To aid in this process, we considered the four general guidelines offered by Yardley
290 (2008) as they offer a more pluralistic and flexible stance for assessing the quality of research
291 (Smith et al., 2009). 'Sensitivity to context' involved efforts to understand the social-cultural
292 milieu of elite sport and how this could impact participants' experiences of retirement. For
293 example, the present research was part of a wider project that made it possible to spend time
294 engaged in informal conversation with athletes, retired athletes, coaches, and practitioners
295 working within sport. At the same time, there was a need to be aware of how existing and
296 developing knowledge about transition may lead to preconceptions that could influence the
297 research process. Thus, a research diary was kept to facilitate a self-critical and reflexive
298 approach to the research and helped to highlight any prior assumptions and ideas about the
299 research topic and any emotional reactions to the data during collection and analysis.

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

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

319 **Results**

320 The participants' accounts described two broad stages of transition. The first stage
321 was characterized by feelings of loss, denial, and uncertainty about the future. Two
322 superordinate themes were identified in this stage: (a) 'feeling cared for and understood',
323 which included the subordinate themes of 'support from family', 'support from mentors and
324 peers', and 'support from within sport'; and (b) the 'ability to seek and ask for support',

325 which included the subordinate themes of ‘difficulty asking for help’, and ‘accessing new and
326 existing social networks’. The second stage of transition was characterized by a shift in the
327 participants’ self-concept and was described in a superordinate theme labelled: (c) ‘the role of
328 support in the transition of the self’, which included the subordinate themes ‘redefining
329 athletic identity’, and ‘becoming a supporter’. The superordinate themes were developed,
330 therefore, to reflect the temporal aspect of transition. The resulting list of superordinate
331 themes, themes, and sub-themes is presented in Appendix 2.

332 **Feeling cared for and understood**

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

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

348 It was giving me time...they said to me ‘you can live with us for as long as you need,
349 no pressure’...there was no financial pressure, they knew I wasn’t making money and,

350 you know, they just were there. I think 'cos my Dad had been through the whole
351 journey and he knew the ins and outs, and I didn't have to explain anything to him
352 and I think that's really important, it's just being there to listen.

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

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

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

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

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

371 **Gemma:** I think he [Ian – Gemma's partner] openly says it's probably the worst ten to
372 twelve months of his life pretty much was when I retired, 'cos he didn't know what to
373 do, he didn't know...and to me if you're very independent, I'm very independent, I've
374 always been independent...I was away for a third of the year and suddenly I'm in the

375 house and I'm like arghhh. It was horrible, I felt claustrophobic, and he hated it as
376 well.

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

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

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

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

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

398 This quote emphasizes the temporal nature of transition and invokes a sense of Sue
399 physically holding and leading Ben in the right direction. Because Sue had experienced

400 transition herself she was deemed to know ‘the way’, and was able to offer Ben a vision of a
401 future outside of sport. In contrast, Luke, who retired through injury just before an Olympic
402 Games, reported feeling lost without a role model. He wished that he had more support to get
403 “through it” from people who had experienced something similar:

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

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

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

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

419 They don’t care, they don’t care, it’s when you’re done, you’re finished, you’re out,
420 even phoning, not one phone call from the governing body when I was injured after
421 [Olympic Games], not one phone call, and that says a lot to me... having pushed my
422 body so hard for so long for my country I think we should receive ongoing medical
423 support, that’s the only thing I really asked for but no, absolutely nothing whatsoever.

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

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

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

443 The sudden change in Janet's relationship emphasizes the way that the presence, or
444 indeed absence, of relationships, fixes the meaning of subjective experience. That is, Janet's
445 experience of the world was different without the physical and psychological closeness she
446 shared with her coach. The shared meaning of their relationship (namely, Janet's career) was
447 gone and it seemed like Janet experienced the world as a lonelier place as a result.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

515 The third superordinate theme identified in the participants' accounts captures the
516 second broad stage of transition, which was concerned with the participants' longer term
517 adjustment and their efforts to shape a new life beyond sport. After many years spent in the
518 elite sport environment, it was perhaps unsurprising that most of the participants had a strong
519 athletic identity. This self-concept was supported by the social practices and culture within
520 sport and by the participants' own social networks. However, once the participants had left
521 the sporting environment and their social networks had changed they were left with little to
522 support their sense of self. Nonetheless, all of the participants began to expand their social

523 networks as transition progressed and this renewed sense of connectedness helped to reshape
524 their identities.

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

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

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

541 I am now involved in coaching... I'm sort of leading at the moment...my actual
542 development has gone from playing to then being comfortable and competent enough
543 as a person to coach this group who are highly opinionated...but I've also become
544 good friends with them too...so it's really challenging, but good, great company, great
545 people that are helping me work out where I want to go.

546 Coaching helped Rob to feel connected, and the new social ties increased his feeling
547 that support was available. More important, however, is what membership of this group did

548 for his sense of self – Rob began to see himself as a leader of what he perceived to be a high
549 status group (i.e., the coach of a group of athletes) and, by taking on this role, he was able to
550 use some of the skills that he had developed in sport in a new environment. This may have
551 gone some way toward helping to foster his feelings of competence and self-esteem, and
552 helped him to establish positive self-regard.

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

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

564 Many of the athletes, in some way, became supporters or mentors to other athletes.

565 This was highlighted by Alan when he talked about his transition from being an athlete to a
566 role in sport administration.

567 I got involved with it because I thought it was a good thing to do for other people and
568 I wanted to represent other athletes. I had no idea what was involved but it's turned
569 out to be a bit of a life changer to be honest, the whole kind of identity thing, there's
570 something there from a kind of a human perspective in terms of rather than "I'm an
571 athlete" now it's "I'm a Sports Administrator".

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

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

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

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

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

590 **Discussion**

591 The present research investigated elite athletes' experiences of social support during
592 retirement using an interpretive phenomenological approach. The findings suggested that
593 participants experienced a more positive transition if they felt cared for by people that they
594 believed understood them and what they were going through. The findings also suggested
595 that participants often struggled to ask for support, particularly concerning issues around their
596 mental health. However, those who were willing and able to ask for help, for example, by

597 networking and seeking support to develop their career after sport found it easier to adjust to
598 life in retirement. As transition progressed, the participants were able to establish new
599 relationships and social roles that fostered a sense of being supported, as well as providing
600 opportunities to positively reappraise their sense of self through the experience of supporting
601 others.

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

616 The present research found that a common feature of effective social support was the
617 strength and closeness of relationships. Closeness in a relationship signals to the members of
618 that relationship that they are liked, loved, and valued and is often the foundation of feeling
619 supported (Crocker & Canevello, 2008). The present research found that a sense of closeness
620 and trust between the recipient and the person providing support appeared to be crucial for
621 support to be seen as available and helpful. That is, when the participants felt that the person

622 supporting them understood them and what they were going through, then they felt
623 supported. Thus, supportive relationships and social support did not simply involve an
624 exchange of resources. Rather, the shared, intersubjective experience of support enriched the
625 participants' understanding of their retirement and helped to make their transition a more
626 positive experience. Sadly, however, our findings also highlight that some athletes may have
627 difficulties maintaining close relationships during transition. For example, Gemma often
628 struggled to adjust to life in retirement because she found it difficult to connect with potential
629 supporters, including close family, leading to a more isolating experience. This echoes the
630 findings of previous studies, which have found a link between a lack of perceived support and
631 mental health difficulties, such as depression (Dennis & Ross, 2006; Tower & Kasl, 1996).

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

642 However, many of the participants in the present research found it difficult to ask for
643 support, especially in respect to mental health issues. This finding supports previous research
644 which suggests that athletes often find it difficult to ask for help for these issues due to the
645 perceived stigma associated with doing so (Wood, Harrison, & Kucharska, 2016). A potential
646 explanation for the apparent reluctance to seek help is that athletes are often discouraged

647 from showing psychological, emotional, and physical weakness when competing (Sinden,
648 2010). Thus, it is possible that unrealistic and unachievable cultural norms related to the
649 physical and mental toughness of athletes maybe internalized and remain a salient part of a
650 former athlete's identity long after retirement (Andersen, 2011; Barker, Barker-Ruchti,
651 Rynne, & Lee, 2014; Tibbert, Andersen, & Morris, 2015). For these former athletes, asking
652 for help may incur a social cost (for a review, see Lee, 1997). That is, it is possible that a
653 perceived loss of competence and autonomy may weigh heavily on elite athletes who see
654 themselves as highly competent, high status individuals (Stephan, 2003; Webb, Nasco, Riley,
655 & Headrick, 1998). Indeed, the feelings of shame and embarrassment that seemed to underpin
656 some of the participants' reluctance to seek support may be related to the perceived social
657 costs associated with losing their 'elite' identity.

658 The findings of the present research suggest that identity continued to play a crucial
659 role as transitions progressed, but in a more positive way. Specifically, expanding social
660 networks and forming new social relationships helped the participants to reappraise their
661 sense of self by providing the basis for being supported, feeling supported, and providing
662 support to others. All of the participants found that providing support to others was just as
663 effective at facilitating adjustment to retirement, if not more so, than receiving support. This
664 finding is supported by a number of empirical studies that suggest the act of 'giving' can
665 foster a sense of making a positive contribution to someone's life that can enhance one's own
666 positive self-regard (e.g., Steffens, Cruwys, Haslam, Jetten, & Haslam, 2016). Indeed, early
667 models of social support included giving support to others as a means of promoting wellbeing
668 and ameliorating the impact of stressful life events (Cutrona & Russell, 1990; Weiss, 1974).
669 To our knowledge, however, the present findings are the first empirical evidence that
670 highlights how providing support can have a positive effect for athletes transitioning out of
671 sport. In doing so, the findings extend the traditional view of support during transition beyond

672 that of a coping resource used in times of stress. Instead, the findings suggest that social
673 support can be conceptualized as a social process that can help athletes' to flourish (Knights
674 et al., 2016) and act as a mechanism for growth (for a review, see Howells, Sarkar, &
675 Fletcher, 2017).

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

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

692 Future studies could use longitudinal designs to mitigate these limitations by seeking
693 to explore patterns of support as the process of retirement unfolds. More regular contact with
694 participants as they are immersed in their transition may also provide more vivid descriptions
695 of experiences of support and may build trust that could facilitate deeper, more nuanced
696 accounts. Future research could also explore social support from the perspective of the

697 providers of support. That is, the present research describes how family members, coaches,
698 and peers played a crucial role in transition, but this knowledge could be expanded by
699 exploring the experiences of these people directly; understanding what it is like for them as
700 providers of support could offer a different perspective on the nature of what is a
701 fundamentally interpersonal phenomenon.

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

711 The potential for these generalizations suggests the need to consider the practical
712 applications of the findings. For instance, previous researchers have suggested that
713 practitioners working with athletes in transition should encourage them to confide in close
714 others in order to help them confront and understand their transition (Grove, Lavalley,
715 Gordon, & Harvey, 1998). The findings of the present research support this idea, but also
716 suggest that athletes may be unwilling or unable to engage with potential supporters in the
717 first instance. With this in mind, self-help interventions could be a less threatening first step
718 towards encouraging retiring athletes to engage with support and seek help, especially if
719 delivered online (Cunningham, Gulliver, Farrer, Bennett, Carron-Arthur, 2014). Another
720 possible way to facilitate a positive transition is to consider intervention programs that are led
721 by former athletes. Evidence from outside sport suggests that interventions that are led by

722 peers can reduce anxiety, depression, and protect against stress during major life events (for a
723 review see, Miyamoto & Sono, 2012). Peer-led interventions in general can often benefit both
724 the recipient of support and the provider (Schwartz, 1999; Schwartz & Sendor, 1999) and this
725 reciprocal relationship opens up the possibility of developing mutually beneficial support
726 programs that can help a relatively large number of athletes during transition, and create a
727 self-sustaining community of supporters.

728 **Conclusion**

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

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