



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



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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

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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 (Lavalley, 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; Lavalley & 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; Lavalley & 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

- How athletes are constructed in these accounts and what identities are ascribed to them
- The implications of such dominant cultural understandings for individual athletes

Method

This paper examines Australian newsprint media articles from three of the highest circulating newspapers in Australia – *The Herald Sun*, *The Courier Mail*, and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. These papers represent a mix of newspaper ownership as well as tabloid and broadsheet formats. All articles appearing in these papers that reported on either Ian Thorpe or Grant Hackett were collected from the date of retirement (Thorpe retired in June 2006 and Hackett in August 2008) for several years post-transition (until mid-2014). During this period, 501 articles appeared reporting on Thorpe and 245 reporting on Hackett. Based on full text review (by SMC and PJT) 49 and 72 articles, respectively, detailed difficulties such as mental illness, depression, addiction, and the ‘trashing’ of Hackett’s apartment and loss of his child; and these 121 articles were selected as the focus of the present analysis.

Theoretical approach

This paper adopts a constructivist approach, which is focused on the socially-constitutive and action-oriented nature of language (e.g., Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter, 1996). This discursive approach contrasts with traditional realist research paradigms, contending instead that psychological phenomenon, along with versions of objects and events are constructed in and through language and that it is these constructed versions that constitute our experiences of the world (Hepburn & Potter, 2003). Within a given culture at a given time in history, some constructed versions come to be dominant and taken for granted as common-sense knowledge (Edley, 2001). Likewise, from a discursive perspective who we are and our identities are understood to be produced in and through discursive practices (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998): through language (talk and text) identities are ascribed. With such ascribed identities come understandings of the behaviours, actions and choices that are appropriate (or not) for a member of a certain identity category, rendering alternate actions and behaviours inappropriate (Sacks, 1992). Identity, then can be understood in terms of a broader cultural framework, as what is deemed to be an appropriate self can be seen as governed by cultural and historical factors (Abell & Stokoe, 2001). A discursive approach to sport psychology has been outlined (see Locke, 2004; McGannon & Mauws, 2000) and a growing body of sport and exercise psychology research based in discursive approaches has challenged traditional assumptions and understandings of a range of widely researched phenomena (e.g., Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, & Kettler, 2012; Finlay & Faulkner, 2003; Locke, 2008; McGannon & Schinke, 2013).

Data analysis

Data were systematically examined to identify recurring patterns and representations of how Thorpe and Hackett, as well as retirement, mental health issues, addiction and other such difficulties were depicted. Such analysis was informed by a broad approach to discursive analysis, examining the broad patterns of collective sense-making and the dominant versions of athletes and retirement that talk reflects (see Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1999; Wetherell, 1998). That is, the aim was to identifying the repeated patterns of how identity and causality for transition

difficulties were depicted and the implications that these versions serve to perpetuate for retiring athletes; rather than a more specific goal of examining how these versions and constructions were rhetorically organised and designed to be robust (as seen in more fine-grained discursive analysis). Thus the full text of the 121 articles under analysis were read (by SMC) and coded into themes relating to how Thorpe and Hackett and their current difficulties were constructed. Extracts relevant to each theme were coded accordingly, accompanied by notes regarding the type of article and surrounding contextual detail. Such coding was then verified by the co-authors. After data were coded into themes, each theme was then further examined to identify a) how causality for difficulties was attributed, b) what actions these depictions served to function, and c) the identities ascribed to Thorpe and Hackett, noting the context in which each example appeared. The analysis was also informed by MCA (see Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007) in order to identify the identity categories invoked in representations of the athletes and what the specific identity constructions functioned to achieve within the given articles. Following final analysis, illustrative examples were selected and agreed upon by two authors, and these examples are presented in the results section below.

Validity

Validity in the present research is ensured through the presentation of detailed extracts, allowing for readers to analyse the data themselves (Locke, 2004), through generating new research questions and raising awareness (Sparkes & Douglas, 2007) and by the analysis of deviant cases. For a full discussion on the issue of validity within relativist research see Sparkes and Smith (2009).

Results

The following analysis is presented in two parts: firstly, an examination of the identities ascribed to Thorpe and Hackett and the functions of these identities; and secondly, an exploration of the causal factors associated with these individuals’ post-retirement difficulties.

Identities constructed in the accounts

Within the media accounts, the dominant identity category ascribed to both Thorpe and Hackett was that of ‘champion’ athlete. Additionally, the category of ‘fallen champion’ – a subset of the ‘champion’ category – was invoked in a smaller subset of the articles. However, additional identity categories (i.e. categories not invoking athlete status) were extremely rare throughout the dataset.

Swimmers and champions

Within all but a small minority (N = 12) of articles, both Thorpe and Hackett were repeatedly described (throughout the dataset and within each individual article) as members of the category ‘champion athlete’ through the use of descriptors such as ‘champion’, a ‘great’ and a ‘swimming champion’ and reference to their sporting success (e.g. ‘five-time Olympic gold medallist’). In doing so, their prior success as athletes was made relevant in the context of events occurring well into their retirements. Thus, within the data, even years after retiring, Thorpe and Hackett were repeatedly produced in terms of their sporting identity. Examples of such descriptors are provided below.

Swimming great Ian Thorpe should leave hospital within days after successfully fighting a number of serious infections, before

heading back to rehab for depression. The 31-year-old five-time Olympic gold medallist fell ill after surgery on his shoulder at the start of the year.

Courier Mail, 30 April 2014

Australian swimming great Ian Thorpe has been admitted to a rehabilitation clinic as he battles with depression.

Sydney Morning Herald, 4 February 2014

Olympic great Grant Hackett has admitted being “overwhelmingly embarrassed” after police were called to his luxury family apartment.

Herald Sun, 1 November 2011

The public fallout from Grant Hackett's drunken rampage has begun with the Olympic champion relieved of his role as ambassador for a major children's charity. The Alannah and Madeline Foundation last week informed Hackett's management they were cutting ties with the swim star - before the emergence of photos yesterday of the extent of his alcohol-fuelled meltdown last October.

Courier Mail, 28 May 2012

Descriptions are never neutral and in producing talk and text, any number of identity categories can be ascribed to others (e.g. man, commentator, father, addict) and in ascribing certain identities over others, social actions are performed (Sacks, 1992). As is highlighted in the above extracts, in the present data the identity of champion athlete was repeatedly ascribed to Thorpe and Hackett: despite both having retired and despite their ages (with Thorpe's age referenced in an above example, which is an age at which it is not uncommon for swimmers to have retired). The repeated depiction of Thorpe and Hackett as athletes, to the exclusion of other identity categories, produced this as their dominant identity.

While it is acknowledged that Thorpe and Hackett were publicly known because of their status as swimmers – and thus it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the identity category of champion swimmer was invoked – the claim we are making is that the invocation of the swimmer identity went beyond that required to provide context for the reader, and that the swimmer identity was invoked to the (almost complete) exclusion of any other descriptors, reference terms, or identities. Indeed, post-retirement, Thorpe and Hackett both remained household names. Both had ongoing endorsement deals with various companies. Thorpe moved into fashion and also started his own charity, while Hackett worked as a television anchor and presenter, as well as an ambassador for charities, and he had also moved into a publicised career in banking (also appearing in commercials for the bank). Such roles were ongoing for both at the times of the articles being published. Therefore, arguably the invocation of ‘swimmer’ was unnecessary, given that the readers would likely well know who Hackett and Thorpe were. Regardless, what is of interest is that the identity of swimmer was repeatedly and recurrently invoked throughout each article and across the entire dataset, while their new endeavours and other alternate identities and descriptors were almost exclusively overlooked. Such ways of describing people does social work, depicting a certain identity as dominant above all possible others. Even when detailing Hackett's role as an ambassador for a charity (as shown above) he was still ascribed the identity of a swim star. In only three rare instances throughout the

entire dataset were alternate identities invoked for Hackett and never for Thorpe: twice Hackett was described using professional identities as a commentator (as is shown below) and once as a ‘father’.

Swimming star Grant Hackett is believed to be preparing to go into the same US rehab clinic where footy ace Ben Cousins sought treatment. The Herald Sun understands the former Channel 9 sports anchor is having preliminary assessments before being admitted to the Summit Centre.

Herald Sun, 28 February 2014

For the first time since completing a five-week stint in a US rehab clinic, and after spending the past two months on the Gold Coast fighting to overcome a sleeping pill addiction, the swimming star turned sports commentator will bravely step back in front of the camera to co-host Channel Nine's Wide World of Sports next Sunday.

Courier Mail, 8 June 2014

These articles draw on alternate identities for Hackett, depicting him as a commentator and an (former) anchor. However, as is also evident, these articles also labelled Hackett as a swimming star; thereby reinforcing his identity as an athlete. Additionally, throughout the data collection period several articles reported that Hackett had lost his son late at night in a casino and also that he had acted violently in front of his wife and children. Yet, interestingly, there was an absence of explicit identity ascriptions of Hackett as a husband and father in such reporting; again the swimmer identity was predominant. In fact, he was described just once in the dataset as a ‘father’, in stark contrast to his ex-wife (a well-known singer) who was frequently depicted as a ‘wife’, ‘mum’ and ‘mother’. Again, these articles provide a further example of the lack of alternate identities, such as father or husband, ascribed. Examples of the reporting around Hackett in which he is described as a swimmer rather than father can be seen below.

The swimming star took Jagger and his twin sister Charlize to Crown [casino and hotel], where he often stays when in Melbourne. Hackett's camp claimed that sometime in the early hours of Saturday morning the swimmer woke to find Jagger had disappeared.

Herald Sun, 25 February 2014

The situation ... is believed to have been a challenge for Hackett, with tensions simmering between the swimmer and his in-laws. Alley, a devoted and committed mother to their children, puts every ounce of her energy towards their development.

Herald Sun, 2 June 2014

As is evident above, in articles reporting on Hackett's children and family, he is described as a swimmer, rather than father or husband. The second example further illustrates a recurrently seen contrast: his ex-wife described as a (devoted and committed) ‘mother’ and the family category of ‘in-laws’ is also invoked, yet Hackett is still described as a ‘swimmer’. The invocation of Alley as a committed mother functions partly to construct her as a good partner and, therefore, victim. However, Alley could have been portrayed as a victim whilst describing Hackett as a father/partner/husband. The contrast between descriptor terms ‘mother’ versus ‘swimmer’ does additional work. This contrast further highlights

how the identity of 'athlete' was reproduced as Hackett's dominant identity. That is, there are many ways of categorising people, and certain categories are understood as belonging together in collections (e.g., mother, father, son, daughter belong together in the collection of 'family', whereas lawyer, architect, and teacher belong together in the collection of 'occupations') (Sacks, 1992). When one person is referred to using a category from one collection, then categories from that same collection are typically used to categorise others; and to do otherwise is a notable departure that performs social actions (e.g. blaming, justifying excusing) (Schegloff, 2007). Thus, if Alley (Hackett's ex-wife) is referred to as a mother of their children and their daughter, Charlize, as a sister, we would expect Hackett to be referred to by a category from that same collection (i.e. family) and, therefore, be referred to as a father, at least in addition to being described as a swimmer. Indeed, to describe Hackett as a 'bad' 'father' would have still depicted Alley as a victim. However, Hackett continued to be described by the categories of 'champion' and 'swimmer'; again excluding other possible identity categories.

Therefore, recurrently throughout the dataset, Thorpe and Hackett were ascribed the identity category of champion athlete, with alternate identities never ascribed to Thorpe and only very rarely to Hackett. Through repeatedly depicting them as athletes above other possible categorisations of identity (including possible alternatives available for Thorpe and/or Hackett such as charity ambassador, philanthropist, commentator, fashion designer, student, banker, spokesperson, father, brother, son and so on) both Thorpe and Hackett's identities as champion athletes become reproduced as their dominant identity. This dominance of the athlete identity was exemplified by the absence of father/family categories when describing Hackett in relation to his wife and children. In gaining such dominance, alternate identities are not made available for Thorpe and Hackett to occupy (Edley, 2001; Gill, 2007). Thus, opportunities for retiring athletes to hold alternate identities post-career is limited; potentially leaving them without alternate identities and even identity crises (Lally, 2007; Lotysz & Short, 2004).

Moreover, with these identity ascriptions comes common-sense knowledge regarding typical characteristics, activities and actions of people belonging to that category (Sacks, 1992). Thus, when ascribed the identity of champion athlete, certain actions and behaviours are expected (or not) for a member of that category; such as hard worker, healthy, dedicated, committed and so on. However, within the dataset examined, the identity of champion athlete was recurrently juxtaposed with Thorpe and Hackett's actions of requiring rehabilitation (for addiction and mental health issues) and Hackett's alleged drunken incidents; activities not expected of or appropriate for someone ascribed the identity of champion athlete. Examples of this reporting can be seen below.

Police found the five-time gold medal Olympian sitting in a car parked in the driveway of a house near his parents' Sydney home, having been alerted to his dazed and disoriented state.

Herald Sun, 5 February 2014

Australian swimming legend Ian Thorpe is back in rehab after being found wandering the streets of Sydney in the early hours of yesterday morning. In a bizarre incident, the five-time Olympic gold medallist was found sitting in a white Toyota Starlet parked in the driveway of a home near Thorpe's parents [sic] house.

Courier Mail, 4 February 2014

The two-time Olympic 1500m champion was spotted wandering half-dressed and barefoot around Melbourne's Crown Casino looking for his missing four-year-old son in the early hours of Saturday morning.

Courier Mail, 25 February 2014

In ascribing the identity of champion athlete when detailing the difficulties encountered by Thorpe and Hackett, they are produced as deficient members of the category athlete. That is, to act in a manner that is inconsistent with category-bound activities (i.e. how someone from a given identity category is understood and expected to act; see Sacks, 1992) renders the actor as a defective or deficient member of that category (Schegloff, 2007). Moreover, in acting inconsistently with an ascribed identity category, issues of morality are also invoked (Jayusi, 1984, 1991). Accordingly, Thorpe and Hackett's actions are depicted not only as deficient for an athlete, but also as immoral for someone occupying that identity. If, for example, identity categories such as 'addict' or 'depressed person' had instead been used, such actions would be considered normal and seeking mental health help and attending rehabilitation would be understood to be appropriate and even good behaviours. However, through the repeated production of Thorpe and Hackett as champion/star athletes, their actions are constructed as inappropriate, whilst the commonality of transition difficulties is not acknowledged.

Fallen champion

Although Thorpe and Hackett were predominantly presented as 'champion athletes', in a minority of articles (N = 16) the identities of 'fallen champion' (ascribed to Thorpe and Hackett) and 'disgraced star' (ascribed to Hackett only) were ascribed. These identities can be seen as a subset of the broader identity category of 'champion athlete'. The use of these 'disgraced' and 'fallen' identity ascriptions functioned similarly within the data and so are presented together below.

Articles in which Thorpe and Hackett were depicted as fallen or disgraced typically appeared later, chronologically, than articles reporting incidents such as depression and the loss of Hackett's child (although it should be noted that articles throughout the corpus ascribed Hackett and Thorpe the identity of champion athlete). The 'disgraced star' – as ascribed to Hackett alone – appeared in articles reporting on his public apology for acting violently and 'trashing' his apartment in a (widely criticised) televised interview. Similarly, the 'fallen' star identity was used in articles reporting on Thorpe and Hackett making improvements, such as seeking help and showing improved mental health. Although Thorpe and Hackett's athlete status continued to be made relevant, instead of being depicted as members of the athlete category, they were ascribed to the category of deficient champion athletes who have 'fallen' from their previous heights. Examples are provided below.

Disgraced swim star Grant Hackett is making a desperate bid to restore his reputation with an interview on 60 Minutes this Sunday.

Herald Sun, 22 June 2012

Fallen swimming champion Ian Thorpe has triumphantly emerged from the darkest months of his life.

Herald Sun, 1 June 2014

Fallen swimming champion Ian Thorpe is out of rehab and will attend the Commonwealth Games in Scotland in July.

Courier Mail, 1 June 2014

As is evident in the examples above, the use of the descriptors 'fallen' or 'disgraced' were used in reporting on Thorpe and Hackett engaging in positive behaviours – apologising, seeking help or recovering. In other articles, depicting Thorpe and Hackett as a 'champion' and 'star' functioned to present their actions as inappropriate athlete behaviour. Contrastingly, in engaging in positive behaviours, Thorpe and Hackett are not typically redeemed, but instead ascribed to the morally loaded identity of fallen/disgraced champion.

Accounting for difficulties

Although there was a large focus in the media on the troubles facing Hackett and Thorpe, and their behaviours were subject to moral examination, articles did not typically address any issues of causality or explore any reasons for the men's experiences and actions. Indeed, contributing factors that might have increased or exacerbated their distress were largely overlooked. In a minority of articles ($N = 15$) some causality for the distress and actions of Thorpe and Hackett was considered, albeit typically only briefly. When causality was invoked, Thorpe and Hackett's difficulties were typically framed in terms of the individual: as an individual failure or inability to cope. Such a presentation is highlighted in the extracts below.

The amicable but intense rivalry between Ian Thorpe and Grant Hackett provided Australia with some of its most inspirational sporting moments. Now they are united by a different set of circumstances involving mental health issues, drug dependency and an inability to make the transition from the pool to the real world.

Herald Sun, 2 March 2014

The 31-year-old remains under the care of specialists, facing a long and lonely battle to find a settled life after swimming and his failed comeback attempt for the London Olympics.

Herald Sun, 31 January 2014

Last week the five-time Olympic gold medallist, who has struggled to adjust to life after the end of his glittering swimming career, appeared cheerful.

Courier Mail, 31 January 2014

As can be seen in the extracts above, the attributed reason for Thorpe and Hackett's distress was framed exclusively in terms of individual failings, struggles or inability to adjust successfully to retirement: 'an inability to make the transition', 'a long and lonely battle to find a settled life', 'struggled to adjust'. Other possible contributing factors that may make transitioning difficult for athletes were not reported or acknowledged. The use of the term 'lonely battle' in the second example further reinforces the individualised notion of blame, framing not only responsibility, but also the solution to problems as being a lonely and therefore individual process. This is certainly not to claim that Thorpe and Hackett have no responsibility for their actions and problems, but rather to highlight that the reporting in the articles constructs them as solely responsible, while overlooking any other possible contributing and mediating causes, or contextual factors.

Indeed, the framing of the cause of current distress throughout the dataset in individual terms also functions to locate the solution to their problems as centred primarily with the individual; again with other factors and sources of help rendered invisible (e.g. the 'lonely battle' with depression overlooks the role of professionals in treating depression). As has been highlighted in mental health research, the dominant discourses around depression likewise function to locate the problem within the individual and, as such, social and political factors which may lead to distress remain unnoticed and unchallenged (Ussher, 2010). Such constructions of the individual as the locus of mental ill-health thereby create the individual as needing to be 'cured', while the broader socio-cultural practices that might contribute go ignored and are not required to change (Hepworth, 1999). Similarly here, such positioning of Thorpe and Hackett as themselves solely responsible due to their own failings also makes them the site of cause and cure, while other contributing factors are not positioned as needing to be resolved/improved.

Contrasting the dominant reporting around Thorpe and Hackett, there was a small minority of five articles appearing during the data collection period that reported on some of the broader contributing factors to Thorpe and Hackett's current difficulties. Two such articles reported on the banning of a prescription sleeping medication (to which the media reported that Hackett was addicted) by the Australian Olympic Committee ahead of the London Olympics. In both of these articles, the prescription of the medication to Hackett by Australian Swimming Team doctors was partially attributed a causal role in Hackett's subsequent alleged addiction.

The remaining three articles extensively addressed mental health more broadly as well as orienting to some of the reasons for which athletes have been found in the sport psychology literature to experience transition difficulties. These articles were notably different from the other articles appearing in the dataset. Firstly, Thorpe and Hackett were not referred to as stars and champions; only their names were used with no descriptors. Secondly, these articles also reported on both Thorpe and Hackett simultaneously, and also made mention of other Australian athletes who had also experienced transition difficulties, potentially normalising this experience, or at least diminishing the sense of individual uniqueness and responsibility. In these articles, sport psychologists were also typically cited, outlining some reasons for transition difficulties. The following examples highlight the reporting seen in these three articles.

After spending their youth getting up at 4am, to the exclusion of any career path, struggling to form relationships outside swimming, they were spat out at the other end in a listless and aimless state.

Herald Sun, 2 March 2014

Bond University sports psychologist Clive Jones, who did his PhD on athlete burnout, said high-profile sportspeople struggle to make the transition to life after their careers end because their whole lives had been consumed with sport. "Their sense of self, identity and belonging – how they define and value themselves – is integrated so much in their sport," he said. "A lot of athletes start their careers when they are 9, 10 or 11 – it's through adolescence that the sense of self and identity is founded ... Swimming Australia says it is working to help them transition to a "normal environment". But Brisbane-based sports consultant Michael Jeh said: "Some of them just can't get used to everyday lives."

Courier Mail, 1 March 2014

Not long ago, athletes held down a normal day job. They stayed in touch with their friends and progressively learnt skills that would carry them through life when their sporting days were completed ... Sadly, for many when the music stops, their generally inflated salaries stop, they have no qualification, or time-earned experience, and they simply cannot handle the transition.

Herald Sun, 5 February 2014

As can be seen in the above examples, these articles reported on a range of reasons for which athletes might encounter transition difficulties, with the professionalisation of sport largely held accountable for difficulties through leaving athletes with a lack of alternate career paths and a lack of relationships or identity outside of their sport. However, even in these few instances with some orientation to causes of transition difficulties, these articles did not make visible the broader socio-cultural context and the discursive practices within which athletes are located. Moreover, although these articles broadened causality, they still reproduced the ultimate responsibility and blame as located within the individual. That is, despite acknowledging an array of reasons for transition difficulties, the root of such difficulties was ultimately attributed to an inability of some (and thus by implication not all) athletes to 'handle' or 'get used to' the transition.

Discussion

The present study aimed to build on the extant body of career transition literature, by exploring athletes' transition difficulties within their socio-cultural context. The aim was consistent with a growing focus in sport psychology research on exploring phenomenon within their cultural context (Blodgett et al., 2014; McGannon et al., 2013; McGannon & Smith, 2015; Smith, 2010). In examining the socio-cultural through popular media representations, the aim was to expand understanding of the context in which athletes experience distress, including the identities and actions that are most readily available or restricted. Through this examination, it was evident that only limited identities were made available to Thorpe and Hackett, even years into retirement. Moreover, although career transition difficulties are well-documented within the sport psychology literature, any difficulties were constructed as due to individual failings and inadequacies, with other factors overlooked.

The ascription of the 'champion athlete' identity rendered Thorpe and Hackett's actions as inappropriate, even immoral, due to being inconsistent with category-bound activities of that identity (Jayusi, 1984, 1991; Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). In so doing, the difficulties and distress that athletes commonly experience in transition (e.g., Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004) not only remain unacknowledged, but the experience of transition difficulties is presented as something that is inappropriate or unusual for athletes (despite being common; Wylleman et al., 2004). Tensions between dominant understandings of depression as an individual pathology and people's subjective experiences of the condition have been argued to result in the delegitimising and stigmatising of an individual's experience (LaFrance, 2007). Likewise, here, the contrast between cultural understandings of transition difficulties as individualised and somewhat inappropriate actions and the lived experiences of individual athletes may leave transitioning athletes stigmatised. Also noteworthy is that the only alternate identity made readily available to Thorpe and Hackett was that of the 'fallen' athlete (and additionally 'disgraced' athlete for Hackett). Thus, even when Thorpe and Hackett engaged in what

could be seen as positive behaviours such as apologising and seeking help, through the use of such identity ascriptions, they were again produced in potentially morally loaded and stigmatising terms.

One's sense of identity has been shown to mediate ease of adjustment to retirement, with athletes with exclusive or strong athlete identities reported to struggle more into retirement (Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Horton & Mack, 2000; Lally, 2007; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Park et al., 2013). However, as was evident within the present study, even years after retiring, only the identities of athlete (or fallen athlete) were made available to Thorpe and Hackett, even though both individuals had moved into new roles and careers. With no alternate identities made available, other identities are harder to access or occupy (Edley, 2001). It is reported in the sport psychology literature that exclusive athlete identities can be problematic for transitioning athletes, yet our analysis demonstrates that athletes are culturally understood and reproduced in the media in terms of a specific and narrow athlete identity even many years after retiring. Despite this, the way in which the athletes are reproduced in terms of their athlete identity within a given socio-cultural context is not typically acknowledged in understanding athletes' transition difficulties and adjustment to retirement. Interventions for transitioning athletes at times address identity (Lally, 2007; Mizuno, Hochi, Inoue, Kaneko, & Yamada, 2012), yet the broader cultural context that reproduces these identities is not considered. Accordingly, when (individually) treating athletes who are encountering transition difficulties, narrative therapy may provide a valuable treatment modality. Narrative therapy is an approach that has arisen from social constructionism and takes into account the discourses and dominant social constructions in which our lives are embedded (see Cosh, LeCouteur et al., 2013).

Furthermore, when accounts of the causes of Thorpe and Hackett's difficulties were addressed in the dataset, causality was typically reproduced narrowly in terms of individual failings and inabilities. Yet, a range of factors have been identified in the sport psychology literature as contributing to transition difficulties, such as identity foreclosure (Grove et al., 1997), lack of career alternatives (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; McGillivray et al., 2005) and changes to the body (Schwenk et al., 2007; Stephan et al., 2007). However, in the media representations we examined, all such factors are almost entirely overlooked, and even when they are addressed, ultimate responsibility remained reproduced as lying within the individual. Yet the potential problems associated with the repeated reproduction of only one possible identity are not acknowledged or recognised. Rendering the culture and sport invisible from responsibility has also been seen in media analyses of combining motherhood with elite sport participation, with individual women held accountable for combining both pursuits and the cultural context in which motherhood and sport are considered incompatible was overlooked (Cosh & Crabb, 2012a).

Similarly, Blum and Stracuzzi (2004) highlighted how the popular media recurrently reproduce constructions of depression as an individual problem that is isolated and decontextualised from the social world. As such, social and political inequalities and injustices, such as poverty and discriminatory employment policies, which may lead to distress, remain unnoticed and unchallenged (Ussher, 2010). Accordingly, the solution is located as residing within the individual, and changes to the broader socio-cultural context are not required (Hepworth, 1999). Likewise, the sporting and broader socio-cultural context in which athletes experience eating disorders is also typically overlooked, rendering the solution for disordered eating as largely targeted to the individual athletes (Busanich & McGannon, 2010; Cosh & Crabb, 2012b; Cosh, Crabb, LeCouteur, Kettler, & Tully, 2014). Similarly, in the current analysis, the role

of the sporting context and the broader socio-cultural context can be seen to be overlooked in cultural discourse of post-retirement difficulties, reproducing any difficulties as due to individual inabilities and failings.

Even within sport psychology, where there is more acknowledgement of the commonality of transition difficulties, the solution to transition problems is largely focused on individual and targeted interventions, such as counselling and career guidance and support (e.g., Lally, 2007; Mizuno et al., 2012): the cause and therefore solution to transition difficulties thus remains located largely in the individual. Arguably, broader changes in the cultural and discursive contexts in which athletes experience such difficulties are also required. A continued broadening of the scope of the athlete to the whole individual within sport settings throughout athletic careers and an ongoing focus on developing additional aspects of athletes' lives may benefit athletes, especially upon retirement. The ways in which athletes and transition are depicted within sport settings, including in team meetings, workshops, in pamphlets and materials provided to athletes (especially retiring athletes) could also be modified in order to better outline and challenge the dominant versions of athletes and retirement and to better encapsulate a broader range of identities for retiring athletes. Beyond sport settings, recommendations for media reporting include to normalise transition difficulties and provide a greater acknowledgement of the factors that contribute to such difficulties, as well as enhanced focus on new identities in media reporting.

The present paper underscores the importance of examining athlete identities and psychological phenomena within the cultural and discursive practices in which they are located. Building on the sport literature and using media analyses, this paper demonstrates how the study of the mass media can enable insight into dominant cultural ideas and understandings. This media examination has highlighted the discursive practices in which athletes are located and their identities constructed, as well as the actions and behaviours that are, in turn, deemed appropriate or not. An analysis of the mass media provides the opportunity for a broad insight into dominant discursive practices within a given society that are not attainable from other data sources, such as interviews, questionnaires and interactions.

Limitations

Although advantageous for understanding culturally dominant discourses, analysis of media data does not demonstrate how versions of athlete identities are constructed within the sporting setting, nor can it demonstrate how athletes negotiate these broad societal constructions in their everyday interactions. Likewise, the identities athletes ascribe to themselves and if or how they resist other identities cannot be garnered through media analyses. Analysis of further data sources, including materials provided and interactions within sport settings, and interviews with athletes would be valuable to further elucidate these specific discursive contexts surrounding transition distress, complementing the current study. The ways in which members of a given culture and society take up and reproduce discourses prevalent in the media would also expand our knowledge of the socio-cultural context; as may be examined through focus groups or questionnaire methods. Moreover, a discursive approach – as used in the present analysis – does not allow for examination of the individual's internal experiences of transition difficulties. How athletes understand and make sense of their experiences post-retirement, especially within the given socio-cultural context, would also be valuable to explore via additional methodologies, such as narrative analysis.

The present study examines post-retirement difficulties in only one cultural context: the Australian mainstream news media.

However, given the dominance of this reporting around athletes in the mainstream media, it is likely that such findings would also generalise to athletes in other sports and even in other Western cultures, especially high profile and highly successful athletes. Although the analysis here focused on male athletes, the invocation of athlete identity and the overlooking of broader factors in retirement difficulties are also likely to be observed for female athletes. Indeed, it has already been observed that broad structural and cultural factors were overlooked in depicting athletes' inability to combine sport and motherhood (see Cosh & Crabb, 2012a). Likewise, migrant athletes and those from ethnic minorities living and competing in the Australian context are likely to have a range of structural and socio-cultural inequalities and barriers to overcome (e.g., Schinke, McGannon, Battochio, & Wells, 2013) in addition to those already specifically linked to sporting transitions for the dominant cultural group; and it is likely that these too would be overlooked in the depiction of transition difficulties, thus further locating responsibility for their problems within the individual. Thus, it is plausible that transition could be increasingly problematic for female and ethnic minority athletes. Such future investigations would be valuable.

While transition difficulties have been observed across many cultures (e.g., Dimoula, Torregrosa, Psychountaki, & Gonzalez Fernandez, 2013; Mizuno et al., 2012; Moshkelgosha et al., 2012), how athletes' identities and distress are constructed and how cause of distress or difficulties is attributed in these other cultural contexts requires further exploration. Whether dominant identity constructions are similar across contexts remains unknown.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to scholarly work in the area of athletes' career transitions through exploring post-retirement distress in a socio-cultural context. In this context, only limited identities were made available for athletes, thereby limiting alternatives. Moreover, transition difficulties were constructed as due to individual failings. In doing so, athletes were positioned as the locus of cause and cure for their distress; the socio-cultural context was overlooked. This paper highlights how the broader socio-cultural context in which athletes retire and experience post-retirement distress may have implications for athletes and their psychological well-being, yet currently understandings of such distress and subsequent interventions remain located at an individual level.

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