

Running head: RESEARCH PROJECT LETTER OF INTENT

CAAP Research Project Letter of Intent

Elite Athletes' Experiences and Perceptions of Parental Support: A Postmodern Perspective on Transition

from Sport

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### Overview and Rationale for the Study

During their course of involvement in sport, elite level athletes will experience a number of transitions which require them to make considerable personal adjustments, including deselection, injury, and sport career termination (Brewer & Van Raalte, 2002; Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000). The degree of difficulty that high performance athletes experience when transitioning out of sport continues to be debated (Coakley, 1983; Lavallee, 2000; Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993) however, “researchers have established that high-performance athletes are confronted with a wide range of psychological, interpersonal, and financial adjustments when they end their careers” (Lavallee & Anderson, 2000, p. 249).

Sport theorists have made significant contributions to our conceptualization and understanding of athletic transition from sport (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000; Coakley, 1983, 2001; Lavallee & Anderson, 2000; Lavallee, 2000) culminating in the development of a multidimensional, conceptual model of adaptation to retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 1998). To date, research efforts, theory development, and interventions have focused on the following areas: causes and consequences of retirement, developmental factors related to the adaptation process (specifically identity related issues), and coping strategies that mediate adjustment to various stages of the transition process (Fisher, 2001; Lavallee, 2000).

Existing conceptual frameworks are problematic because they locate the problem and interventions within the athlete, and do not acknowledge that high performance sport programs have been organized for the purpose of producing outcomes – as opposed to providing developmental opportunities for participants. Moreover, current ideology does not acknowledge the power hierarchies that exist within these programs, which serve to constrain identity development, and prevent athletes from having meaningful control over their lives (Coakley, 1992, 2001; Fisher, 2001). Finally, the significance of social support as a key to athletes’ adjustment to retirement has been outlined in the literature (Schlossberg, 1981; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman, De Knop, Ewing, & Cumming, 2000); however limited empirical research in this area does not examine the critical role that parents play in an athlete’s sport experience (Lavallee, 2000; Wylleman et al., 2000).

Beginning in childhood, athletes being groomed for elite level competition are expected to conform to rigid training routines (Donnelly, 1993). The exclusive attention that must be devoted to a particular sport in terms of time and physical work severely restricts opportunities to explore alternative roles in adolescence, contributes to the development of a high athletic identity, and can lead to arrested development (Andersen, 2000; Marcia, 1980; Petitpas, 2002). Evidence suggests that the unique challenges that athletes face upon retirement from sport are related to the interaction between early specialization, strong athletic identity, and identity foreclosure (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Petitpas, 2000; Petitpas, 2002; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Svoboda & Vanek, 1983); however, the link between these factors, and the type and amount support provided by parents during the stages of athletic development can only be surmised. Parents typically lack knowledge about their child's sport, the training techniques that are used, and the sport culture in which their children are involved. It is important to find out if a link exists between the problems associated with identity development and transition, and the manner and degree to which parents encourage their children to conform to existing power hierarchies in sport.

#### Research Situation

The purpose of the proposed research project is to examine elite level athletes' experiences and perceptions of parental support with regards to their sport involvement, and difficulties encountered during their transition to retirement. It is hoped that it may be possible to discover the nature of this support; that is, the degree to which it does or does not foster the development of high athletic identity, conformity to power hierarchies within sport, and loss of personal autonomy.

#### Methodology

Grounded theory methodology has been selected for this study because this type of qualitative research is particularly well suited to capture complex processes from the perspective of the people who are being studied (Bryman, 2004; Mertens, 1998). Grounded theory was developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and differs from other qualitative methods in its emphasis on building a theory, or model to explain or predict a particular phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The defining characteristic of grounded theory is that it does not test a hypothesis (Mertens, 1998). Instead, generalizations (theory) emerge out of

data collection and analysis efforts that are “grounded” in real world observations.

*Data Collection, Interpretation, and Analysis*

Data collection will commence once approval has been received from Campus Alberta and the Research Ethics Board. It is proposed that in-depth, semi-structured interviews be conducted with former athletes from a variety of sports who have competed at the national level, and have devoted between 10-20 hours per week to training on a year round basis. A general call for participants will be conducted by posting a letter of invitation that describes the type and purpose of the study at the following venues: The Canadian Sport Centre Calgary, Glencoe Club, and Calgary Winter Club. These locations have been selected because they are the training sites for elite level athletes participating in a variety of summer and winter sports. Many former athletes remain connected with their sport in some capacity following retirement. Hence, a logical assumption can be made that those individuals who meet the criteria for this study will either read the advertisement, or hear about it through word of mouth.

Prospective respondents will be asked to contact the principle investigator by telephone, at which time the parameters of the study will be described. For those who agree to participate in the study, arrangements will be made to meet privately at one of the designated training venues or a location of their choice. Prior to the start of each interview, the terms of anonymity and confidentiality will be reviewed. Participation is voluntary, and a consent form requesting permission to audiotape/transcribe the interview will be signed. There is no foreseeable risk to participants. Benefits include the potential to develop further insight into past experiences as an athlete, and following retirement.

It is estimated that each interview will last between 1 ½ - 3 hours. Each participant will be interviewed once; however, a provision for additional contact will be made for the purpose of seeking clarification, exploring emerging themes, and member checking.

The purpose of this study is to move beyond current ideology of athletic transition to retirement, and understand what is happening from a postmodern perspective. That is, to incorporate an analysis of power as it relates to the manner and degree to which parents encourage their children to conform to existing power hierarchies in sport, and the problems associated with identity development and transition.

The following categories will be broadly addressed in each interview:

- Nature of the transition experience
- Personal, relational, and contextual factors related to adaptation
- Athletes' experiences and perceptions of parental support
- Degree of early specialization and athletic identity
- Opportunities to explore alternative activities during the various stages of athletic involvement

Consistent with grounded research methodology, a recursive model of interviewing (Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell, & Alexander, 1995) and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) will be used to identify categories/themes and properties, and their relationship to core categories. This type of research is also referred to the method of constant comparative analysis. Using this procedure, categories elicited from the data are constantly compared with data collected earlier in the data collection so that commonalities and variations can be determined. As the concurrent processes of collection, coding and analysis proceed, the inquiry becomes increasingly focused on theoretical concerns. Thus, data and the emerging theory are in relationship to each other in a recursive and ongoing process of inquiry and analysis. In the continuing search for evidence, which disconfirms emerging theory, it becomes possible to reach a point in which further interviews add nothing to what is already known about a category, its properties, and its relationship to the core category. It is estimated that only a small sample will be required until saturation occurs ( $n = 3$  to  $5$ ).

#### *Data Storage, Retention, and Disposition*

Interview transcriptions and a copy of the final merged document will be saved in a password-protected file on the principle investigator's personal computer. Access to this computer is limited to the principle investigator. Another copy of the final document will be saved on 2 coded computer discs – to be used for future research work. There will be no other copies or discs made. All paper trail printouts, participant consent forms, reflective journal notes, audiotapes, and computer discs will be stored in a

locked, metal filing cabinet in the researcher's home office for the mandatory five-year period of data preservation; after which time, audiotapes and both computer discs will be destroyed, and all printed materials shredded. Data on the investigator's computer hard drive will be erased once this project has been completed and graded. The final document will be available to participants and other interested parties electronically via the Digital Thesis and Projection Room at Athabasca University.

#### Limitations

Several basic assumptions are inherent to grounded theory methodology: the researcher becomes the collection instrument as in which knowledge is socially constructed by people active in the research process. Hence, researchers must attempt to understand the "complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt, 1994, p. 118). The potential for bias exists due to the researcher's past experiences as a national level competitor, high-performance coach, and parent of an elite level figure skater. It is strongly believed that a unique culture exists within amateur, high-performance sport; and that the power hierarchy that is inherent to this culture is detrimental to young athletes. Issues of a personal nature have been thoroughly explored through self-reflection, graduate course assignments, and discussions with supervisors. Several strategies will be utilized to help the researcher to keep an open mind and prevent interpretations that confirm personal beliefs, including peer debriefing, journal writing, negative case analysis, and ongoing dialogue with her project supervisor. Although checking information with other sources enhances authenticity, triangulation with coaches and parents is beyond the scope of this project.

#### Implications

To date, there does not appear to be any studies that examine the power dynamics within the culture of high-performance sport. Coakley (1992) challenges sport scientists to address the social conditions in sport, lest they become guilty of psychodoping. This involves the "use of techniques to help athletes adjust to conditions of powerlessness, and to discourage them from asking critical questions about why they participate in sport and how sport participation is tied to the rest of their lives" (p. 283). A post-modern approach will be used to guide this undertaking. It is hoped that this study will encourage others

to incorporate the analysis of power into future research projects that examine this issue. Ontological authenticity is a benefit of participation for both the researcher and participants.

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