

1 Running head: RETIREMENT EXPERIENCES OF ELITE BALLET DANCERS

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4 Retirement experiences of elite ballet dancers: Impact of self-identity and social support

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Abstract

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2 This study examined the retirement experiences of elite ballet dancers. Particular emphasis
3 was placed on the influence of self identity and social support on the quality of adjustment to
4 retirement in elite ballet dancers. Six former international elite ballet dancers from a single
5 National Ballet Company in the UK participated in retrospective semi-structured interviews.
6 These interviews yielded transcripts that were analysed using content analysis. As expected,
7 the majority of dancers presented strong and exclusive athletic identities. Those dancers
8 presenting a strong and exclusive athletic identity at the point of retirement experienced
9 identity loss and confusion during the career transition process. Refuting our anticipated
10 outcome, the dancers primary social support network remained intact after career termination.
11 The dancers perceived this continued social support to positively influence the overall quality
12 of career transition experienced. In addition to social support, dancers adopted a combination
13 of coping strategies; predominantly retirement planning and redefinition of self. Future
14 research should focus on identifying specific adjustment difficulties associated with athletic
15 identity during retirement and should identify specific coping strategies adopted to counteract
16 these adjustment difficulties during career transition from dance.

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19 *Keywords:* Career transition, retirement, athletic identity, social support, elite ballet dancers
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1 Retirement experiences of elite ballet dancers: Impact of self-identity and social support

2 Athletic retirement, often referred to as career transition from sport, is defined as the
3 transitional process from participation in competitive sport to a post athletic career (Baillie &
4 Danish, 1992). It is widely acknowledged that athletes must adjust to their transition out of
5 sport (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Taylor & Lavalley, 2010; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). These
6 adjustments may include psychological, social, financial and occupational changes (Taylor &
7 Lavalley, 2010). For some athletes, retirement creates minimal stress and therefore the
8 adjustment to retirement is straightforward (Perna, Ahlgren, & Zaichkowsky, 1999). On the
9 other hand, the retirement process can be distressing and may require significant adjustment
10 (Blinde & Stratta, 1992: Werthner & Orlick, 1986). For these athletes, is it important to
11 identify the causes of these adjustment difficulties. It also is important to identify which
12 effective coping strategies are adopted by athletes during the career transition process.
13 Collectively, this information is relevant to Sports Psychologists working in the field to
14 identify those athletes most at risk of experiencing career transition difficulties.

15 The quality of the transitional process experienced by athletes is influenced by
16 multiple factors that are unique to the individual athlete. Schlossberg's (1981) Model of
17 Human Adaptation to Transition has been commonly used as a broad framework to
18 investigate career termination issues. Schlossberg defined a transition as "an event or non-
19 event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires
20 a corresponding change in ones behavior and relationships" (p.5). Within this model, the
21 transitional process experience depends upon the interaction of three sub-themes; i)
22 characteristics of the individual, *e.g.*, gender, age and previous exposure to transition, ii)
23 characteristics of the transition, *e.g.*, onset, role change and the degree of stress and, iii)
24 characteristics of the pre and post-transition environments, *e.g.*, the internal support systems,
25 institutional support and physical setting. Numerous researchers have adapted this model to

1 enhance application to athletic retirement (Baillie & Danish, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993;
2 Swain, 1991; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). One such adaptation was the addition of athletic
3 identity to characteristics of the individual (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Akin to the Schlossberg
4 (1981) model, Taylor & Ogilvie (1994) developed a sport-specific conceptual model of
5 adaptation to career transition. This model consists of a series of transition phases, (Taylor &
6 Ogilvie, 1994) that address issues faced during the career transition process from the
7 beginning of career transition through to the ultimate consequences of career transition
8 (Taylor & Lavalley, 2010). Importantly, within both models various factors that underpin the
9 quality of the career transition process were identified. These factors include age, voluntary
10 control over the decision to retire, developmental experiences, self-identity, perceptions of
11 control, pre retirement planning, coping strategies and social support. Therefore, to elucidate
12 transitional experiences from sport, self-identity, as a determinant of the quality of transition
13 experience and social support, as a coping strategy for the adjustments experienced during
14 career transition, provide the focus of the present study.

15 Self-identity is the most prominent psychological issue that influences the quality of
16 career transition from sport (Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985; Park, Lavalley & Tod, 2012). Self-
17 identity refers to a “clearly delineated self-definition...comprised of those goals, values and
18 beliefs which the person finds personally expressive and to which he / she is unequivocally
19 committed” (Waterman, 1985 p.6). In their pursuit of excellence, elite athletes often forego
20 activities outside of their sporting environment. This immersion in their sport creates a
21 limited identity composed almost entirely from this sport commitment (Brewer, Van Raalte,
22 & Petitpas, 2000). The exclusion of external influences often culminates in the athlete
23 developing a strong and exclusive athletic identity. Athletic identity is the degree to which
24 individuals define themselves within the athletic role (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993).
25 Although this exclusive identity can theoretically assist in the athlete’s endeavors of

1 excellence (Werthner & Orlick, 1986), it can be a disadvantage when adapting to career
2 transition from sport (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Indeed, a strong correlation has been reported
3 between athletic identity and the quality of career transition experienced (Grove, Lavalley &
4 Gordon, 1997).

5 During career transition from sport, athletic identity has been shown to influence the
6 relationship between levels of emotional / social changes and levels of distress experienced
7 (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997). Those athletes that develop an exclusive athletic
8 identity, whereby “the individual derives his / her self-identity exclusively from the athletic
9 role” (Brewer et al., 1993, p.239), are the most susceptible to experiencing adaptation
10 difficulties. Moreover, Baillie and Danish (1992) suggested athletes with strong and
11 exclusive athletic identities are less prepared for post athletic careers and experience athletic
12 retirement as an irreplaceable loss never to be recovered (Werthner & Orlick, 1986).
13 Therefore, the strength of the athletes’ identity directly influences the identity conflict they
14 experience at termination of their sporting careers (Ogilvie & Howe, 1986, Grove et al.,
15 1997). In turn, athletic identity also influences the time needed to acclimate to the changes
16 brought about by retirement (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997). Thus, athletic identity
17 is considered to be one of the main factors that influence the career transition experience and
18 time of adjustment to changes associated with retirement in athletes (Warriner & Lavalley,
19 2008).

20 The nature of some sports, such as gymnastics and swimming, requires athletes to
21 “maximize their career before puberty” (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p.127). This enmeshment
22 of their identity to their sport involvement impedes the attainment of true identity (Marcia,
23 1980) resulting in most gymnasts developing strong and exclusive athletic identities
24 (Warriner & Lavalley, 2008). Consequently, within retirement from elite gymnastics, identity
25 crisis is prevalent (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lavalley & Robinson, 2007; Warriner &

1 Lavallee, 2008). There are many parallels between gymnasts and ballet dancers, including the
2 extreme training from such an early age that coincide with the years assigned to exploration
3 and identity development (Lavallee and Robinson 2007). The intensive training of most
4 young dancers commences from the age of eleven at residential ballet schools. As a result,
5 subsequent exposure to identity forming stimuli outside the ballet environment at this
6 formative time is minimized. Within Developmental theory, adolescence has been recognized
7 as a time when individuals form a true self-identity (Chickering 1969; Erikson, 1968).
8 Therefore, drawing from the parallels between the gymnastic and ballet training
9 environments, the assumption can be made that ballet dancers are likely to develop strong
10 and exclusive athletic identities and this athletic identity will primarily be developed during
11 adolescence. Evidence suggests that elite ballets dancers, with strong and exclusive athletic
12 identities, experience identity crisis during the retirement process (Roncaglia, 2010). Thus,
13 the retirement experience of elite ballet dancers warrants further investigation with particular
14 attention to self-identity.

15 The adoption of coping strategies during the retirement process is also instrumental
16 for influencing the quality of career transition experienced (Grove, Lavallee, Gordon &
17 Harvey, 1998). During the career transition process, combinations of coping strategies are
18 adopted. These include acceptance, positive reinterpretation, pre retirement planning and
19 social support (Grove et al., 1997). Social support has been identified as key to experiencing
20 an optimal career transition (Murphy, 1995). Social support in sport constitutes the network
21 of people providing the athlete with both structural and functional support (Gould, Ekland &
22 Jackson, 1993). An athletes primary social support network commonly derives from their
23 athletic involvement (Coakley, 1983; Rosenfeld, Richman, & Hardy, 1989). Athletes tend to
24 be enmeshed, both socially and psychologically, within the sporting environment. The
25 majority of athlete's friends, acquaintances and other social interactions predominantly

1 revolve around this network, which originates from their athletic lives (Petitpas &
2 Champagne, 2000). Therefore, as a consequence of no longer being a fundamental part of the
3 team or organisation, an athlete's access to their primary social support network is often
4 diminished at career termination.

5 Within a sample of internationally experienced athletes, the career transition process
6 for many athletes was negatively affected due to the loss of social aspects relating to their
7 sport (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). The combination of limited social identity and access to a
8 support system external from the sport environment can lead to the athlete experiencing
9 significant distress stemming from possible isolation, loneliness and a lack of social support
10 during the career transitional process (Alfermann, 1995; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).
11 Therefore, social support is a vital factor influencing the quality of career transition from
12 sport (Schlossberg, 1993; Schlossberg et al., 1995).

13 Research into career transition from sport has focused on a broad range of sports.
14 However, to our knowledge only one study to date has investigated the transition experience
15 of elite ballet dancers (Roncaglia, 2006). However, to date no study has investigated the
16 combined effect of athletic identity and social support on the career transition experiences of
17 elite ballet dancers. Therefore, the overall aim of this study is to investigate the influence of
18 self identity and social support on the retirement experience of elite ballet dancers. Particular
19 focus will be placed on the impact athletic identity has on the quality of career transition from
20 dance. We anticipate that dancers with a strong athletic identity will experience difficulty
21 adapting to the challenges imposed by career transition from dance. Also attention will be
22 focused on the impact of social support as a coping strategy during career transition. We
23 anticipate that on retirement, the dancers primary social support network will dicipate and
24 therefore retired ballet dancers will experience feelings of isolation on career termination.

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Method

1 *Design*

2 The aim of the current study was to examine the effect of self-identity and social
3 support on the retirement experience of elite ballet dancers. To address this study aim, we
4 deemed an inductive, qualitative approach to be the most appropriate research design. This
5 research design allowed themes and categories relevant to the retirement experience to
6 emerge from data collected (Thomas 2006). The dataset was collected through semi-
7 structured qualitative interviews. Ethical approval for the study was received from the Local
8 School Research Ethics Committee within a University in the United Kingdom.

9 *Participants*

10 Six (2 males and 4 females) elite ballet dancers (mean \pm SD age: 36.2 ± 3.3 years
11 (range 32-39 years), age started dancing: 4.7 ± 3.1 years) were recruited. All participants
12 were former professional ballet dancers (mean \pm SD: career duration: 13.1 ± 4.4 years (range:
13 6-19 years), retirement age: 31.2 ± 4.1 years (range: 24–36 years)) and had been retired for at
14 least 3 years (mean \pm SD: time elapsed since retirement: 5.0 ± 2.4 years (range: 3-8 years)).
15 This criterion (≥ 3 years since retirement) was imposed to permit disengagement from elite
16 dance and therefore permit the investigation of the career transition process. Data collection
17 was discontinued after the sixth interview because the researchers felt confident that
18 *theoretical saturation* had been reached - i.e., no new raw data themes were revealed by the
19 participants (Strauss & Corbin 1998).

20 *Instrument (interview)*

21 In accordance with previous qualitative research into the retirement experience of
22 elite athletes (Lavallee & Robinson 2007, Warriner & Lavallee 2008), a predetermined
23 interview schedule was developed. The interview schedule was underpinned by
24 contemporary research on the retirement process from elite sport. The schedule consisted of

1 34 standardised open-ended questions and was designed to encourage participants to disclose
2 individual experiences on topics relevant to retirement from dance (Patton, 2002).

3 Prior to the main study, the first author (a former female ballet dancer) undertook a
4 90-minute semi-structured pilot interview with a former ballet dancer. This pilot served to
5 hone the researcher's interview technique and highlight ways to improve the interview
6 schedule. Although no changes were made to the schedule, certain probes were added to
7 elucidate the participant's responses. For example, in relation to the question ("How did you
8 feel about your world when you were dancing?"), the added probes included ("was it happy,
9 was it safe, was it stressful, etc.?").

10 The interview schedule followed a temporal path of the participants' experiences.
11 First, the period prior to the decision to retire and leading to current day was addressed. Next,
12 a question regarding the participants' introduction to ballet was posed. This question was
13 intended to ease participants into the interview. Ensuing questions focused on, i) factors that
14 contribute to retirement (i.e., "What factors contributed to your decision to retire?"), ii) their
15 retirement experiences (i.e., "Can you tell me what it was like directly after you retired / in
16 the ensuing months / in the years after?"), iii) issues of identity ("How did you feel about
17 yourself and who you were in the world?") and iv) support provided ("Did you have support
18 when you were dancing?"). Participants were given every opportunity to expand on their
19 individual retirement experiences by inviting them to identify reasons for their experiences.

20 *Procedure*

21 Face-to-face interviews were conducted in a convenient and quiet location. The author
22 selected face-to-face interviews to facilitate in the observation of social cues. Opdenakker
23 (2006) noted the importance of observing social cues when interviewees are responding to
24 questions pertinent to their experiences.

1 The interviews were conducted in the presence of the primary researcher and
2 interviewee, only. Prior to interview, participants were informed how their data would be
3 recorded and analysed. A consent form assuring confidentiality (except on disclosure of any
4 harmful or illegal activities) was read and signed). This form explained the opportunity to
5 cease the interview and remove data at anytime without provision of reason. Participants
6 were informed that a copy of their transcript would be provided for inspection and that they
7 would have one week to request removal of their data. Following written consent, an audio-
8 recorder was switched on and a semi-structured interview commenced. The duration of the
9 interview was between 86 and 48 minutes. Thereafter, the interview was transcribed and
10 mailed to the participant for verification. Lincoln & Guba (1985) reported that member
11 checking provides validity of an account, and is therefore crucial for establishing credibility
12 in qualitative analysis.

13 *Data presentation*

14 A six-step procedure was used to inductively analyse qualitative data (see steps 1-6
15 below). This approach was adapted from the work of Gould et al. (1993).

- 16 1. The first author transcribed all six audio-recorded interviews verbatim.
- 17 2. The investigator (the first author) read and re-read all six transcripts until familiarity was
18 achieved.
- 19 3. The first author identified raw data themes (quotes or paraphrased quotes that captured
20 major ideas conveyed) that characterised each dancers responses within the interview
21 schedule and developed an ideographic profile or summary abstracts of each dancer.
- 22 4. The interviewer decided upon the ideographic profiles of each dancer following extensive
23 analysis of all raw data themes. Because the first investigator conducted the interviews
24 and had the advantage of talking directly to the study participants, her opinion on

- 1 profiling was considered most salient. Therefore, no other researchers were involved in
2 the profiling process.
- 3 5. Sectional raw data themes characterising each dancer in Step 4 were compiled across
4 dancers. Such profiling resulted in a listing of raw data themes (for example: “preparation
5 made smooth transition”, within each subsection that encompassed the sum total of
6 responses by all six dancers.
- 7 6. An inductive analysis was conducted to identify common themes of greater generality
8 from the lists of subsection raw data themes generated in Step 5 (Scanlan, Ravizza &
9 Stein, 1989). Second-level themes were labeled “higher order themes,” (for example:
10 “retirement planning”, see table 1) while the highest-level themes (those of greatest
11 abstraction, for example: “regaining control”, see table 1) were labeled “general
12 dimensions.”

13 **Results**

14 The content analysis revealed 146 raw data themes. These data were clustered into 20
15 higher order themes from which four general dimensions subsequently emerged. These
16 general dimensions were: i) dancers journey and formation of identity pre- and post-
17 retirement; ii) imbalance of power; iii) regaining control; and iv) dancers network. Table 1
18 illustrates themes and data contained within each dimension. In order to limit space and
19 facilitate readability, the most prevalent themes to emerge in this dataset will be discussed.

20 **Dimension 1: Dancers journey and formation of identity pre- and post-retirement**

21 The following seven higher order themes were included in this dimension: traits +/- of
22 ballet dancer, training, early career, identity, ballet is life, post retirement and relationship
23 with dance post retirement. This dimension provided a backdrop for the rest of the study by
24 providing an insight into the unique training environment of ballet dancers, the total sacrifice
25 and dedication needed to achieve and the subsequent developmental impact on identity

1 formation. It also illustrated the propensity for dancers to over invest in the athletic role and
2 therefore, potentially develop an exclusive athletic identity and identity foreclosure. This over
3 investment in the athletic role makes the dancers susceptible to identity confusion during the
4 adaptive process of career transition from dance (Park et al. 2012).

5 **Identity.** Five dancers had developed very strong and exclusive dancer identities
6 because they had studied at vocational ballet schools and had been immersed into the life of a
7 ballet dancer from a very early age. Many of these participants closely identified themselves
8 with the dancer role, as illustrated in the following quote: *“I suppose it’s something that I’ve*
9 *been doing for so long. I started when I was four. It shaped my identity, I feel I will always be*
10 *a ballet dancer or have been.”* They would clearly define themselves as ballet dancers rather
11 than ballet being something they did. Consequently, during the career transition process,
12 many dancers experienced adjustment difficulties, with four out of the six dancers expressing
13 overwhelming identity loss: *“when I retired I think you kind of lose yourself”*. These
14 participants acknowledge the huge formative role ballet has played in shaping their identity.

15 Many participants expressed difficulty in separating themselves from the dancer role
16 post retirement: *I can’t pull it apart. I can’t say this is the influence it’s had on me because*
17 *it’s in me, because it is me, so it’s hard for me to think of it as separate things.”* Many still
18 feel they are primarily ballet dancers: Therefore, they define themselves as ballet dancers
19 who now have another career. One dancer noted: *“I think for me, if I’m being totally honest,*
20 *it would be I’m a ballet dancer that’s now a therapist but I think that’s the only way that I*
21 *can really describe it.”* with another stating: *“it would give a false impression of who I was if*
22 *I didn’t say that [state he was a ballet dancer].”*

23 One participant with a strong athletic identity began to disengage from dance a few
24 years prior to retirement. He sought outside influences, opened his circle of friends and
25 subsequently began defining himself as person who did ballet:

1 *“Maybe it becomes something more that you do and other things take over in our life.*
2 *Maybe yeah I would say initially because you are young it’s your whole world I*
3 *would describe myself as a ballet dancer but now it would be something that I did,*
4 *and think latterly as well, as it was my job. Even though I loved it, it was my job.”*

5 In contrast, ballet was not the only source of self-definition for one of the participant ballet
6 dancers. He noted:

7 *“Ballet just kind of happened, it happened that I went to the school where my sister*
8 *was and it happened that I was quite good at it and I enjoyed the attention but I*
9 *wasn’t like one of those boys that decided I was going to be a ballet dancer no matter*
10 *what...I felt it was something I did.”*

11 Interestingly, neither participant presenting a broad identity at the point of retirement
12 struggled with either identity loss or confusion on career termination.

13 ***Ballet is life.*** Given that five participants’ demonstrated very strong athletic identities,
14 it clearly emerged that ballet was their passion and life. One participant explained: *“Ballet’s*
15 *not a job, it’s a dream it’s a passion. You don’t care you don’t get paid very much for it. I’d*
16 *wanted to do it all my life so like I say, I’d still say to this day I was so driven so disciplined.*
17 *So determined that almost nothing else existed.”* These sentiments were echoed throughout
18 the majority of interviews with another participant stating that: *“I would say my life was*
19 *really all about ballet.”* This total immersion in dance limited the dancers’ perspective that
20 often increased their emotional reaction to experiences, leaving them emotionally vulnerable.
21 One dancer stated: *“Cause you’re passionate about it, the highs are really high and the lows*
22 *are complete devastation. It’s like your world is about to end because you didn’t get a*
23 *particular role.”*

24 The sacrifice and total dedication to dance precluded all other influences in their lives
25 and culminated in one participant recollecting: *“I mean [my now husband] was ditched*

1 *several times because he got in the way, anything that stopped you doing exactly what you*
2 *wanted [in dance] couldn't exist."*

3 Post retirement, the sacrifice and commitment many dancers had invested in their
4 journey to achieve left many participants with a sense of irreplaceable loss and a lack of
5 direction in their lives. One participant stated:

6 *"I've drained myself of every trait it takes to be a dancer and now that it's gone from*
7 *me on one hand it's such a relief not to have that anymore but at the same time it's*
8 *really upsetting too, there's nothing else to dream for, for yourself."*

9 Another participant was still searching for a replacement to dance:

10 *"I don't think anything is going to feel the way ballet did because we've done it from*
11 *such a young age and it's in you and also [post ballet] you're doing something so*
12 *completely new, are you ever going to feel like this is me, this is what I'm going to do,*
13 *maybe I haven't found the right thing or maybe you're never going to feel like it*
14 *because nothing is going to feel as ballet did."*

15 **Post retirement.** Retirement from the ballet company initiated a myriad of individual
16 adjustments and emotions for the participants including: i) hope - *"the place I was at before I*
17 *left, there was nothing that could have been worse and then suddenly you're doing something*
18 *and there's loads of hope again",* ii) relief - *"in a way I felt a bit relieved not having to walk*
19 *in and stand in front of the mirror and start the critical process"* and iii) loss - *"I've missed*
20 *people I've missed the place that I belonged".*

21 The change in their daily routine and focus was particularly challenging for the
22 majority of participants. Two participants struggled to adapt from a submissive role as a
23 dancer to an authoritative role and having a voice: *"I really found that an adjustment where I*
24 *had to change my role slightly where I was the one to provide the care and guidance that was*

1 *a challenge and now I've gone into dance education as well you're looking after them, so*
2 *that's been the biggest challenge for me."*

3 On reflection, all participants expressed a sense of pride having achieved the standard
4 required to be an elite ballet dancer. However, this pride was tinged with some regret by three
5 dancers who failed to achieve more challenging roles (i.e. principal or soloist rank within the
6 ballet company). The majority expressed no regret at leaving and felt it was the right
7 decision. However, one participant wished she had remained longer in the company and
8 persevered with her career in dance: *"I do have regret, I think when I look back I wish I'd*
9 *stuck in maybe...if I'd just had more guts to stick it a bit longer to see if I could have done*
10 *more, but I didn't."*

11 ***Relationship with dance post retirement.*** Post retirement, dance still plays a role in
12 five participants lives: *"it's funny cause I always thought I didn't want anything to do with it*
13 *after I left. You sort of find yourself drawn to what you know I suppose."* Another participant
14 is hoping to use her post dance training within the dance world. Only one participant has cut
15 themselves off completely: *"Now hardly any role at all, sometimes I think I've actually*
16 *maybe cut myself off too much from ballet."*

17 **Dimension 2: Imbalance of power**

18 This dimension includes the following four higher order themes: Relationship with
19 director, experience in company, effect of de-selection and reasons for retirement. Overall,
20 within this dimension a clear picture emerged of the dancers perceived lack of control over
21 their careers. The dancers' relationship with the artistic director strongly influenced various
22 aspects of their career including the casting, which subsequently greatly impacted on the
23 dancers sense of achievement, satisfaction and self-worth.

24 ***Relationship with director.*** Five participants reported a volatile relationship with their
25 artistic director. All the dancers expressed a general unease regarding the director's

1 unpredictable moods. These moods had considerable impact on their professional interaction.

2 One participant elaborated:

3 *“I think the way they reacted to certain situations...I always felt that they brought*
4 *those into the studio so if they were in a bad mood everything was awful even if it was*
5 *not, and if they were in a great mood everything was terrific whether it was or*
6 *not...that kind of misguided direction just left everybody I think, very confused.”*

7 The director’s unpredictable personality impacted on the daily working environment
8 and left the dancers unsure what was expected of them:

9 *“He/she would contradict themselves quite a lot... I remember once being told the*
10 *way I danced something was something they specifically would never ask for in a*
11 *dancer and didn’t want that and then the following week told me to dance in that very*
12 *way he/she just said they didn’t want which was really confusing.”*

13 These fluctuations in moods left the atmosphere in the studio very unsettled, leaving
14 the dancers feeling insecure and eager to please: *“my relationship with my director was*
15 *based upon fear, they were up here and I was some stupid dancer trying to please him.”*

16 Unsurprisingly, many dancers felt worn down and unappreciated: *“It didn’t work well...the*
17 *aggressive approach didn’t work well with me, cause I just felt undermined and a bit*
18 *battered.”* One participant reported an “alright” relationship with her director. However, she
19 acknowledged how fortunate she was: *“It was an OK relationship... He/she was never*
20 *horrible to me, I was quite lucky that way.”*

21 ***Experience in company.*** When the dancers were younger, a general sense of
22 anticipation and living their dream was felt and all participants enjoyed life in the company.
23 The casting had a direct impact on the dancers’ sense of fulfillment and confidence: *“If you*
24 *wanted to be involved and you weren’t cast in that for whatever reason, that would always*

1 *knock your confidence a bit and be a disappointment, and I suppose the other end of the scale*
2 *when you got to be cast in a role you wanted to do.”*

3 The constant uncertainty of the casting often left the dancers feeling frustrated and
4 vulnerable at the lack of control in their career path. One participant expressed: *“I felt like*
5 *[the casting] had been decided before they’d come in and almost making a fool of myself just*
6 *to show him/her I want this.”*

7 ***Reasons for retirement.*** The overriding reason for retirement with all six participants
8 was de-selection and lack of progression. Increasing age was also pertinent in the decision.

9 Many dancers felt worn down by the constant rejection during the casting process and
10 drained and exhausted by continually striving to prove themselves and be selected:

11 *“I’m just setting myself up for fall after fall if I stay, and what does that do to someone’s*
12 *person, their soul, I don’t know, I just don’t think it’s going to end good for me, that’s how I*
13 *felt at the time.”*

14 Many dancers expressed feeling unappreciated and demoralized:

15 *“Before I left I almost felt invisible to him/her, there was always somebody more*
16 *important...I felt that I was just this spare part in the company, to keep things going, to jump*
17 *in if someone had a sore throat or a sore knee”.* The constant rejection also led to some
18 dancers experiencing difficulties in motivating themselves: *“I didn’t have enough fight in me*
19 *to stay, people would come in to do workshops and stuff and I’d lost interest.”*

20 Pre retirement, it emerged that the majority of the participants were very unhappy and
21 unfulfilled. This manifested in participants wanting to take control of their future success and
22 happiness: *“It was just I wanted to have control over my success in life.”*

23 **Dimension 3: Regaining control**

24 This dimension includes the following four higher order themes: Retirement planning,
25 needed to leave with direction, coping with retirement and financial. Overall, this dimension

1 captured the participants' adjustment in the initial stages of the transition process and
2 identified some of the coping strategies they adopted whilst gaining personal control over
3 their future on the cessation of their dancing career.

4 **Retirement planning.** A few years prior to retirement, all participants had toyed with
5 retirement planning engaging the professional services of the 'Dancers Career Development
6 Fund'. At that time, some dancers found the pressures of work had restricted their capacity to
7 focus on their future: "*But then you're so tired and you don't have mental capacity then to
8 come home and think about what I want to do next with my life and research courses.*" Many
9 dancers experienced difficulty in identifying their future career path in unfamiliar
10 environments: "*You're doing something that you've been doing since you were tiny you
11 know, it's what you know. What do you do afterwards?*"

12 However, all dancers seriously commenced planning a year prior to retiring from the
13 company. Therefore, all six dancers had a plan in place on retirement.

14 **Needed to leave with direction.** The need to leave with direction emerged as an
15 important factor for all the dancers. In the words of one dancer they: "*Needed the security of
16 having something to go to.*" Consequently with plans in place, all participants reported
17 managing the career transition from dance smoothly: "*I felt very able, I knew what I'd
18 wanted I spent a year working on it.*" On reflection, the dancers felt the act of planning has
19 greatly aided the adaptation process from dance with one dancer reporting: "*I would say what
20 made it smooth was being prepared having something in place took away that fear element of
21 god what am I going to do*". Interestingly, the dancers all emphasised their need to
22 commence the new transition immediately:

23 "*Looking back I probably could have had a year off... I couldn't have done that, I
24 had a week from when I stopped dancing and when I started my course so there
25 wasn't much thinking time or preparation before.*"

1 ***Coping with retirement.*** On leaving the company, one participant had a six month
2 round the world ticket booked. She explained:

3 *“I’d just left the company and I’d just left the biggest part of my life... I knew if I’d*
4 *stayed in the country and stayed around all my friends and everything that I knew that*
5 *was connected with [the company], it probably would have messed me up at the*
6 *time.”*

7 Other participants expressed the need to keep busy. All participants: *“initially wanted some*
8 *distance from it [ballet]”* before reintroducing themselves into the dance world in their new
9 role.

10 **Dimension 4: Dancers network**

11 This dimension includes the following three higher order themes: Support, work life
12 balance and friendships. The overall theme to emerge in this dimension was the positive
13 influence support and friendships had on the adjustment to retirement from dance.

14 ***Support.*** All participants felt thoroughly supported both pre and post retirement. One
15 participant cited his wife as his primary source of support. The five remaining participants’
16 primary source of support derived from within the company environment: *“I felt supported in*
17 *that I had a great network of friends at work.”* Post retirement, regular access to this support
18 network diminished as the dancers were no longer in the company environment: *“The only*
19 *difficult thing is that you don’t see them every day, you have to make time to keep those*
20 *going.”* However, surprisingly, the participants maintained the same level of support from
21 this network during the retirement process, with one participant stating:

22 *“The support in fact probably got more if anything, cause obviously friends and*
23 *family are... particularly family are very much out for you as a person and not as a*
24 *dancer, so if anything externally with [my husband] ...it was greater probably.”*

1 Two participants found great re-assurance by sharing their retirement experience with
2 former dancers this enabled them to: “*See people do get on with their lives and are*
3 *successful.*” This unfaltering support the participants received had a significant impact on the
4 adjustment experienced by the dancers. Conversely, participants unanimously reported
5 receiving no support during the retirement process from the company itself, some were
6 explicit in their wish not to receive support due to the strained relationship with the artistic
7 director: “*I felt supported by family and friends I didn’t want any involvement with [the*
8 *artistic director].*” All of the dancers expressed gratitude for the financial support received
9 from the Dancers Career Development Fund, stating this provided them with the security to
10 embark on their training without financial concerns.

11 ***Friendships.*** It was evident from these interview data that friendship was a vital
12 lifeline for all the dancers existence within the company environment. Many participants
13 expressed the depth of friendship with one stating: “*I’ve made the best friends of my life from*
14 *the ballet company.*” The bond is particularly strong due to the experiences shared while
15 totally immersing themselves in the dance environment: “*The amazing friends that we’ve all*
16 *got probably wouldn’t be so strong if we hadn’t been through, what we’ve been through*
17 *together so that strength will carry on and never diminish because the foundations are so*
18 *strong.*” The participants’ social network was mainly limited to socializing and often living
19 with fellow dancers: “*We lived together so it was overlapping all the time the friendship as*
20 *colleagues and then outside of work*”, therefore, limiting their social identity whilst
21 confounding their dancer identity: “*That strong sense of friendship and community is*
22 *something that obviously I don’t think you get in a lot of workplaces but I think because we*
23 *had to tour together you know you’re inside each other’s pockets all the time, you really*
24 *know each other inside and out, and that’s quiet special.*”

1 artistic director-dancer relationship. Within a ballet company, the artistic director selects
2 dancers for each production through an individual casting process. This casting process
3 significantly impacted on the dancers sense of self-worth and confidence and resulted in the
4 dancers feeling rejected, unvalued and lacking control. This perceived imbalance of control
5 appeared to be exacerbated by the volatile nature of the artistic directors personality and by
6 the prescriptive lives the dancers experienced throughout their career. This limited identity
7 exploration and imbalance of control within the artistic director-dancer relationship likely
8 contributed to 5 out of 6 dancers in the present study developing strong and exclusive athletic
9 identities.

10 Interestingly, 4 out of 6 dancers experienced varying degrees of identity loss during
11 career transition. Notably, those dancers that experienced identity loss had presented strong
12 and exclusive athletic identities at the time of retirement. This observation is in agreement
13 with previous work that revealed a correlation between a strong and exclusive athletic
14 identity up to the point of retirement and a predisposition for experiencing career transition
15 difficulties (Brewer et al., 1993; Grove et al., 1997). Thus, taken together these data provide
16 strong evidence that a clear relationship exists between level of identity loss experienced
17 during retirement and the degree to which dancers invested in the athletic role during their
18 career.

19 To the contrary, two ballet dancers in the present study did not experience identity
20 loss during retirement. One dancer maintained a 'good' life balance and therefore his self-
21 identity was composed from multiple dimensions. The other dancer maintained a strong
22 athletic identity for the majority of his career. Interestingly, prior to onset of retirement, this
23 dancer actively sought to broaden his self-identity and thus diminished his athletic identity.
24 Prior work has reported that elite performers such as athletes and dancers may positively
25 avoid experiencing identity issues at the onset of retirement by proactively reducing their

1 athletic identity (Grove et al., 1997; Lally, 2007). Drawing on the present findings, it is
2 possible that this proactive (and conscious) effort to reduce athletic identity was responsible
3 for preventing perceived feelings of identity loss and confusion during this dancers retirement
4 process. Future research should aim to fully elucidate the impact of ‘proactive redefinition of
5 self’ prior to disengagement from a dance career on the overall retirement experience of elite
6 ballet dancers. Particular emphasis of future studies should be placed on identity confusion or
7 loss. As an interesting side-point, the quality of adjustment experienced by the dancers in this
8 study was not dependent upon gender. However, a noteworthy observation is, that both male
9 participants reported experiencing some adjustment difficulties but experienced no identity
10 confusion at the onset of retirement. Therefore, attention to gender in future studies of elite
11 ballet dancers retirement experiences would be recommended.

12 A combination of factors can be attributed to the dancers decision to retire. However,
13 the dancers’ perceived lack of control over their career was evidently the overriding factor.
14 Five out of the six dancers retired of their own volition, however, it clearly emerged from
15 these data that de-selection was the overriding factor informing the dancers decision to retire.
16 Therefore, although the act of resignation was voluntary, it is clear the contributing factors
17 leading up to retirement were out of their control. Previous athletic retirement literature
18 reports ‘control of decision’ to be a significant factor mediating the quality of adjustment to
19 retirement (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014; Taylor & Lavalley, 2010). Thus, voluntary
20 retirement has been reported to be the ‘ideal’ cause of retirement. Our data concur with Kerr
21 & Dacyshyn’s (2000) findings that, in reality, perceived voluntary retirement often may not
22 be of the athletes’ own accord. Therefore, it is suggested that when researching retirement in
23 both dancers and athletes, studies should examine causes of retirement and not solely whether
24 the act of retirement itself was voluntary. Furthermore, awareness that voluntary retirement

1 may be disguising an uncontrollable cause will assist practitioners in predicting possible
2 career adjustment difficulties.

3 On retirement, dancers embraced the independence afforded to them. For the first
4 time in their lives, dancers were able to express feelings of relief at being in control of their
5 destiny. To the contrary, the control afforded did pose problems for some dancers. Some
6 dancers experienced difficulty adjusting to the personal control and sense of independence
7 that retirement had afforded. Interestingly, those dancers that presented strong athletic
8 identities experienced greater difficulties adapting to independence. These findings are akin
9 to those of Warriner & Lavalley (2008) that demonstrated an association between a perceived
10 lack of control in sport and athletic identity. Therefore, the relationship between athletic
11 identity and perceived control of the dancers career seemed to impact on whether
12 independence was perceived as a positive or negative challenge during retirement. Lack of
13 control often associated with elite sport contributes to independence issues on career
14 termination (Miller & Kerr, 2002). Hence, assisting dancers to navigate through this major
15 change of control during retirement may assist the quality of career adjustment experienced.

16 A secondary observation in this study was to investigate the effect of social support
17 on the career transition experience. Typically, athletes report the loss of their primary social
18 support network on retirement and hence experience feelings of isolation, loneliness and
19 social exclusion (Alfermann, 1985; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Therefore, we anticipated
20 that dancers would experience exclusion from their primary social support network after
21 retirement. However, contrary to expectation, in the present study, we demonstrated that all
22 dancers reported receiving the same, if not greater, levels of social support on career
23 termination. This continued receipt of social support was reported to greatly assist in the
24 career transition process of the cohort of dancers recruited in the present study.

1 It emerged from our data that the dancers' primary social support network revolved
2 around the company environment and this support network remained intact post retirement.
3 The company had employed all dancers for six years or more and therefore lasting
4 friendships had been built. These friendships likely explain why this social support network
5 remained intact. However, it is important to note that the enduring friendships developed by
6 dancers in this study may not be representative of all ballet companies. Therefore, future
7 research should investigate a different sample of elite ballet dancers to identify if the dancers'
8 experiences of social support presented herein can be generalized to all ballet dancers during
9 the retirement process. From a practical standpoint and in light of these findings, it may be
10 suggested that practitioners encourage dancers to expand their support network prior to
11 disengagement from dance.

12 Dancers required differing types of social support at various time points during the
13 retirement process. Interestingly, in addition to their existing support network, dancers
14 received support from other sources. The introduction of these new sources of social support
15 may have contributed to the dancers perception that their primary support network was
16 sustained. Cutrona and Russell (1990) posit that dependent on the specific source of stress,
17 certain forms of social support such as; tangible and emotional, may be more beneficial. In
18 the present study, we did not directly investigate the relationship between the source of stress
19 experienced and the form of social support received by dancers throughout the retirement
20 process. Hence, as recommended by Grove et al. (1997) and Lally (1997), a longitudinal
21 study looking at various time points throughout the retirement process is warranted to assist
22 with the identification of elite ballet dancers specific support needs throughout the retirement
23 process.

24 A noteworthy observation from the present study was that two dancers particularly
25 benefited from confiding with recently retired ballet dancers during the retirement adjustment

1 process. Accordingly, based on the results of a study in elite athletes, Lavalley et al. (1997)
2 proposed that confiding the emotions and feelings linked with retirement from sport
3 positively effected the overall career adjustment experience. In the present study, all dancers
4 reported receiving no direct social support from the company. Hence, there was an
5 overwhelming feeling amongst dancers of being disregarded and not valued. These
6 experiences are commonly reported during career transition from sport (Sinclair & Orlick,
7 1993). One potential solution to overcoming this perceived lack of support could be the
8 appointment of recently retired dancers in the role of mentors within the dance company
9 environment. The company's provision of this service may assist the dancers in feeling
10 valued and supported throughout the retirement process and should be a considered coping
11 strategy that can be applied within the field.

12 Alongside social support, dancers employed a combination of coping strategies during
13 the retirement process. These included positive reinterpretation of self, pre retirement
14 planning and keeping busy post retirement. This use of multiple coping strategies supports
15 the findings of a previous study that reported the adoption of emotion focused, problem
16 focused and avoidance orientated-strategies to assist athletes during career transition (Grove
17 et al., 1997). With regards to the present study and as discussed previously, the employment
18 of positive reinterpretation was demonstrated to positively affect the quality of career
19 transition. Pre retirement planning is reported to have a positive effect on the quality of the
20 career transition process (Martin, Fogarty, & Albion, 2014; Taylor & Lavalley, 2010). All
21 dancers in the present study adopted retirement planning at least a year before retirement. A
22 strong priority for all dancers was the attainment of a new direction prior to leaving the
23 company. Interestingly, in a study of Canadian international athletes, 98% reported having
24 something of interest to go to upon career termination (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Many
25 dancers attributed pre retirement planning to exhibit a positive influence on the quality of

1 their career transition. However, two dancers expressed difficulty finding the time, or energy,
2 to research future career options when both mentally and physically exhausted from their
3 working day. This outcome was not surprising given that elite sporting environments require
4 immersion and total commitment which leave the athlete minimal time or energy to plan for
5 their future (Lavalley, 2005; Gordon & Grove, 1996; Taylor & Ogilvie, 2001). Indeed, it has
6 been well documented that many coaches discourage the athlete focusing on retirement issues
7 for fear that it has a negative effect on performance (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1981).

8 In addition, athletes with a new focus post retirement are more likely to experience
9 ‘smoother’ transition from sport than their counterparts without a new focus (Schlossberg,
10 Waters & Goodman, 1995; Taylor & Lavalley, 2010; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Moreover,
11 the attainment of a new direction provided by retirement planning is closely related to
12 identity shift processing, due to the athletes change of role post retirement (Kerr & Dacyshyn,
13 2000; Lally, 2007). All the dancers started transitioning into new roles immediately after
14 leaving the company. There was a general sense of urgency to commence work or training
15 immediately upon retirement. All dancers planned their date of resignation to coincide with
16 beginning their new job or training. Keeping busy has been identified as beneficial in
17 reducing difficulties experienced during the career transition (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008). The
18 majority of dancers stated that post career they were so busy that there was no time to think
19 about the life they had just left. Hence, this avoidance strategy further assisted the dancers
20 during the career transition process. To summarize, in this study, the adoption of emotion-
21 (social support and re-definition of self) and problem focused (pre-retirement planning)
22 coping strategies, as well as an avoidance-orientated coping strategy (keeping busy) may
23 have benefitted the career transition process of elite ballet dancers. Future research is required
24 to reaffirm the impact of these coping strategies on the quality of adjustment with elite ballet
25 dancers.

1 It must be acknowledged that the present study has strengths and limitations. In terms
2 of subject recruitment, all ballet dancers were selected from a single ballet company.
3 Therefore, on a positive note, the sample selected may be deemed to be highly homogenous.
4 However, it could be argued that limiting the sample to one Ballet Company restricted the
5 generalization of results to broader populations both within dance and other sports. With
6 regards to the retrospective design of the study, although advantageous in elucidating the
7 participants' experiences, from a point of perspective this design may be considered
8 problematic due to the possibility that memory decay and faulty recall ensued (Kerr &
9 Dacysan, 2000; Brewer, Van Raalte, Linder & Van Raalte, 1991). To rectify this limitation,
10 future prospective longitudinal studies should be conducted during the retirement process of
11 elite ballet dancers.

12 To conclude, in the present study, the dancers that exhibited a strong and exclusive
13 athletic identity at the point of retirement experienced identity loss and confusion during
14 career transition. It clearly emerged that training environment greatly contributed to limiting
15 the dancers identity formation. As expected, all dancers experienced varying levels of
16 adjustment difficulties on retirement from dance. However, adjustment difficulties were more
17 pronounced in dancers with strong and exclusive athletic identities. In general, the transition
18 from dance was perceived by dancers to be smooth. The adoption of social support, alongside
19 other coping strategies such as redefinition of self and pre-retirement planning, positively
20 contributed to the dancers overall adjustment to career transition from dance. Further research
21 is needed to lend support to our recommendation that the augmentation of a career transition
22 programme for elite ballet dancers with a multidimensional approach would positively
23 influence and assist elite ballet dancers navigation through the career transition process from
24 dance. In addition, future research would benefit from identifying specific adjustment
25 difficulties associated with strong or exclusive athletic identity.

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24

- 1 Table 1
- 2 Higher order themes identified in each general dimension

General dimension	Higher order themes
Dancers journey and formation of identity pre- and post-retirement	Traits + / - of ballet dancer (characteristic of ballet dancer) Training Early career Identity Ballet is life Post retirement Relationship with dance post retirement
Imbalance of power	Relationship with director Experience in company Effect of de-selection Reasons for retirement
Regaining control	Retirement planning Needed to leave with direction Coping with retirement Financial
Dancers network	Support Work life balance Friendships