

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH SIGNIFICANT OTHERS: REFLECTIONS OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL STUDENT-ATHLETES

Lizette HÖLL & Cora BURNETT

*Department of Sport and Movement Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of
Johannesburg, Doornfontein Campus, Johannesburg,
Republic of South Africa*

ABSTRACT

The paper explores the nuanced articulation of social dynamics in relationships between elite athletes and their significant others. It captures that these relationships changes over time. A case study was undertaken at the University of Johannesburg to determine the roles of significant others at various phases of elite athletes' sporting careers. A retrospective research perspective was pursued, which yielded insightful data, reflecting on various socialisation phases. Symbolic interactionism provides the framework for analysing the building of relationships between elite athletes and their significant others. In-depth interviews were conducted with elite throwers and decathlon athletes. The sample included current (n=15) and retired (n=5) student-athletes, parents (n=5), coaches (n=2) and managers (n=10) from the University of Johannesburg (UJ Sport). A multi-method approach ensured triangulation and comprehensive data was obtained from case studies. The results reveal that a priority shift occurs in athletes' relationships over time. Support from parents demonstrates an engendered interaction and focus in addition to assisting in the provision of support and material resources. In one technical event, the athlete's father became the coach, and a similar transition from teacher-coach to professional-coach occurred during high school years revealing deepening commitment. The increased reliance on and solidarity with peer athletes increased after socialisation.

Key words: Socialisation; Significant others; Social agents; Elite athlete; Student-athlete.

INTRODUCTION

Socialisation is seen as a lifelong process, as people interact with others and their environment in a myriad of ways (Maguire *et al.*, 2002). Coakley and Burnett (2014) describe socialisation as an active learning process, through real-life experiences, to which meaning is given within cultural settings as people discover and embrace values, beliefs and norms. Sport socialisation occurs through contact with multiple socialisation agents. Each agent plays a different role in the creation of overall socialisation pathways. During the initial years, parents are generally the most significant sport socialisation agents. Other important socialisation agents and influences include siblings, other family members, peers and role models. Various social institutions (schools) and environmental influences also expose one to

socialisation agents. Numerous researchers discuss the prominence and differential support relationships within the socialisation process, where the sportsperson filters and acts on influences according to his/her own circumstances and orientation (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004; Knight & Holt, 2013; Coakley & Burnett, 2014).

It is evident from the research that one's parents are central social agents in the life of the sportsperson (Brown *et al.*, 1989; Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013). Generally, during the child's primary school phase, parents encourage him/her to participate in sport or facilitate an active lifestyle. Parents motivate their children to become physically active and to participate in sport for various reasons. It is also during primary school where teachers (teacher-coaches) take on the role as professionals with varied degrees of expertise. The teacher-coach has the responsibility of teaching and coaching in the school environment. The participation and commitment of the sportsperson is highly dependent on the environment facilitated by the teacher-coach. During the latter years of primary school, sportspersons become increasingly subjected to peer pressure. It is during this phase when the sportsperson's friends and peers become primary social agents and influence within a teenage culture of distinguishable norms and behaviours.

During the secondary school phase, parents still play a central role in socialisation. The father normally takes on the role as provider of material and technical matters, whereas the mother generally offers emotional and nurturing support (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013). It is also during this phase that sportspersons decide to specialise in sport, and professional coaching is sourced. At the tertiary level, one's parents mainly offer (additional) financial support to the elite sportsperson, while the coach becomes the more prominent social agent and role model. During this phase, the elite sportsperson is challenged with balancing his/her sport and academic life (Watt & Moore, 2001). The sportsperson-coach relationship is very important during this heightened specialisation phase.

This article aims to document and reflect on relationship changes during the sporting life of elite sportspersons, with special focus on the student-sportsperson years.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sport socialisation is viewed as "a process of learning and social development, which occurs as we interact with one another and become acquainted with the social world we live in" (Coakley & Burnett, 2014:76). The social learning theory of Bandura (1986) makes it evident that the influences of significant others (such as parents, peers, teachers and coaches) on the personal development and sport experiences of sportspersons provide directional growth and development pathways.

The first phase of socialisation is when the sportsperson is introduced to sport. The individual selectively experiences the influence of several key socialising agents, and the impact of these may vary from person to person over a period of time (Coakley, 2011). During the early formative years (primary school) of being socialised into sport participation, parents and caregivers are identified as the main social agents. The type of support (emotional, social, financial or physical) creates a culture of motivation and goal orientation, and this may have either a positive or negative impact on the sportsperson. If a caring climate is created, a

sportsperson is nurtured and may decide to pursue a sport career or pathway. However, if the sportsperson experiences failure and undue pressure, he/she may drop out or seek alternative sport or other activities in which to participate (Burnett, 2005; Knight & Holt, 2013).

Research conducted by Hedstrom and Gould (2004) and Knight and Holt (2013) indicate that sportspersons who acquire positive support from their parents are advantaged and able to cope more effectively with stressors during their sporting career. Research also reveals that such children experience a range of positive outcomes, such as enjoyment and are highly motivated and more committed to sport. Parents thus enable the youth to participate and progress in their participation in sport and can guide them towards socialisation (Nunomura & Oliveira, 2013). The family members, especially the father and same-sex siblings, play a significant role as facilitators of competitive sport participation. During adolescence (13 to 14 years), peers and coaches begin to assume a more dominant role, influencing the sportsperson’s choice of and commitment to sport participation. This phase, which implies progression and intensification of role acquisition, thus forms the basis for consecutive phases (Domingues & Gonçalves, 2013).

Burnett’s (2005) model indicates the changing nature of the influences of social agents on the experiences of the sportsperson during various socialisation phases, from the primary phase of being introduced to sport (play) to where sport becomes fun and then a more serious obligation.

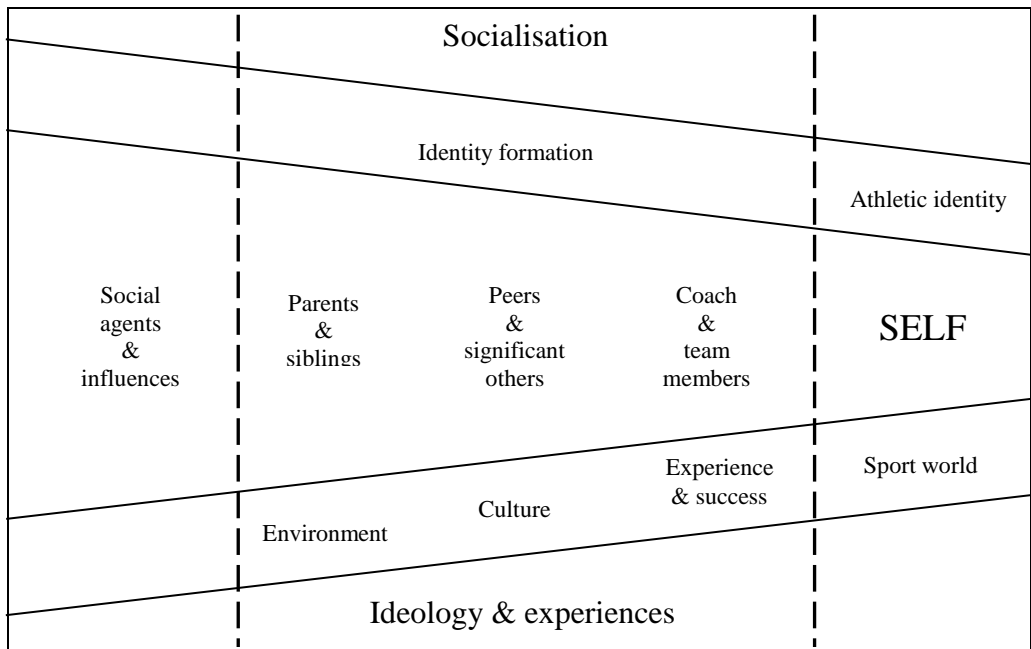


FIGURE 1: ATHLETIC IDENTITY SOCIALISATION MODEL (Burnett, 2005:24)

Sport takes place within the context of the society's social spaces and influences. The roles of significant others are prioritised differently by sportspersons as they progress from being mere participants to acquiring a sporting identity. The sporting identity forms an integral part of a sportsperson, and this 'persona' is based on the sportsperson's accomplishments and achievements (Burnett, 2005). It is during the deepening commitment phase that the sportsperson decides to take sport more seriously. This phase mainly takes place during the early years of secondary school. As the individual gets older, and he/she is successful in his/her sporting endeavours, the choice of specialisation in a specific sport might become a viable option. This process is also linked to the availability of resources and often contingent on the culture and ideology within the household. If parents are very supportive, or have also been sportspersons themselves, an enabling environment is created.

Over the years, the sportsperson's attitude changes and he/she grows more professional and performance-orientated (Coakley & Donnelly, 1999; Coakley, 2011). During the initial years, the parents play a dominant role by introducing an active lifestyle and encouraging children to participate in sport. School-going children are mostly coached by their teachers who would take over the role as 'mentor', with the exception where parents act as coaches. In the absence of expert coaches in individual sport, parents may take on this role as reported in various studies (Brown *et al.*, 1989; Melnick & Wann, 2011). The social stimuli with the most impact are significant others, reference groups, and those individuals whose attitudes, values and behaviours contribute decisively to the formation of one's own attitudes and values (Papaioannou *et al.*, 2008).

For the sportsperson, playing with friends in the early years might be the determining factor for them entering into the world of sport. As the sportsperson commences his/her sporting career, the players generally become close friends. Especially around the age of 14 years, the peers become a prominent social influence and team mates often become friends as they share social space and similar experiences (Karweit, 1983). They might be accepted or rejected by others within the sporting culture and due to this, might decide to either proceed or quit.

The essence of this process is the increased level of commitment displayed by a sportsperson. He/she increasingly embraces the role of sportsperson and, as such, identifies with elite participants as a particular and identifiable sub-culture by 'walking the walk and talking the talk' (Tinto, 2002). This decision mainly takes place during the latter years of the sportsperson's secondary school career, coinciding with late adolescence and final school years (Norris, 2010; Canadian Sport for Life, 2011). As a result of the deepened commitment of the sportsperson, he/she starts to develop a sporting identity. Sportspersons consciously and subconsciously obtain a set of dispositions that orientate them towards a particular understanding and interpretation of the role they are fulfilling in their social world (Vaughrand, 2001). The most important influence on the identity formation of the sportsperson in the construction and understanding of his or her social world is the 'self', as well as the interpretation of the sportsperson's identity, success and goals. It is the sportsperson's perception of goals and success that shapes the sporting identity and contributes towards the realisation of starting a sporting career (Stroot, 2002; Burnett, 2005). The sporting identity also comes with special social relationships where the coach is the main influence in taking responsibility for sport performance and often determines team selections.

Team mates are a key source of social support as sportspersons share a similar life style in training and competing.

The post-school years present another major transition in the structured environment of the sportsperson. For sportspersons who continue their studies at tertiary institutions, other student-sportspersons provide unique socialisation components. During this transition phase when the student enters a tertiary institution, the individual takes on the identity of a student first and foremost, after which the student can begin participating in sport and become the student-sportsperson. Student-sportspersons are identified and recognised as a special grouping within the broader field of participation (Burnett, 2003). Social recognition co-constructs role acquisitions of student-sportspersons. They become outliers compared to their peers or fellow sportspersons. Success for individual sportspersons provides another shaping force for potential career fulfilment. They focus on sport-related achievements and might set specific goals, even putting their social lives on hold for a certain period of time to focus on reaching narrowly defined sport goals (Burnett, 2003). It is in this phase that the coach acts as the main social agent. The sportsperson might even have multiple coaches if he/she participates at a national or international level.

The role of the coach is complex and multidimensional. Multiple roles of coaches are particularly prevalent in contexts where the coach also has to act as manager and psychologist, compared to more professional set-ups where the coach is mainly responsible for coaching (Bloom *et al.*, 2008). This relationship between the coach and sportsperson has been researched mainly from a leadership perspective, as the coach is considered a leader and mentor in the life of the sportsperson.

Jowett (2008) defines interpersonal relationships as the situation where coaches' and sportspersons' emotions, thoughts and behaviours are mutually and causally interconnected and inter-related. The interpersonal construction of closeness, co-orientation and complementarity were utilised to broadly define coaches' and sportspersons' emotions and thoughts respectively (Jowett & Ntoumanis, 2004). Student-sportspersons predominantly find a social home among co-sportspersons. Patrick *et al.* (1999) report on the social lives of male student-sportspersons who showed high levels of bonding and a sense of belonging to a special group.

This bond may become so strong that they often form sub-cultures which, in a sense, can be perceived as deviant due to over-compromising, as these students focus predominantly on pursuing a sporting career. It is for this reason that various universities in the United States acknowledge that students should be well-integrated into student life (Watt & Moore, 2001). It is also for this reason that sport residences, in which student-sportspersons reside, are not considered advantageous to these student-sportspersons' academic performance. In a study by Burnett (2010), it became clear that student sportspersons lead relatively segmented lives with the main thrust being that of sport, rather than academic- and social life. Student-sportspersons struggle to lead a balanced life and are mostly compelled to prioritise a sporting life, which is time-intensive and requires multiple sacrifices.

A sport career at this level might be relatively short. The life span of an elite sportsperson is often related to various influences and happenings, which could either extend or shorten it.

This, however, means that a pre-established pathway is not predictable as sportspersons might prematurely burnt out or may experience a career-ending injury (Wylleman *et al.*, 2004). In some cases, the lack of access to essential resources might be a limiting factor, or the sportsperson might weigh the chances of a prolonged sports-related career against that of a more predictable profession within or outside the sport sector (Coakley, 2011). A highly competitive career of an elite sportsperson will inevitably end and the sportsperson may then pursue different options beyond mere competitive participation.

RESEARCH PROBLEM

Discussing the changing roles of significant others in the study, and the sportspersons' priority shift, student-sportspersons at the University of Johannesburg were researched as case studies to investigate changes over time, within a particular institutional setting.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilised a mixed-method approach, as this has become increasingly employed by researchers to utilise more sources and thicker descriptions for complex realities (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). Data-set triangulation enriches the pool of information, validity and reliability of findings (Fielding, 2009). The research design of this in-depth descriptive study made use of both qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (questionnaires) data to explore and substantiate the case study as a type of research. For this article, only the qualitative data (interviews) will be used to discuss the influences of significant others in the various phases and settings of socialisation.

The purposive sample of the current student-sportspersons consisted of 15 individuals, of which 10 (67%) were male and 5 (23 %) female; while the retired student-sportspersons' sample included 5 individuals, of which 2 were male and 3 were female. The parent sample consisted of both mothers and fathers, and included a sample of 5 who were willing to take part in the research. Management and coaches totalled 12 individuals, with a gender representation of 6 (50%) males and 6 (50%) females. A total of 21 males and 16 females were included in the study.

The case study approach afforded the researcher the opportunity to interview various people in their different roles and to capture a variety of perspectives on the role of significant others during various socialisation phases. Against this outline of the socialisation process and the role of significant others, main result areas, which link to socialisation influences and practices, will be presented.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The literature indicates that there are various social agents playing a role in the socialisation phase of the student-sportsperson. This is reflected in the narratives resulting from the study. The discussion will be against the backdrop of the various socialisation phases, incorporating the role that the social agent plays. The different sections are structured to follow a developmental pathway associated with the progression of socialisation in identifiable phases.

Introduction to sport (primary school level)

According to Hedstrom and Gould (2004), the parent's role is mainly to encourage and motivate their child to be successful in sport. The following narrative, captured during the interview, states the importance of parents during the primary phase of a sportsperson's participation:

The support from my parents was very important and the fact that they pushed me to do athletics was the ultimate motivation. They kept on pushing me to participate because I couldn't do it on my own. (22-year-old female, shot put athlete)

My mom and dad were my main support during my sporting years. They were always there for me, happy when I won, supported me when I did well. They provided me with the opportunities to participate in sport. They helped me to realise that sport is important, because you don't realise it when you are small. I wasn't born a great athlete – I had to work hard to become good and if it wasn't for the support of my parents, I would not be as successful as I am today. (25-year-old male decathlon athlete)

The narrative reflects the shared meaning of a family where the success of a son was partially contingent on parental support and parenting. It also speaks to the work ethic and understanding or demonstration (by or through parental guidance) that dedication and hard work are required for sporting success. These narratives demonstrate how parents are the initial motivators in their roles as primary educators to introduce their young children to an active life style. Taking part in physical activity forms an integrative part in the holistic development of children. It further demonstrates the personal involvement of parents in continuing to support children along a sporting pathway and having to provide the material means for specialisation.

In primary school, the teacher may recognise the sporting talent of a sportsperson. It is then when the teacher-coach dedicates more time and resources to the training of the talented sportsperson.

My teachers were amazing during my primary school years. One teacher told me that she thinks I will be a very good athlete, she believed in me. I didn't want to disappoint her, so I worked hard to become a good athlete. (26-year-old male shot put athlete)

I wanted to become the best but didn't always have the best opportunities or coaches. I made the best of the fact that my teacher was my coach and I respected her a lot. (24-year-old female, shot put athlete)

A teacher wrote me off in Grade 7, because I struggled to grow and it reflected in my distance. The teacher enjoyed the fact that somebody else would beat me. She would put more time and effort into the other athlete. (26-year-old male, shot put athlete)

Within a school setting, the status of the teacher-coach often rests in the success of his/her players or team. This contributes to a special bond of trust, empathy and reciprocity between the sportsperson and the teacher-coach. Teacher-coaches expect their sportspersons to succeed and the sportspersons internalise such expectations, potentially conferring on them a belief in their ability to succeed. From the sportsperson's perspective (as indicated in the narratives) teachers are not necessarily equipped to offer specialist technical coaching. The school is neither capacitated or has a high performance focus and as institution cannot facilitate that level of exposure to competitions. Not all teachers would prioritise the coaching

of a particular sportsperson, as personal factors and the judgement of ‘success’ and potential of different sportspersons might play a determining role.

Siblings or family members may influence one another to participate in sport. They encourage each other to participate and compete and try to determine who is best.

My younger sister was my competition; we trained together and did everything together. Although she is not in the same age group as I am, she was my competition as she was also a strong competitor. I always wanted to be better than her. (24-year-old female shot put athlete)

My cousin was a South African high jumper. I used to go to him in December holidays from the age of 10. I wasn't the best in high jump but the fact that my cousin was so good, inspired me a lot. He was my idol and I wanted to become like him. I even did an assignment on him in my primary school years, he inspired me a lot, his support was significant in my primary years. If I struggled with training he was always there to support. (25-year-old male, decathlon athlete)

In some cases, sibling rivalry creates additional motivation to succeed, as siblings compete for parental approval. Having a successful sportsperson as a family member is not only encouraging, but a sportsperson can get emotional and technical support, which is crucial during the primary years where the personal social relationships seem to be most influential.

Deepening commitment (high school level)

Research indicates that mother-daughter and father-son relationships represent differential influences. In most cases, the mother provides emotional support while the father augments the child's coaching and offers technical advice, as well as providing material support in a household where he is the main provider. In such households, fathers often influence the decision of allocating household funds and resources to the sporting career of a child. The stability of one's home environment plays a key role during socialisation stages, as children need emotional security and nurturing (Hedstrom & Gould, 2004).

One student-sportsperson explained the gender differentiation in this parental support structure. Shared experience and knowledge about competitive participation in sport disciplines influences parental guidance and goal setting. The following narrative captures this sentiment:

The stability of my parents' house was an incredible support aspect for me; it was a safe haven for me. I knew that I could share everything with my parents, especially my dad. My dad was very good in hammer throw and knew me personally and how I performed. He always showed me what to do; he had a lot of patience. He wanted me to become the best. (23-year-old male hammer throw athlete)

I have a very sporty family and my parents are very supportive. My mom did netball and hurdles and my dad played rugby. They lived their dream through me. They supported me a lot; they always came with me to competitions. I am doing exactly what they tell me to do because I know that they were successful. (22-year-old female, shot put athlete)

It is evident from this narrative that this student-athlete's father became the parent-coach. For this role, the parent-coach is based on a personal sporting career or, as mentioned in other cases, special learning by the parent. When a parent takes on the role as coach, the child may benefit from the intimate and trusting relationship, but it may also cause pressure to perform according to a parent's expectations. The longitudinal involvement of parents provided a

transition between introducing a child to sport and further 'strategic' involvement. As parents become more knowledgeable about a sport, they increasingly act in an advisory capacity. A father acknowledged the differential support of individual parents:

We supported our son a lot as parents, we went to every single event that he participated in, we pushed him a lot. Mom didn't push him as hard as I did, but she also played a part. (Father of male decathlon athlete)

Inherent in this narrative, is the understanding that both parents had a role to play and that each in his/her own way contributed to a family environment that encouraged sport. There also seems to be support for the notion that fathers continue to play a more dominant role than mothers in shaping the perceptions of and effective outcomes experienced by their children in sports (Coakley, 2011). In the absence of qualified coaches in highly technical sport disciplines, a father may extend his authority in his parental role and may act as a coach for this sportsperson. A father of a student-athlete explains:

As parent I have identified talent in my children and helped them to develop that talent in all possible ways. I also developed my own coaching skills to assist them with training due to a lack of coaching resources in the area. I've started getting involved in their sports, went on courses to help them develop their talent. There were not a lot of people with knowledge of the sport and the only way my children could develop is if I helped them. We have put a lot of resources into the development process, a lot of money. (Father of male hammer throw athlete)

Parental role augmentation is taken up by the parent (in this case, the father) who feels responsible for facilitating his child's sporting career. The new role of a father-coach compromises the more traditional role of care-giver. In some cases, a dependency relationship may develop where the child's success confirms the quality of potential competencies. This constitutes a potential role conflict for both parties. This narrative is representative of several others obtained by the research where parents increased their involvement and obtain technical knowledge so as to advise and/or assist their children with their performances. Other parents also reflected on the material resources and financial sacrifices they had to make to facilitate their child's sporting career.

During the secondary school phase, the sportsperson may begin specialising in a sport or certain sports. The coach supports and encourages the sportsperson to participate and to train. He/she also sets boundaries for social and life experiences in association with demarcated expectations of what it means to be a successful sportsperson. The coach also acts as a mentor and sets priorities for the sportsperson. The coach helps the sportsperson set goals for advanced levels of competition where he/she judges the potential for competitive success and improvement (Mageau & Vallerand, 2003).

I had a very encouraging coach, which was also my teacher! She was the perfect coach; she never took the fun out of athletics. She never forced me to do anything. I think that played a very significant role in the fact that I still love athletics. I worked hard to become someone. (25-year-old male decathlon athlete)

From a sportsperson's perspective, a successful coach (including his/her teacher-coach) is one who guarded against unrealistic goals or undue pressure to succeed. The level of success and specialisation of individual sportspersons are increasingly been recognised during the secondary school years and teachers seem to capitalise on the sportsperson's success for the honour of the school. During the secondary phase, the role of the teacher-coach becomes

more prominent. It is also evident from the following quote that the teacher of this student-athlete fulfilled multiple roles:

My teacher was the deputy head, nature science teacher and pole vault coach. He was such an incredible person and a big role model. He could do all the tasks and still made the best of everything. (25-year-old male decathlon athlete)

Sportspersons recognise the strength and limitations of their coaches. Role modelling forms a meaningful part of setting normative behaviour patterns for sportspersons to follow. It can be a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it requires competencies and insight on the part of the educator and teacher while on the other hand it necessitates the role acquisition of being a coach. Balancing these roles effectively comes with unique challenges and opportunities of increased influences. The relationship change between the teacher-coach and the sportsperson, as there is a suggestion of transferred mentorship from the sports field to the classroom.

Peer relationships and peer pressure start to become an issue and a dominant influence during the secondary school years (Patrick *et al.*, 1999). It is clear that peer pressure can either be positive or negative. For instance, at secondary school level, peers can either help produce high levels of motivation or contribute to early drop out for their fellow sportspersons. If peers do not share the same experiences and goals, sportspersons are faced with challenges of associating with unsupportive peers. A student-athlete articulates such an experience:

My friends weren't very supportive in my athletics during school. They said I must go out with them and movie instead of training. (22-year-old female shot put athlete)

Fellow sportspersons play a very supportive role in the secondary school phase. Athletics is an individual sport and friends taking part in the same sport motivate and support each other. Fellow sportspersons share experiences and challenges with each other, they train together and are interdependent on one another (Karweit, 1983; Brown *et al.*, 1989). A student-athlete explains:

I had two athletes doing athletics with me, my fellow athletes (male decathlon athlete). My high school boyfriend was also an athlete and he knew what I was going through and supported me a lot. (22-year-old female, shot put athlete)

I just kept on trying and working hard to beat my friends to become the best. Eventually I became the best by just keep on believing in myself, if it wasn't for the support and competition of my friends, there wasn't a reason why I had to become better. (25-year-old male, decathlon athlete)

Successful sportspersons often socialise with other sportspersons and get support from members of the sporting fraternity. Sportspersons form a special cohort where shared experiences and identification underpin group formation and help establish meaningful and understanding relationships. Friendly rivalry becomes important as sportspersons may push one other to increased levels of performance. In this sense, they have to collaborate to compete, which adds a relatively complex dimension to friendship and social inter-dependency.

Post-school specialisation

In the student-sportsperson years, parents are essential agents in the support system of their children. In the post-school phase, parents may still be committed, but function as peripheral

providers of their children's competitive sporting life. The coach and peer relationships become more dominant during this phase. It is evident from previous research that when sportspersons moved into a university residence, they became separated from their family and slowly these ties lose their previous closeness and parental control diminishes. Sportspersons travel nationally and internationally for competitions, and it is not always possible for parents to accompany their children on these tours.

During this phase, the gradual shift of attention and embracing other recourses are obvious as expressed by this athlete:

My mom and dad are still very supportive during my university phase, although they are very far, they offer emotional support. They encourage me and keep me motivated. I still talk to them every day and share my experiences with them. My parents are really a great guide in life for me. (24-year-old female shot put athlete)

Parents may still perform an emotionally anchoring role, which is important to the sportsperson as it constitutes a frame of reference. This narrative, as in others not presented here demonstrate the increased social distance and the change in parent-child relationship in continuing to motivate, encourage and also to provide sound personal advice on how to address various challenges in life of which sport is an important component.

Studies indicate that some parents have the ability to make substantial contributions, in terms of financial support, to their children's participation, but the capacity to do so is inevitably related to the socio-economic status of the family and household. A child's sporting career is often prioritised in the absence of access to their material or financial sources. In these cases, scholarships or sponsorships are made available. Financial factors may create barriers to children's participation in sport (Kirk *et al.*, 1997). Such experiences are demonstrated in the following narrative:

My mom and dad still support me financially where I am today! I've been studying for over 6 years to compete in athletics. I've asked my dad to support my dreams and I will become a successful athlete. Not all parents can support their child financially till late 20's. But the fact that we don't get good money to participate in athletics in South Africa is a huge challenge. I am fortunate to have the financial support of my parents to pay for me. (25-year-old male decathlon athlete)

This student-athlete confirms his continued dependency on parental (or external) financial means to support elite levels of competition. In some cases, additional funds are needed to finance tours, facilitate training, attend camps and/or pay for professional coaching.

Student-sportspersons rely on the competency of the coach and many believe that the coach is pivotal to their success in sport. A student-athlete explains this viewpoint as follows:

I have the best coach in the country – he helped me a lot through all the developmental phases to be the best athlete I could be. (23-year-old male decathlon athlete)

The level of specialisation at this stage of a sportsperson's career necessitates expert knowledge and skills from highly qualified coaches. The sportsperson is increasingly forming a close relationship with the coach, who in some cases 'replace' parental guidance and provide additional support.

Both cohesion and trust are unique to sport peer groups. Student-sportspersons, however, also find support from their friends (boyfriends or girlfriends) who are not sportspersons, which also helps to encourage them. Gender dynamics are different, though, with girlfriends being relatively more supportive of their boyfriends and they also associate themselves with their partners' sporting successes. Not all boyfriends are supportive of their girlfriends who are successful sportspersons as some perceive this as a traditional role reversal. This support is motivational, and others' understanding gives sportspersons the space to follow a sport career.

The support from my roommate in residence was phenomenal, she was not an athlete, but she inspired and motivated me so much. If I was tired or lazy to go and train she motivated me to go. (21-year-old female shot put athlete)

My girlfriend gives me space, time, helps me to focus and respects the fact that I need to train. (25-year-old male, decathlon athlete)

Some same-gender peers often provide a type of sisterhood or brotherhood with strong emotional ties. Inter-gender relationships is also built on a common understanding that the sportsperson needs time for training and would be away for competitions, in addition to having to cope with competitive stress. From other narratives, it was evident that peer relationships that are not supportive are severed and athletes choose their friends to accommodate their competitive lifestyle. This represents a change from trying to fit in with friends and fellow competitors to finding friends and team mates that offer the capacity and safe space of support. It is evident from the narratives that student-athletes often form a cohesive insider group. Such bonding is motivational and uplifting. These relationships are based on fellowship, sharing and a special insider status.

My fellow thrower athletes support me a lot. That was a very good motivation when we all went together to the gym to train, or went to the field together, I felt guilty when I wanted to stay home and not train. The motivation at competitions was incredible. (24-year-old female shot put athlete)

This bonding (and shared identity) generates norms and creates expectations of behaviour. At this level of strong emotional ties, trust and reciprocity are embedded values. To outsiders, this is recognisable as an athletic culture.

CONCLUSION

During the socialisation phases of the athlete's career, it is clear that the relationships with these social agents change over time, with recognisable manifestations. Relationships differ with role-crossing (father-coach and teacher-coach), constituting unique challenges and opportunities. On critical reflection, the narratives reflect that there is a clear priority shift in the roles of social agents as the needs of the athlete change and as a result, their reliance on certain relationships alters. It is apparent that there is a need to educate and equip athletes and their social agents with knowledge and skills. In this case, the sport-parent and team mates should know how best to play a supportive and motivational role.

The knowledge and skill set of coaches particularly relate to their roles as mentor, technical advisor and trainer, as well as being an expert within the particular discipline and address the holistic development of the athlete whilst ensuring an enabling environment. The very antecedents of parental support (financial, psycho-social and motivational) are core elements.

Gender-dynamics offer peer support structures among insiders (fellow athletes), and this affiliation serves as an identity reference. The coach increasingly becomes the role model (high school years) and this remains a significant influence in the construction of enabling relationships and helping form an athletic identity for competitive student-athletes. Understanding these role identification shifts has implications for coaching, teaching and parenting, which when well-articulated, can form a crucial enabling environment and supportive network.

REFERENCES

- BANDURA, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- BERNARD, H.R. & RYAN, G.W. (2010). *Analysing qualitative data: Systematic approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- BLOOM, G.A.; LOUGHEAD, T.M. & NEWIN, J. (2008). Team building for youth sport. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation and Dance*, 79(9): 44-47.
- BROWN, B.A.; FRANKEL, B.G. & FENNELL, M.P. (1989). Hugs or shrugs: Parental and peer influence on continuity of involvement in sport by female adolescents. *Sex Roles: Journal of Research*, 20(7/8): 397-412.
- BURNETT, C. (2003). The multi-faceted development of the athlete-student in the South African context. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 9(1): 1-19.
- BURNETT, C. (2005). Influences on the socialisation of South African elite athletes. *South African Journal for Research in Sport, Physical Education and Recreation*, 27(1): 37-50.
- BURNETT, C. (2010). Student versus athlete: Professional socialisation influx. *African Journal for Physical, Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 16(4): 93-104.
- CANADIAN SPORT FOR LIFE (2011). "Long-Term Athlete Development (LTAD)". Hyperlink: [www.canadiansportforlife.ca/.../LTAD%20Downloads%20Eng/LTAD_4_20page_summary.pdf]. Retrieved on 18 April 2011.
- COAKLEY, J. (2011). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies* (10th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- COAKLEY, J. & BURNETT, C. (2014). *Sport in society: Issues and controversies in Southern Africa*. Pretoria: Van Schaik.
- COAKLEY, J. & DONNELLY, P. (Eds.) (1999). *Inside sports*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- DOMINGUES, M. & GONÇALVES, C. (2013). The role of parents in talented youth sport. Does context matter? *Polish Journal of Sport and Tourism*, 20(2): 117-122.
- FIELDING, N.G. (2009). Going out on a limb: Postmodernism and multiple method research. *Current Sociology*, 57(3): 427-447.
- HEDSTROM, R. & GOULD, D. (2004). *Research in youth sports: Critical issues status. White Paper summaries of existing literature*. East Lansing MI: Institute for the Study of Youth Sports.
- JOWETT, S. (2008). What makes coaches tick? The impact of coaches' intrinsic and extrinsic motives on their own satisfaction and that of their athletes. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine and Science in Sports*, 18: 664-673.
- JOWETT, S. & NTOUMANIS, N. (2004). The coach-athlete relationship questionnaire (CART-Q): Development and initial validation. *Scandinavian Journal of Medicine & Science in Sports*, 14(4): 245-257.

- KARWEIT, N. (1983). Extracurricular activities and friendship selection. In J.L. Epstein & N. Karweit (Eds.), *Friends in school: Patterns of selection and influence in secondary schools* (131-139). New York, NY: Academic Press.
- KIRK, D.; CARLSON, T.; O'CONNOR, A.; BURKE, P.; DAVIS, K. & GLOVER, S. (1997). The economic impact on families of children's participation in junior sport. *Australian Journal of Science and Medicine in Sport*, 29(2): 27-33.
- KNIGHT, C.J. & HOLT, N.L. (2013). Strategies used and assistance required to facilitate children's involvement in tennis: Parents' perspectives. *Sport Psychologist*, 27(3): 281-291.
- MAGEAU, G.A. & VALLERAND, R.J. (2003). The coach-athlete relationship: A motivational model. *Journal of Sport Sciences*, 21: 883-904.
- MAGUIRE, J.; JARVIE, G.; MANSFIELD, L. & BRADLEY, J. (2002). *Sport worlds: A sociological perspective*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.
- NORRIS, S.R. (2010). Long-term athlete development Canada: Attempting systems change and multi-agency cooperation. *Sports Medicine Reports*, 9(6): 379-382.
- MELNICK, M.J. & WANN, D.L. (2011). An examination of sport fandom in Australia: Socialization, team identification and fan behaviour. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46(4): 456-470.
- NUNOMURA, M. & OLIVEIRA, M.S. (2013). Parents' support in the sports career of young gymnasts. *Science of Gymnastics Journal*, 5(1): 5-17.
- PAPAIOANNOU, A.G.; AMPATZOGLOU, G.; KALOGIANNIS, P. & SAGOVITS, A. (2008). Social agents, achievement goals, satisfaction and academic achievement in youth sport. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 9(2): 122-141.
- PATRICK, H.; RYAN, A.M.; ALFRED-LIRO, C.; FREDRICKS, J.A.; HRUDA, L.Z. & ECCLES, J.S. (1999). Adolescents' commitment to developing talent: The role of peers in continuing motivation for sports and the arts. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 28(6): 741-763.
- STROOT, S.A. (2002). Socialisation and participation in sport. In A. Laker (Ed.), *The sociology of sport and physical education: An introductory reader* (129-147). London, UK: Routledge.
- TINTO, V. (2002). "Enhancing student persistence: Connecting the dots". Speech prepared for presentation at Optimizing the Nation's Investment: Persistence and success in postsecondary education. University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin. Hyperlink: [<http://www.wiscap.wisc.edu/publications/publications/419Tinto.pdf>]. Retrieved on 1 June 2013.
- VAUGHRAND, H. (2001). Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Marie Brohm: Their sciences of intelligibility and issues towards a theory of knowledge in the sociology of sport. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 36(2): 183-202.
- WATT, S.K. & MOORE, J.L. (2001). Who are student-athletes? *New Directions for Student Services*, 93: 7-18.
- WYLLEMAN, P.; ALFERMANN, D. & LAVALLEE, D. (2004). Career transitions in sport: European perspectives. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise*, 5(1): 7-20.

Miss L. HÖLL: Department of Sport and Movement Studies, Faculty of Health Sciences, University of Johannesburg, Doornfontein Campus, 37 Nind Street Doornfontein, John Orr Building, Johannesburg, Republic of South Africa. Tel.: +27 (0)11 559 3936, E-mail: lizetteh@uj.ac.za

(Subject Editor: Prof Babs Surujlal)