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A Heuristic Inquiry into Female Student-Athletes' Experiences of Identity Loss after Retirement from Sport

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A HEURISTIC INQUIRY INTO FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES

OF IDENTITY LOSS AFTER RETIREMENT FROM SPORT

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A HEURISTIC INQUIRY INTO FEMALE STUDENT-ATHLETES' EXPERIENCES

OF IDENTITY LOSS AFTER RETIREMENT FROM SPORT

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

School of Humanities and Social Sciences of St. Mary's University in

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Counselor Education and Supervision

by

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San Antonio, Texas

December 2018

ProQuest Number: 13812625

ProQuest 13812625

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the most supportive and nurturing people I know, my heart and soul, my parents: Dr. Herbert Ray Wooten Jr. and Elisa Buckingham Wooten. To my brother, Carson Ray Wooten, who provides me with inspiration and unconditional acceptance. Also, to my love. Russell Maclean Bodine, none of which would be possible without your love and support. This achievement is the product of a lifetime of your love, support, and unwavering belief in me.

Also, to the female athletes who inspired this research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of female athletes after they have retired from Division I athletics. The study sought to understand retired female athletes' subsequent transition out of athletics and their loss in identity, if any. With increased understanding of psychological and emotional facets of retired female athletes, counselors may be able to provide more appropriate and well-tailored interventions, support, and guidance required for adaptive transitions in identity. Six retired female athletes were recruited to describe their lived experiences of transition out of athletics in a single semi-structured audio interview. Data comprised participants' personal narratives describing their experiences, and participants' artifacts. Findings indicated that retired female athletes experienced a sense of identity loss and difficulty with transition out of athletics. The essence of their experiences was a disenfranchised grief in their transition processes, which was not readily recognized or acknowledged by their social supports, peers, or society. In addition, the findings suggest athletes may feel a socially unacceptable form of loss, when accompanied by shame, delayed coping and reformation of their identities.

CHAPTER I

THE PROBLEM AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE STUDY

The recognition of one's self as an athlete holds major significance to an individual's overall sense of purpose and accomplishment. Eldridge (1983) acknowledged the emphasis of athletics and sports in early human development as a means of achieving psychological, physical, and socially desirable traits and skills. Veritably, the role of "athlete" acts as a measurable and distinct component of an individual's identity. Researchers distinguished athletic identity as a distinct cognitive structure, or self-schema, that helps an individual process, contextualize, and interpret information about the self (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). With individual athletic participation being a part of a multi-dimensional self-concept, those who identify primarily with their athlete role interpret their life by the standards of their athletic accomplishments and failures.

According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1993), athletes described the life of a competitive athlete by its glorious peaks and debilitating valleys. Although athletes experience a spectrum of emotions throughout their sport careers, the most significant and potentially traumatic experience has yet to be encountered (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1993). Athletic retirement, also referred to as sport career termination, has been acknowledged as a potentially vulnerable and challenging time for athletes. As an athlete transitions out of sport, she may experience difficulty when adapting to life after sport. The retirement of an athlete and her transition out of sport into a new stage of life often signifies a transition in identity and emotional hardships that come along with relinquishing or renegotiating a new sense of self.

The concept of *transition* has ben associated with a variety of theories including processes of aging, dying, retirement, social support, lifespan development, and occupation and educational planning (Wylleman, Alferman, & Lavallee, 2004). According to Schlossberg (1981), identity transition has been associated with the occurrence of one or more specific events that act as a catalyst to an individual's "change in assumptions about oneself" and also provides social imbalance that surmounts the changes associated with daily living (Wylleman et al., 2004, p. 5). Athletes recognize transition out of sport as a vulnerable time, due to the significant change in lifestyle, personal, social, and financial factors. The importance of being able to renegotiate one's identity pre- and post-transition, while maintaining adequate mental health and resiliency, is paramount. Further research in this area is needed to facilitate optimal transitioning and wellness outcomes for retired athletes after they retire from sport.

The primary purpose of this study is to investigate the lived experiences of retired female athletes while seeking to understand their subsequent transition and loss in identity. A secondary purpose of this study is to discover retired athletes' methods of coping with their retirement and how they utilized their coping skills to transition in identity. With increased understanding of the psychological and emotional facets of retired athletes, more specifically female athletes, counseling, sport psychology professionals, and athletic coaches can provide appropriate and well-tailored interventions, support, and guidance required for adaptive transitions in identity. Given the inevitable end of an athlete's career, this study is useful in gaining improved understanding of the experience of how one renegotiates a lost identity and the potential emotional and identity difficulties athletes experience in their retirement.

Background of the Study

Theories on identity and career maturity indicate that college age years of individuals (i.e. ages 18-22) are a fundamental time of growth and subsequent change (Erikson, 1963). The development of one's self-concept is dependent on fundamental milestones achieved throughout adolescence. Specifically, participation in athletics, often beginning in childhood, is one of many areas that lends to the development of an individual's identity. To obtain a holistic view of athletes' transition out of athletics, the development and cultivation of one's identity is an important concept that needs to be recognized in the literature. However, the majority of previous literature focuses on age-related athletic retirement, sport ending trauma-related injuries, and career-related issues (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Lavalle, 2000; Park, Lavalle, & Tod, 2012; Reifsteck, Gill, & Labban, 2015). With a high focus on the athletic retirement and career transition that athletes undergo as they move out of sport, little research exists regarding the transition in identities that athletes must go through as they make their way out of athletics.

Throughout the past three decades, literature has emerged related to sport retirement that indicates mixed findings. Giannone (2012) suggested that a large number of athletes experience forms of psychological difficulties related to athletic retirement leading to negative transition outcomes, while another study has found athletes experience minimal amounts of psychological distress associated with positive transitions out of athletics (Grove et al., 1997). Giannone (2012) researched several predictors regarding career adjustment transition. Transition out of athletics is a dynamic process, often marked by an initial sense of loss leading to a period of adaptation and personal growth (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Werthner & Orlick 1986). Studies suggest that transitions have negative outcomes, such as identity crises (Brewer, Van, Raalte, & Linder, 1993) mental health problems (Ogilvie & Howe, 1982; Menkenhorst & Van Den Berg, 1997),

emotional difficulties (Allison & Meyer, 1988), and decreased self-confidence (Werthner &

Orlick, 1986). Athletes who experience positive transitions adjust quickly and easily to the

demands of the transition, such as reorienting to their new lifestyle and routine (Coakley, 2006).

Transferrable skills in relationship to athletic identity and pre-retirement planning and

preparation leading up to retirement have been linked to positive transition outcomes (Giannone,

2012; McKnight et al., 2009). More research is needed to understand the relationship between

positive and negative transition outcomes in retired athletes.

Minimal research (Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Brewer, Van, Raalte, & Linder, 1993;

Ogilvie & Howe, 1982) has been conducted on specific mental health outcomes, emotional

issues, and identity evolution related to athletic retirement. However, a few studies have

supported the notion that having a strong athletic identity relates to higher emotional

vulnerability (i.e. susceptibility to depression and anxiety) in retired athletes. Notably, a study by

Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) found that retired elite gymnasts described facing complications with

self-redefinition after retirement. In the study, the athletes described "drifting into a nowhere

land" as they experienced feelings of identity loss, disorientation, and confusion for years post-

retirement from gymnastics (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p. 7). According to Clemmet, Hanrahan,

and Murray (2012), an athlete may experience various psychological, emotional, social, and

physiological consequences following the transition out of athletics. Retirement for competitive

athletes involves issues with confusion and redefinition of the self (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Problems in retirement have been connected to a "sense of loss of the athlete role and identity

confusion" as many athletes remain dependent on athletics as a source of identity even after

retirement (Giannone, 2012; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000, p. 4). While there is some literature

alluding to retired athletes' occurrence of identity loss, more research on the experiences of

athletes', particularly female athletes', identity transitioning post-retirement is needed to fully embody a more holistic and supported understanding of how female athletes renegotiate their identities after transitioning out of sport.

This phenomenological research study will aim to explore and describe the experiences of female athletes post-retirement form NCAA Division I collegiate sports. The central question will investigate identity transition for retired collegiate athletes. Consistent with the developing methodology representative of qualitative research (Creswell, 2009), this study will further examine some of the factors related to transitioning and coping that influence athletes experiences after sport, with a focus on how athletes transitioned and how their transitioning effected their sense of self.

Statement of the Problem

Athletic career retirement is a significant time in an athlete's life that is accompanied by a process of transition, change, and in some instances, feelings of loss (Alferman, 2001; Taylor et al., 2006). Identity loss is one of the most critical issues athletes face while experiencing or having experienced athletic retirement. Given the competitive and physical nature of collegiate athletics, only select athletes obtain the opportunity to compete at an elite or professional level. Schlossberg (1984) suggested that there are numerous reasons for athletic career retirement; however, career transitions can be clustered into two categories: normative and non-normative. Blinde and Greendorfer (1985) argued that athletic career retirement should be considered a life event rather than a single event and should be viewed as a transition from beginning of sport through post-athletic involvement. Ogilvie and Taylor (1993) characterized retirement as more of a transition or process that involves development throughout the lifespan of the athlete rather than a discrete event.

Mcknight et al. (2009) purported that athletic career retirement is different from occupational retirement. Many athletes experiencing athletic retirement do so at a younger age than the majority of their non-athletic peers (Baillie, 1993; Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985). Often, non-athletic individuals are engaging in interests including non-sporting occupations, marriage, and raising families, whereas retiring athletes are just beginning to be submersed in non-athletic roles (Mcknight et al., 2009). Athletes are not provided the time or opportunity to develop and engage in non-athletic interests due to dedicating their time to sport often from an early age (Mcknight et al., 2009).

Notably, Division I collegiate sports require a dedicated and committed athlete-student role from their athletes (Richardson, 2009; Coakley, 2004). Student athletes are expected to fulfill the demands that their collegiate sport requires before attending to scholastic endeavors. Richardson (2009) coined the term *athlete-student* to emphasize the idea that student athletes are able to concentrate on their educational demands only after meeting the expectations of their collegiate sport program, putting their athletic selves before their student selves. Factors including preparing for competition, maintaining eligibility to compete through academics, and success in competition all influence an athlete's level of sport participation (Richardson, 2009). Athletes' self-worth becomes intrinsically linked to sport performance, narrowing their focus on external interests and expanding their vulnerability to critical appraisal, which further enforces and engages their athletic identity. Many athletes pledge to athletic commitment believing in the possibility that they will be able to advance and compete at a higher level; however, due to the select, competitive, and physical nature of sports athletes begin to realize that becoming a professional or elite athlete is often unobtainable. As athletes encounter the inevitability of retirement, they may begin to renegotiate their overall self-concept.

The possible loss of an athlete's athletic role upon retirement may not affect only one's athletic identity but one's overall sense of self (Brewer, Selby, Linder, & Petitpas, 1999; Brewer et al., 1993; Lally, 2007). Lally (2007) suggests that certain athletes, not all, experience role engulfment, in which their athlete self overshadows other identity dimensions. Therefore, transitioning to other identity dimensions becomes problematic because other self-dimensions are not recognized and strengthened leading to a sense of confusion and loss for the athlete.

There is a problem in identity loss in athletes after retirement. Despite athletes' attempts to mediate the loss of their primary identity before athletic retirement, athletes are still experiencing the grief and loss associated with leaving their athletic roles (Brewer et al., 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Gionnone, 2012). This problem has negatively impacted retired athletes as they negotiate life transitions (Brewer et al., 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Gionnone, 2012). By examining the experiences of athletes undergoing athletic retirement, using a qualitative approach, researchers can better understand the process of self-identity reformation in athletes. With this understanding, researchers may better assist athletes in renegotiating and assimilating new and prospective identities, making the transition from athlete to non-athlete more fulfilling and beneficial to their self-concept. Counselors and other mental health professionals may be able to help athletes in transition build skills to self-regulate and integrate new self-concepts leading to an easier and more positive life transition.

Despite the knowledge that athletic retirement entails a transition process, little is known empirically about how athletes, especially female athletes, conceptualize the renegotiation of their self-identity (Zaichkowsky, Kane, Blann, & Hawkins, 1993). This study examines identity transition in Division I female athletes after sport retirement. More specifically, the purpose of

this study is to conduct a qualitative examination of the post-retirement experiences of NCAA Division I female athletes.

Significance of and Justification of the Study

Students who participate in NCAA sanctioned sports may experience significant difficulties upon their athletic career ending. Many, if not all, student-athletes develop their social identity as an athlete during the early years of their childhood (Erikson, 1963) and abruptly, whether due to a major injury, exhaustion of their eligibility, or other reason, those individuals are no longer members of that sport social group upon sport retirement. With only less than one percent of female student-athletes continuing their athletic career post-graduation, it is necessary that NCAA institutional members and licensed mental health providers prepare their athletes for retirement from athletics (NCAA, 2017). The importance of conducting research on the psychological attitudes and experiences of student-athletes as they embark on their lives post-retirement from sport lies in the need to provide adequate services to a large and growing population of student-athletes in the United States. Currently, there are more than 480,000 NCAA athletes, and only a select few advance to compete at the professional or Olympic level (NCAA, 2017). Therefore, preparation for life after collegiate athletics is necessary to assist student-athletes in renegotiating their identities to abate post-retirement struggles, such as identity-loss, that may occur as the result of role encapsulation.

Considering the value placed on understanding NCAA student-athletes' transition out of athletics, the research in the areas of athletic retirement and athletic identity have significant gaps that need to be addressed to create a better understanding of what student-athletes are experiencing as they exit collegiate-level competition (Richardson, 2009). Only one study examining student-athlete identity reformation during athletic retirement has been conducted

(Lally, 2007). There have been minimal studies that explore the relationship of athletic identity and athletic retirement (Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Brewer et al., 1993; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Of those studies, the majority of the relevant literature in this area focuses on the retirement experiences of professional and elite level athletes (Richardson, 2009). Miller and Kerr (2003) examined the role of experimentation among intercollegiate athletes through qualitative research methods, which highlighted a need for subsequent research that would further examine the strength of athletic identity and its influence on "emotional reaction to the atrophy of other roles, and their exploration of former and future selves" (p. 214). Both studies (Lally's, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2003) found that athletic identity salience shifted after two years into the athletes' eligibility and athletes' started to prioritize their education over their athletic careers. It is evident more research is necessary to determine role salience changes in intercollegiate athletes pre- and post-retirement, as it is unclear as to the cognitive and emotional changes occurring in athletes as they transition out of athletics.

The results of this study may lead to better understanding of the emotions and cognitive processes that a student-athlete may experience after transitioning into athletic retirement. The study may also have an impact in the construction of an educational program or service that can be implemented by universities and institutions to educate student-athletes on the post-athletic career and lifestyle opportunities they have available to them. Knowing the determinants of athletic identity management may cause mental health professionals to adjust their interventions towards specific issues when working with retiring and retired intercollegiate athletes.

More specifically, Wylleman, Alferman, and Lavalle (2004) recommend prospective research regarding how gender might influence athletic retirement. They believe that it is of great importance to learn how to apply interventions and services that adapt to a broader spectrum of

student-athletes. Notably, there is a lack of research on female student-athletes (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Therefore, research contributing to the female perspective may help shed light on factors contributing to post-athletic retirement experiences in females.

This phenomenological research study is unique in that it will be a heuristic inquiry exploring the lived experience of retired female student-athletes and constructing a creative synthesis of their experiences. It contributes to the existing knowledge about athletic identity, athletic retirement, and identity-loss by providing deep, subjective, personally-framed insights into the lived experiences of retired female student-athletes from varying sports and geographic locations around the United States. My personal worldview, the relationship between my research participants and me (Finlay, 2005; Moustakas, 1990; Todres, 2007), and my reflexive process (Finaly, 2005; Finlay 2014), shaped the process of my inquiry.

Theoretical Framework

James Marcia's identity status theory is the primary theoretical lens used to guide this study. Marcia's (1973) research on adolescent development and lifespan identity development provides a framework in which to conceptualize the development of athletic identity and the transition from athlete to non-athlete. Additionally, the literature review will address several identity theories and transition theories, as well as current research on the development of student-athletic identity as the distinguishing characteristic of an intercollegiate athlete. Student-athletes undergo a transition process to non-athlete before and after their athletic careers are terminated due to injury, eligibility exhaustion, voluntary termination, or other termination reason.

Research Design

The proposed qualitative research design uses a heuristically-focused phenomenological research approach. Heuristic methodology attempts to discover the nature and meaning of phenomenon through internal self-search, exploration, and discovery (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). Heuristic inquiry incorporates the researcher's experiences with the experiences of co-researchers (participants of the study); therefore the researcher is required to have a direct experience of the phenomenon in question (Moustakas, 1990).

Participants are those who self-identify as females and as previous members of a NCAA Division I athletic program. Participants will be interviewed. The central research question for the study is:

What was/is the experience of identity transition for female NCAA Division I athletes who retired from being student-athletes?

Sub-questions:

1. What difficulties do retired student-athletes experience during their transitions to retirement?

2. What is involved in the process of transitioning to retirement?

3. When do participants first become aware of the transition to retirement?

4. What coping strategies do participants use in the transition to retirement?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined as used in this study:

Student-Athlete. A person participating in sanctioned competitive athletics at the collegiate level (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Athletic Identity. The degree to which an individual identifies with the athlete role (Brewer et al., 1993). Also, defined as how a person views oneself in regards to the sport he/she competes within on a regular basis (Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007).

Sport Retirement. Also referred to as "athletic career termination," is the separation of an athlete from participation in the sport (DiCamilli, 2000).

Retirement. Withdrawing oneself from a specific activity (Brady, 1988). Retirement is not a single event or state; rather, it is series of phases in which an individual relinquishes certain roles in her life and acquires other activities (Brady, 1988). Also, retirement is a multi-dimensional process due to all the factors that can affect the type of transition experienced (Wheeler, Malone, Van Viack, Nelson, & Steadward, 1996).

Athletic Career Transition. The stage in which athletes have completed their intercollegiate athletic careers and do not intend on continuing their sport professionally or in the Olympics (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Transition. An obvious change in one's life or career, with a positive transition as the individual making a contributing impact within society and a negative transition as the individual having a difficult time adjusting to a life without sanctioned competitive athletics (Stankovich, 1998).

A Division I institution member of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA). Must sponsor at the minimum seven men's and women's sports, play other Division I schools, meet attendance requirements for football contests, and meet minimal and maximal financial aid awards as stated by the NCAA guidelines (NCAA, 2011).

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents existing research and literature on the experiences of retired collegiate athletes, their transition from student-athlete to non-athlete, and their experiences of their transition process. There is an emerging interest in athletic identity-loss as it relates to female athletes, not only in the field of sport psychology, but also in mental health practices (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Gionnone, 2012). The resurgence of interest in the process of disengagement from sport as sport retirement research moves away from traditional methodological approaches allows researchers to expand on the qualitative and experiential nature of sport retirement. Although a sizeable amount of research exists toward understanding the process of retirement among professional male athletes (Adler & Adler, 1991; Brewer et al., 1993; Good, Brewer, Petitpas, Van Raalte, & Mahar, 1993; Weichman & Williams, 1997; Singer 2008) , little research exists toward understanding the perspectives and experiences of female athletes, more specifically collegiate female athletes (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008).

The following review of the literature represents an overview of the clinical and professional scholarship relevant to retirement from an intercollegiate sports career, including defining and describing identity, student-athlete identity, and a theoretical framework for student-athlete identity development focused on identity development and status, and identity transitions, especially identity loss. In addition, this chapter provides a review of extant literature on the relevant constructs of this study, and identifies gaps in the literature involving transition from athlete to non-athlete related to identity, athletic-identity, and theoretical and

developmental frameworks through which the student-athlete's identity is developed. Current literature on athletic career transition is reviewed to understand the experiences of student-athletes transitioning from the state of athlete to non-athlete.

Identity

An important developmental milestone in student-athletes' lives is the transition into college. Along with academic students, student-athletes experience the developmental task of establishing independence, learning to manage relationships, solidify a firm identity, and plan for their future and lifestyle goals (Corneluis, 1995). Although, identity formation occurs throughout an individual's lifespan, critical developments transpire throughout late adolescence, more specifically during undergrad college-aged years (Chickering, 1969; Chickering & Reissser, 1993; Erikson, 1959; Miller & Kerr, 2003). Establishing of a sense of identity is one of the most critical developmental challenges that late adolescents experience (Miller & Kerr, 2003). The majority of college students struggle with issues including managing relationships, establishing identities, and planning for the future.

Researchers have suggested that collegiate athletic programs may provide student-athletes with valuable life skills and psychological benefits that help with the developmental tasks associated with late adolescence (Griffith & Johnson, 2000; Oregon, 2010). However, with the advantages that come with participating in college athletics come its disadvantages. According to Richards (1999), college athletics have been found to be the most time consuming extracurricular activities during an undergraduate education (Oregon, 2010). Due to the time commitment necessary to train and compete on a collegiate level, student-athletes are required to balance multiple identity roles during one of the most crucial developmental periods of their lives.

Recent literature on identity among collegiate student-athletes pertains to identity formation and has focused on the degree of commitment to the student's athlete role (Oregon, 2010). Research regarding student-athletes and identity has focused on two variables: athletic identity (Brewer, Van Raatle, & Linder, 1993) and identity foreclosure (Marcia, 1966, 1980, 1993; Murphy, Peptipas, & Brewer, 1996). Theories on identity development have been formulated to provide researchers with a basis for understanding how athletes reinforce their athletic identities and how theories on career transitioning have been used to understand the process of identity foreclosure and reformation after transitioning out of athletics.

In order to gain a better understanding of student-athlete identity-loss, it is important to acknowledge that retirement from sport is a transitional process (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). According to Stambulova, Alferman, Statler, and Cote (2009), athletic retirement is a "coping process with potentially positive and negative outcomes" (p. 396). Therefore, a retiring student-athlete might experience identity reformation difficulties. Notably, self-identity is considered the most important factor that can impact transition into retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Therefore, a thorough understanding of theories of identity development may be beneficial in the understanding of identity-loss in retired student-athletes and the role identity-loss has on the transition process.

Identity is an essential component in understanding and conceptualizing individuals and their responses to lifecycle occurrences. According to Cramer (2001), identification is one of the most prevalent themes that appears in psychological discourse, and refers to how individuals behave, the values they hold, and how their goals align with other individuals' goals. The development of identity is dependent on positive and negative interactions with other individuals or groups starting at an early age (Erickson, 1968). Changes or adjustments in identity are linked

to changes in memberships of certain social groups. Also, as individuals mature, certain identities are modified due to changes and shifts in the importance of particular values the individual holds. The process of identity development begins at infancy, continues throughout childhood, and becomes the main focus of adolescence (Oregon, 2010). Achieving a pronounced identity and avoiding identity confusion is an important goal of adolescence (Bullock, Merry, & Lukenhaus, 1990; Erikson, 1956;).

Theories of Identity Development

Researchers have surveyed several concepts of self, in which they examine basic ideologies of how individuals are able to create their own identities (i.e. social exchange, choice theory, ecological models, symbolic interaction theories) (Oregon, 2010). In this section, identity theory (Burke & Reitzes,1981), social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), Erikson's (1968) theory of psychosocial development, multidimensional self-concept theory (Marsh & Shavelson, 1985), and James Marcia's (1966) identity status theory, are examined.

Interpersonal Theories

Identity theory and self-identity theory label the self as being reflexive in that it is considered an object that can categorize, organize, or name itself in certain ways in relationship to certain social categories and classifications (Stets & Burke, 2000). In other words, "self" can reflect on, think about, and critique its self. In identity theory, identification is the process of reflexivity, whereas in social identity theory the process is deemed self-categorization (Stets & Burke, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, &Wetherell, 1987).

Burke and Reitzes (1981) developed identity theory to conceptualize the development of one's self-concept. According to identity theory, identity is defined as "meanings an individual attributes to himself in a role and is formed and maintained through social processes" (Reifsteck,

Gill, & Brooks, 2013). Individuals are able to establish their identities based on interactions with others who conform and validate their self-concept. Likewise, identity impacts the enactment of behaviors consistent with a given identity. Identity theory assumes individuals use the meaning they attribute to their respective identity role to monitor their enacted behaviors. Greater identification and reliance on a particular identity role is predictive of greater regularity of engagement in conduct that aligns with that role (Reifsteck, Gill, & Brooks, 2013; Callero, 1985). Therefore, athletes who sacrifice being involved in other activities to pursue their sport would have a self-identity composed nearly exclusively of their athletic involvement (Brewer, Van Raalte, and Linder, 1993).

Social identity theory proposes that an individual's identity forms through his perceived membership or status in a social group (Hornsey, 2008). Social identity has been defined as "a self-concept derived from their knowledge of membership of a social group together with value and emotional significance attached to membership" (Taifel, 1982, p. 2). Identity is constantly evolving and depends highly on the individual's or group's maturity and placed importance on varying life aspects.

Used to describe social behaviors, social identity theory views all human interaction on a continuum (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The spectrum of social behavior encompasses polar ends, interpersonal interactions and intergroup interactions (Hornsey, 2008). Interpersonal interactions involve individuals who maintain no awareness of social categories and relate simply on their own individual characteristics. Whereas, intergroup interactions occur when individuals relate only on characteristics of the group, becoming a group representative, and this representative function overpowers individual characteristics (Hornsey, 2008). Similarities and differences

within an individual's own group and between other groups are enhanced when an individual's own personal characteristics and distinctions are prominent.

Tajfel and Turner (1979) believe the level of self-concept and identity an individual possesses also falls along a continuum. Similar to the spectrum of social behavior, at one end of the continuum is the interpersonal measure, which encompasses an individual's unique emotions, memories, behaviors and attitudes. At the opposite end is the intergroup portion where an individual identifies with the social identity, and is defined based on the qualities and image of the group (Hornsey, 2008). Examining student-athletes experiences of post-athletic retirement using social identity theory may provide an assessment of the impact retirement from athletics has on an individual's identity, especially if the individual's social support, attitudes, and belief system all remain with the team.

Psychosocial Theories

In order to negotiate optimal levels of functioning and health throughout one's lifetime, individuals must have a firm understanding of themselves. Therefore, individuals must formulate and cultivate a dependable and consistent core sense of self (Lavalle & Robinson, 2007; Josselson, 1987). According to Wenger (1998), identity forms at the intersection of the individual and the social world. Both psychological and sociological methodologies have recognized identity as an individual, cultural and social phenomenon (Suad Nasir & Cooks, 2009).

Erikson's Theory of Psychosocial Development. In the psychological realm, Erik Erikson's work acts as the foundation for theories of identity. Erikson's (1968) theory on psychosocial development encompasses the entirety of an individual's life development. Erikson (1968) considered identity formation to be a psychosocial process that incorporates a

psychological dimension (ego identity), a social dimension (social identity), and a behavioral/character dimension (personal identity), relating to roles in the community (Suad Nasir & Cooks, 2009). Erikson's work acted as a catalyst for the majority of research in psychology that has essentially concentrated on psychological aspects of identity formation (Phinney et al., 2001). Similarly, Cote and Levine (2002) find that theories of self have focused on psychological aspects of the self and its relation to cognition, behavior and choices, and the internal consistency of self-knowledge.

Included in Erikson's theory (1968) is the progression of the individual's development and maturing, as well as, how and when an individual forms one's identity. Identity formation is termed the fidelity stage, and is a critical period in an adolescent's life in which he questions who he is and how he identifies in society (Erikson, 1968). The fidelity stage, otherwise considered personality and role experimentation, provides adolescents an overwhelming number of choices in potential roles. During this stage, adolescents endure a period of psychological moratorium, during which they may try on as numerous roles to see what best suits them. If adolescents are able to or allowed to explore various roles, most adolescents will settle of role choices that a beneficial to their overall self-concept.

According to Erikson's (1968) life-cycle development, an adolescent's ability and opportunity to experiment with different possibilities and roles enables her to be able to create her own personalized identity (Lavalle & Robinson, 2007). However, due to the high-demands of collegiate-level sports, adolescent athletes working to become collegiate athletes tend to circumvent this formative process and immerse themselves in a strong athletic and foreclosed self-identity (Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Formative athletes often have minimal time or opportunities to engage in the levels of self-exploration required to make effective and

responsible life decisions outside the sport environment (Marcia, 1980). As a result, the literature has shown that student athletes who do immerse themselves in the athlete role often experience difficulties with adult decision making and exhibit signs of dependence, risk taking behavior, inferior career maturity, and poor moral development (Petitpas & Champagne, 1988; Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). In conjunction with these issues, athletes have reported experiencing their athletic career termination exceedingly distressing (Brewer 1993; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). The concept of psychosocial development may help explain the strength of the identity, the value or importance placed on identity, and the autonomy of constructing identity. Analysis of these three factors (strength, importance, and autonomy) provides a better understanding of how athletes deal with the demands of athletics when the concept of psychosocial development applies to student-athletes and their identity development.

      Multidimensional Self-Concept. Researchers have long supported the notion that an individual's athletic identity is one dimension of their psychological self-concept (Brewer, 1991; Brewer, Denson, & Jordan, 1992; Brewer & Linder, 1992; Brewer, Van Raatle, & Linder, 1991, 1993; Markus, 1977; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985). According to Harter (1990), athletic identity develops within the broader theory of multidimensional self-concept (Oregon, 2010). The term multidimensional stems from the idea that an individual takes all the received information about oneself and constructs several dimensions or subcategories that are used to recreate an overall self-concept. It is important to understand self-concept theory, as well as, the dynamics of multiple roles and potential strain among student-athletes due to the multidimensional self-concept theory provides a framework from which to examine the effects of a strong identification with the athletic role (Oregon, 2010; Cornelius, 1995).

In the theory of multidimensional self-concept, an individual will depict the level of salience of each self-concept dimension. Based on the level of importance ascribed to a particular dimension some subcategories may become more developed and have a stronger effect on an individual's information processing, choices about relationships and activities, and responses to successes or failures. More specifically, individuals will ultimately choose to engage in behaviors or activities that are consistent with dimensions that are more established and central to their self-concept and tend to have relationships with those who validate the highly salient dimensions of their self-concept (Cornelius, 1995, p. 561). Therefore, individuals that have athletic identity as a prominent self-concept dimension experience activities and relationships through that dimensional lens due to their athletic identity influencing the manner in which they experience the world.

Identity Status Theory. Developing Erickson's theory further, Marcia (1966; 1980) described four stages of identity achievement states, also referred to as identity crises or states of identity development. This theory of identity development will provide a framework for understanding the experiences of co-researchers and emergent themes from this inquiry as it focuses primarily on identity states and transitions. According to Marcia's four statuses of identity, an individual can only attain a full psychosocial identity as defined by Erickson by passing through the four stages: identity diffusion, identity foreclosure, identity moratorium, and identity achievement (Cramer, 2001). In each of the four statuses, two elements contribute to an individual's identity achievement: 1) a commitment to a set of values/goals (occupational, religious) or to interpersonal concerns (relationships, sexual identity), and 2) a crisis or conflict that is or has been experiences while trying to create and solidify these goals/values (Riordan & Tracey, 2014; Cramer 2001).

Identity commitment is the moment when an individual has chosen and makes a personal investment in a personality component (Marcia, 1966; 1980). Therefore, regarding any personality component, the developing individual can be in any one of the four stages of development. Identity crises are periods of identity development during which the adolescent is selecting between meaningful alternatives on a single aspect of personality (Marcia, 1966; 1980). It is critical to consider that each aspect of identity must be committed to and crisis proven in order to be achieved. The central tenet is that an individual's sense of identity is determined largely by the commitment and choices he makes related to various social and personal traits.

Athletic Identity

The construct, athletic identity, developed in reference to a broader framework relating to multidimensional self-concept theory, discussed previously, which contends that athletes' athletic identity is one dimension of their overall self-identity. According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), self-identity is conceivably the most vital factor that can impact transition into retirement. Therefore a focus on the role of athletic identity in the transition process from student-athlete to non-athlete is appropriate, as athletic identity is a major source of self-identity for student-athletes (Reifsteck, Gill, & Brooks, 2013). Both self-identity and athletic identity have been a topic of research in the field of social science. Recently, Miller and Kerr (2013) have begun to study the relationship between the development of student-athletes in relation to their athletic identities. Research demonstrates that involvement in collegiate athletics can have both detrimental and beneficial effects on student development (Chartrand & Lent, 1987). Participation in sports has been proven to have a positive impact on an individual's perception of competence and self-confidence (Armstrong, 1984; Harris; 1993). Pertaining to athletic identity, research has demonstrated strong identification with the athlete role may have a positive effect

on development of sense of self, athletic performance, and may increase confidence in athletes as they enhance and improve their athletic skill set (Brewer et al., 1993).

Contrary to the findings on the benefits of athletic identity, the majority of the literature regarding athletic identity has highlighted the potentially detrimental effects that a strong athletic identity may have on student-athletes' identity and career development during and after athletics, and has also speculated that strong athletic identity may lead to increased susceptibility to emotional disorders in the case of unexpected termination of sport or an athletic injury (Brewer, 1993; Brewer et al., 1993; Martin, Adams-Muchette & Smith, 1995; Peason & Petitpas, 1990; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Miller and Kerr (2003) found that athletes who "over-identify" with their athletic role often demonstrate a reduced or limited commitment to their student role. Similarly, research has indicated that athletes with a strong association to their athletic role were less likely to seek out other educational, career, and life style options due to their committed participation in athletics (Brown & Hartley 1998). While these findings may suggest that having a high athletic identity may have potential detrimental effects on athletes, such as their commitment to their student role (i.e. lower GPA, career exploration), it does not indicate student-athletes demonstrate dysfunction in their athletic roles (Elasky, 2006; Brown & Hartley, 1998; Cornelius, 1995).

The concept of athletic identity (AI) was proposed by Brewer, Boin, and Petitpas (1993), and directly influenced by concepts related to social identity theory. AI is comprised of an athlete's self-concept, values, goals, and roles centering on participation in sports (Brewer et al., 1993; Oregon, 2010). Brewer at al. (1993) defined athletic identity as "the strength and exclusivity of an individual's identification with the athlete role" (p. 2). Although researchers have altered the formal definition of AI over the years, all definitions sustain the essence present

in the Brewer et al.'s (1993) original definition. For example, Horton and Mack (2000) purport AI represents "the extent to which a person identifies with the athlete role" (p. 102). Notable in the vast majority of definitions is the "extent" and "strength" of an individual's identification with the athlete role. Furthermore, it's important to draw attention to the individual's choice to identify primarily with that specific role, all of which is related to both psychosocial and interpersonal theories of identity development.

Brewer at al. (1993) contends that AI consists of three factors: exclusivity, social identity, and negative affectivity. An athlete's rejection of other potential self-concepts establishes the exclusivity of the individual's identification with the athlete role. Whereas, social identity is concerned with others' perception of the individual as an athlete and how that effects their own self-concept, while negative affectivity is the individual's concern with not fulfilling the athletic role (Oregon, 2010). Creznak (2004) defined AI as "the degree of importance, strength, and exclusivity attached to the athlete role that is maintained by the athlete and influenced by their environment" (p.38). Creznak's (2004) definition expands previous definitions of AI to include the three factors associated with AI.

Literature has speculated that athletic identity is unique in relationship to other self-concepts due to formation in early childhood development (Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998; Oregon, 2010). Due to identification beginning in early childhood the strength of which an individual relates to her athletic role is much greater, exceeding other roles and continuing through her developmental and adult years. Although research has shown that having a strong athletic identity can be beneficial (Diaz, 2008), Brewer et al. (1993), contends that having a high athletic identity my also be a liability (Oregon, 2010).

According to the expanding body of research in athletic identity, there are numerous benefits associated with having a strong athletic identity (Whether & Orlick, 1986). In regards to identity, athletic performance functions as a key factor in an athlete's life. An athlete's perception of himself, the values he holds, and what is important to him all define his level of athletic identity. Athletic performance acts as a gauge, providing the athlete with a representation of who he is as a person. Literature has suggested that an exclusive identification with the athletic role may enhance athletic performance (Danish, 1983; Oregon, 2010). Therefore, high athletic identity promotes better athletic performance, which conversely supports and builds a strong athletic identity. The benefits of a strong AI include the development of athletic skills, increased and value-laden social interaction, opportunities for personal growth and confidence, and comparative skill assessment (Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Settles, Sellers, and Damas (2002) found high athletic identity to be correlated with positive psychological well-being (Oregon, 2010). Research has also shown that athletic identity is linked to the development of appropriate behaviors and manners of expression (i.e. attitudes and beliefs) in other social areas in student athletes (Oregon, 2010).

As previously noted, having a strong athletic identity has both positive and negative consequences. Although high athletic identity has the potential to be advantageous to a student-athlete's well-being (Damas, 2002), a vast majority of research suggests that having a strong AI can be detrimental to an individual as they retire from sport (Werthner & Prlick, 1986; Brewer et al., 1993; Lally & Kerr, 2003). Individuals who have a strong AI invest a sizable amount of energy and commitment to their respective support, not just physically, but mentally, emotionally, and socially as well. As a result, more often than not student athletes have neglected to explore non-sport related realms and lack the experiences necessary to be well-rounded

individuals (Anderson, 2009). Notably, those with a high AI experience difficulty transitioning from athletics to other endeavors post-retirement (Anderson, 2009). The lack of involvement in non-sport related entities poses a significant problem for retired athletes as often they experience difficulties making life choices outside of the sporting realm.

Numerous studies have been conducted examining the effects of having a high AI and adjusting to life post-sport (Anderson, 2009; Ballie & Danish, 1992; Brewer et al., 1993; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002, Stambulova, Afterman, Statler, & Cote, 2007). Due to the lack of time allotted for student athletes to strengthen and build upon other self-concepts and the skills that come along with those self-concepts, they are not equipped with appropriate resources for managing life after sport. Many individuals, although not all, with a strong, exclusive athletic identities have not begun to give substantial consideration to life post-retirement from athletics (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Also, the time required to adjust to their "new identity" is increased, leaving retired athletes at risk of utilizing inappropriate and ineffective coping strategies to deal with their identity change (Riordan & Tracey, 2014). According to Muscat (2010), these problems are the result of inhibited decision-making skills, the reality of having to make substantial emotional and social adjustments, and inadequate coping resources.

Gender

Gender also plays an important role in athletic identity formation. Athletic identity is not only influenced by the frequency and severity of role conflict within the individual, but also by the gender the individual ascribes to and his or her gender-specific sport. Researchers have speculated that females and males may experience athletic identity differently (Giannone, 2016). Historically in the literature males have been found to report higher levels of athletic identity

(Brewer et al., 1993). For example, a study conducted by Weichman and Williams (1997) claimed that males reported higher levels of athletic identity then did females within a high school setting, which supports findings in previous studies in college settings (Brewer et al., 1993). While these findings suggest there is a difference in levels of athletic identity in males and females, the study has demonstrated that there are still extraneous variables to consider when studying athletic identity in both female and male student-athletes.

Gender plays an important role in the formation of athletic identity. More specifically, in assessing student athletes it is crucial not only to understand that there are differences between athletes and non-athletes, but within the athlete population (Elasky, 2006). Recently, there has been an increasing interest in focusing on potential gender differences in collegiate sport participation and how those differences may or may not effect transition out of athletics. The established norms for student-athletes differ in relation to the general population; therefore, researchers deemed it more appropriate to compare student athletes within the athlete population to gain a better sense of gender differences.

Adler and Adler (1985) conducted a study that used participant observation of collegiate make basketball players to understand the impact sport participation had on their academic career (Elasky, 2006). In the study, they found that athletes from the sample grew progressively more detached from their academic role due to their over commitment to collegiate sports. Expanding on Adler and Adler's (1985) discoveries, Meyer (1990) hypothesized that if tested on different athletic populations that their findings would not be valid (Elasky, 2006). Meyer's (1990) study observed the impact of gender on collegiate academic functions in female basketball and volleyball players in relation to athletic experiences, academic expectations, and attitudes of self and others (Elasky, 2006). Findings of the study revealed that only females

maintained a positive affect concerning their academic role throughout their college years, while males tend to dissociate from their academic role after their first year. Females from the study reported receiving equal recognition for both their academic and athletic achievements whereas males prioritized succeeding in their sport while placing their academic experiences on hold (Elasky, 2006).

The study demonstrated that female student athletes demonstrated a higher commitment to education throughout their university years, affirmed that being a student athlete helped them obtain an education, and instilled in them greater self-discipline (Hook, 2012). Likewise, Murphy, Petitpas, and Brewer (1996) found that female student-athletes scored significantly higher than male student-athletes on career maturity. These findings suggest that female student-athletes were able to transfer the skills afforded to them from athletics into their academic work. The results of Meyers (1990) study emphasize gender differences in expectations for collegiate athletes and in their academic careers.

Sinclair and Orlick's (1993) study on the retirement experiences of male and female high performance athletes emphasized gender differences between the two genders. In the study, the researchers examined participants' coping strategies, reason(s) for retirement, social support, and other variables that were suggested to impact the transition process (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Giannone, 2016). Despite the researchers' belief that gender differences where likely the result gender role differences rather than a characteristic of athletic retirement, the findings of the study suggest otherwise. More specifically, reasons for retirement varied between genders as males reported financial struggle and seeking employment as reasons for retirement whereas females did not (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993).

However, previous studies conducted have found no significant gender differences, or between female student-athletes and female non-athletes. For example, Sowa and Gressard (1983) found no significant differences between female and male student-athletes regarding career plans, relationships with peers, and educational plans (Hook, 2012). Most of the studies conducted regarding gender differences have been on the effects gender has on education, career development and maturity, and vocational identity. No studies have directly examined the differences, if any, between male and female student-athletes and identity loss post retirement from sport.

Findings from multiple studies maintain that gender has no association with levels of athletic identity (Fraser, Fogerty, & Albion, 2008; Groff & Zabriskie, 2006; Hoiness, Weathington, & Cotrell, 2008). Gender role differences were proposed to be the result of changes in perception of the athletic role between females and males (Prorios, Prorios, Mavrovounoitis, & Siatras, 2012). Gender roles were thought to be affecting the perception of each distinct athlete and his or her behavior on an individual basis (Prorios et al., 2012). One study defined gender roles as culturally defined and dependent, and reinforced from birth (Prorios et al., 2012; Gionnone, 2016). Some differences regarding the support and encouragement female student-athletes received for their education compared to their male counterparts has been found (Adler & Adler, 1987; Meyer, 1990). Yet, there have been studies that suggest otherwise, finding no differences between genders on measure of career development.

In summary, research on female career transition and athletic retirement outcomes is extremely limited (Williams, 2012). Two studies to date (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) contributed to the literature through their investigation of the retirement

experiences of elite female gymnasts (Giannone, 2016). According to Giannone (2016), previous

research on identity development recognized interpersonal relationships as being a key factor for

identity formation in female athletes. Support for this finding emerged from Kerr and

Dacyshyn's (2000) and Warriner and Lavallee's (2008) studies on female gymnasts suggesting

that identity issues in athletic retirement relate to interpersonal loss of relationships, confusion

surrounding body image and athletic physique, and social roles related to female gymnastics.

Athletic Retirement

Although research on the concepts of athletic identity and athletic retirement has been

prevalent in scholarly literature for a considerable amount of time, the research that investigates

the connection between the two is relatively new. The term athletic retirement encompasses

many definitions in the existing literature on athletes. Often, athletic retirement is synonymous

with the term "disengagement from sports" (Fuller, 2014). Career termination is another term

used interchangeably in the literature (Ogilvie & Taylor, 1993). Greendorfer and Blinde (1985)

categorize retirement as a continuation rather than cessation of behaviors, the gradual

modification rather than relinquishment of goals and interests, and the emergence of few

difficulties in adjustment. In this inquiry, retirement means a loss of status, and self and social

identity (Pollack, 1956; Tuckman & Lorge, 195).

Taylor et al. (2005) acknowledged the importance of athletic identity as an individual

determinant of the retirement process. According to Fuller's (2014) study on athletes' transition

experiences out of intercollegiate athletics, athletic identity is a decisive factor to quality of

transition for athletes. Athletes who exhibited high saliency of athletic identity were more

inclined to experience difficulty transiting out of athletics than athletes whom did not (Fuller,

2014). Numerous studies have identified athletic identity as being a fundamental factor to

influence the quality of athletic retirement (e.g., Brewer et al. 1993; Lavallee et al., 1997, Webb, Nasco, Riley, & Headrick, 1998). Therefore, a loss of athletic identity might lead to detrimental effects on a retired athlete's sense of self and adjustment process after sport.

An initial study by Webb et al. (1998) used a questionnaire that included areas related to psychological reactions to retirement, and athletic identity. The authors of the study sought to better understand the relationship between athlete identity and athletes' reaction to retirement from sport. The study determined "athletic identity is strongly related to retirement outcomes" (p. 339). More specifically, the study found that athletic identity is related to self-esteem and to the feeling of uncontrollability. Webb et al.'s (1998) research was instrumental because it was the first empirical study to look at both athletic identity and athletic retirement, and the correlation between the two. Furthermore, the study found that the difficulty of athletic retirement was positively related to an athlete's perceived athletic identity.

The struggle to cope with transition out of sport is in evitable in all athletes' careers. In conjunction with Webb et al.'s (1998) findings on the correlation between athletic identity and retirement outcomes, researchers such as Grove, Lavelle, and Gordon (1997) sought to understand various coping strategies athletes used to deal with and adjust to athletic retirement. According to the study's findings, athletes used a variety of different coping strategies, including avoidance-oriented strategies, along with emotion-focused strategies (Grove, Lavelle, & Gordon, 1997). Similar to Webb et al.'s (1998) findings on the correlation between athletic identity and retirement outcomes, Grove, Lavelle, and Gordon (1997) found that athletic identity was strongly related to both the degree of psychological adjustment needed and the time taken to make that adjustment (p.199). Also, another important finding was the association of poor pre-retirement career planning and high scores on the Athletic Identity Measurement Scale (AIMS)

(Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993). Athletes with high athletic identities as demonstrated by the AIMS scores appeared to be the ones who struggles the most with transition out of sport. Both studies demonstrated retired athletes difficulties with retirement from sport in relationship to their high level of athletic identities.

Sparkes (1998) research on one athlete who suffered a career ending injury demonstrated how debilitating athletic identity could be to the survival of self (p. 29). Sparkes (1998) conducted in-depth interviews and found there are stages associated with the process of transition out of sport. The stages included the emergence of the high performance body, which is the establishment of the athletic identity (Sparkes, 1998, p. 651). Followed by feelings of loss and fragmentation, which can proceed for some time after athletic career termination. Other stages involve the demise of the disciplined body-self and the demise of the glorified self. Once the last two stages are complete, athletes resort back to and adhere to their past selves. At last, the athlete will begin to reconstruct the self. Sparkes (1998) acknowledged that the process of transition is a difficult one and often requires aid from other people to be successful. The qualitative research offered in this study associated a strong athletic identity to the "Achilles heel" of athletes retiring and transitioning out of athletics (Richardson, 2009).

Stephen, Bilard, Ninot, and Delignieres (2003) conducted additional research on the connection between athletic identity and athletic retirement (Stephen et al. 2003, p. 354). The study being one of the most comprehensive qualitative studies on the relationship of athletic identity and retirement followed 16 retired, French Olympians throughout their first year of athletic retirement (Richardson, 2009; Stephen et al. 2003). The researchers held four meetings a year and collected quantitative and qualitative data regarding the participants over all well being through assessments and brief interviews (Richardson, 2009). The data showed that during the

first two months post retirement participants experiences a void or loss in their lives, while up to

five months retired athletes used avoidance to cope with their loss (Stephen et al, 2003). In the

eight to twelve month stage of the year after retirement participants began to gain a sense of

personal control. The researchers concluded that the transition out of sport is difficult for

athletes; however, the voluntary nature of the athletes' retirement determined their adjustment to

their new life plan (Stephen et al., 2003).

A few years later, Stier (2007) examined the retirement experiences of eight retired

professional Swedish tennis players. Through the two interviews conducted with participants,

Stier (2007) found the process of retiring to have five overlapping stages: doubting, reality

testing, seeking alternatives, deciding to quit, and establishing the ex-role identity, a new identity

established after relinquishing the athletic identity. Each stage of the transition process required

athletes to assess and make difficult life decisions, which impacted and altered their identities.

Stier (2007) deemed athletic retirement as " a gradual, transitional process of psychological and

social adaptation and quest for self-identity" (p. 99). Stier (2007) suggests future research on the

connection between athletic identity and retirement to be qualitative as it seeks to find

associations between current identity, ex-status, and role exit.

Lavalle and Robinson's (2007) research on the retirement experiences of five, former

elite-level female gymnasts strengthened other research that supported the findings that athletic

retirement functioned as a loss and adjustment period for ex-athletes post retirement. Similarly,

Lavalle and Robinson (2007) identified four domains regarding athletes' careers and subsequent

retirement process: the path to excellence, the balance of power in coach-gymnast relationship,

the search for an identity, and the fluctuating sense of control in retirement. The study found that

athletes based their primary identities purely on gymnastics, which led to feelings of being lost

and unsure of what they desired from life in retirement. Lavalle and Robinson (2007) suggested that the anguish of athletic retirement might be lessened with gradual withdrawal from the sport and appropriate pre-retirement planning.

Important to note is that the Olympic athletes in the Lavalle and Robinson (2007) study all chose to retire post Sydney Games (Richardson, 2009). This information suggests that due to the retired athletes conscious decision to retire after the Olympics their transition may have been easier than retired athletes who were forced to end their athletic careers. Related to this finding, Lally (2007) conducted a study that followed six student athletes throughout their retirement transition. A requirement of the study was that participants facing retirement must have no plans to pursue or continue their sport at an elite level after graduation from college. The goal of Lally's (2007) study was to examine identity reformation through athletic retirement.

Unlike the previous studies mentioned, Lally's (2007) results found that five of the six participants had easy retirement transitions. The study attributed the findings to the participants' withdrawal from their athletic identity prior to retirement from sport. During the study, participants utilized coping strategies to mediate the difficulties of their transition out of sport and to establish new identities. In the pre-retirement interview, participants acknowledged that their sport was ending and that they had begun withdrawing from their athletic identity. Therefore, although their retirement from sport was not voluntary, five of the six athletes did not experience an identity crisis. Lally (2007) suggested the participants "consciously elected to shift the athlete role from its dominant position to a subordinate status in their identity hierarchies and explore other available roles" (p. 96). Conversely, for the participant who experienced difficulty in his transition he verbalized how he did not choose to alter his athletic identity prior to retirement, and that it took him a whole year to establish his new sense of self.

Lally's (2007) research on identity reformation as it relates to sport retirement was a prospective study with a small sample size. In the discussion, the researcher acknowledged and addressed the need for more research in this area. More specifically, longitudinal research with larger sample sizes from various levels of sport competition would be beneficial to generate a better understanding of athletic identity and identity reformation post-retirement from athletics.

Career Transition

An athlete's sports career is characterized by specific phases and transitions. The retirement from elite sports, whether voluntary or not, requires the individual to cope with adjustments on a physical, social, and personal level (Sinclair & Orlick, 1994). When asked to describe their athletic development, often athletes emphasize their athletic careers in terms of individual moments or situations that have occurred throughout their career (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). According to Wylleman, Lavallee, and Alfermann (1999), these "specific moments or situations do not only require athletes to cope with specific changes, but are also perceived by the athletes to influence the quality of their participation at their current competitive level." Reviews of transition literature in sports disclosed that between 15 to 19 percent of athletes need extensive emotional adjustment post-retirement from sport (Grove et al., 1998; Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). However, due to an absence of methodological rigor in athletic literature it is difficult to comprehend the prevalence of adjustment problems for retired athletes.

Researchers have been able to identify a progression of career developmental phases that involve an initiation, a development, mastery, and a post-career phase (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). The phase that has received the most interest in athletic research over the past three decades has been the termination phase of an athlete's career, and subsequently the

beginning of the post-retirement phase. In earlier literature, theoretical frameworks were derived from social gerontology (i.e. the study of the ageing process) and thanatology (i.e. the study of the process of death and dying) (Kubler-Ross, 1969) to better understand the career transitioning that athletes undergo as they retire from sport. Models from social gerontology consist of: activity theory, subculture theory, continuity theory, social breakdown theory, disengagement theory, and exchange theory.

Activity theory developed by Havighurst and Albrecht (1953) suggests that the active role of athlete should substitue another active role after retirement from sports. The substitution of the roles maintains a homeostatic level of activity across the lifespan. Subculture theory (Rose, 1962) attributes positive adjustment after retirement to prolonged social interactions. Similarly, continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) suggests maintaining continuity throughout retirement, with an emphasis on an unchanging pattern of previously founded athlete role behavior. Social breakdown theory (Kuypers & Bengston, 1973) incorporates features from activity, subculture, and continuity theory by proposing that upon retirement athletes become susceptible to social judgment leading them to withdrawal from athletics and become vulnerable to negative evaluation (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Differing from the previous models, disengagement theory (Cummings & Henry, 1961) considers athletic retirement as a required indication of the mutual withdrawal of athletes from the athletic organization, and from their athletic social network. Lastly, exchange theory (Homans, 1961) emphasizes rearranging energy (importance) to activities that produce maximum return as an athlete ages.

Along with social gerontology models, three notable thanatology models include the social death model, social awareness perspective, and the stages of death. Social death model (Kalish, 1966) denotes that athletic retirement is equivalent to isolation, loss of social

functioning, and ostracism (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). While the social awareness perspective (Glaser & Strauss, 1965) centers on the process of cultivating awareness (i.e. open awareness, closed and suspected awareness, and mutual presence) of imminent death. Perhaps the most notable model is Kubler-Ross's (1969) "stages of death" which includes the five phases that an individual undergoes as applied to athletic retirement: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance of athletic career termination.

While the social gerontology and thanatology models were fundamental in generating initial research on issues of career termination for retiring and retired athletes, each model and perspective possessed limitations. Due to issues related to the limited focus on lifespan development in athletes, generating theories from non-athlete populations, and the negative presumption that career termination is problematic, it became clear that the development of transition models specific to the athlete population was necessary (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Transition models, which became prevalent in the 1980's, were a direct contrast to the gerontological and thanatology perspectives.

Historically, initial transition studies in athletics focused on athletic retirement, which was considered equivalent to retirement from a working career. Because transition theories originally stemmed from thanatology and social gerontological perspectives, athletes' transitions post-retirement are seen as a traumatic life event (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). At the time, Stambulova (1981) proposed a definition of transition as "an event or non-event, which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world, and thus requires a corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (p. 5). The sports community initially accepted this definition; however, they later challenged Stambulova's (1981) definition due to the part that classifies the term transition as an event or non-event. For instance, research on

athletic retirement found that not all retired athletes experienced career termination as a negative

experience, and indicated that athletes' post-career adaption took on average about once year

(Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Alfermann, 2000; Stambulova et al., 2009).

Transition Models

Another major shift in the career transition and development concentrated on transitions

out of sport and the development into a "whole person" (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). This

lifespan perspective viewed athletic career transitions in correlation to their developmental trials

and their transitions into other self-concepts or spheres of life. As more studies on athletes'

career transition started to compile, researchers began to understand transition as more of a

coping process rather than a life event. The coping process of transition did not denote strictly

negative outcomes as literature has suggested that there are athletes who have experienced

positive transition outcomes after retirement (Lally, 2007). Transition frameworks included

Schlossberg's (1981) model of human adaption to transition, Sinclair and Orlick's (1994)

modification of Schlossberg's (1981) work, and Greendorfer's (1992) socialization perspective.

Schlossberg's (1981) model included three sets of factors that interact during transition: the

characteristics of the individual undergoing transition (i.e. gender, age, psychosocial

competence, previous transition experience), the perception of the transition (i.e. role change,

stress, affect), and the characteristics of the pre- and post-transition environments (i.e. internal

and institutional support) (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Numerous researchers

(Baillie & Danish, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1994) have used this model to understand the

transition process of athletes.

Sinclair and Orlick (1994) adapted Schlossberg's (1981) model by making greater

specifications to the factors associated with athletes' transition out of sport. While keeping the

same features of the human adaption model, they reassigned specific characteristics to alternate

categories (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). Similarly, Greendorfer (1992) chose to

emphasize the socialization perspectives of the previous models. This model proposed that

factors related to involvement in sports might also be influencing withdrawal from athletics

(Greendorfer, 1992). All the models listed above support the notion that career transition is a

process exhibiting elements of continuity and evolution.

  All of the above models (Schlossberg, 1981; Greendorfer, 1992; Sinclair & Orlick, 1994)

emphasize the manner in which athletic careers are a sequence of transitions, including the

transition out of sports and into retirement. Another transition model formulated by Stambulova

(1994) understands that athletes must cope with transitions in career that consist of fundamental

life events. Stambulova's model contains three levels that personify the level of depth all

transitions consist of: the general level that is the principles and phases of transition, the specific

level which is the difference between cultures and sports, and the individual level where

differences in coping are related to each athletes' personalities and experiences (Wylleman,

Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999). During these transitions athletes must cope with new difficulties

and solve developmental tasks as they aim to find balance between demands and available

resources.

  According to Jimenez (2010), career transitioning (CT) is the process of career path

reinvention that athletes must cope with following collegiate athletic retirement. Inherent in

career transitioning is the loss of function athletic identity has as the dominant identity of the

athlete. In Jimenez's (2010) study on athletic identity and career transitioning, the researcher

contrasts the athlete with the average individual in relation to the differences in career transition

circumstances. Hill and Lowe (1974) report the average age of retirement for an individual is

between 60-65 years old, whereas the average age of retirement for a collegiate athlete is 20-25 years old. Student-athletes retirement at an early age comes with exclusive challenges that the average person does not experience. Without the prevalence of sport in an athlete's life, she is challenged with the task of adjusting to a new identity and lifestyle that is not reliant on satisfaction and confirmation from athletics.

A comprehensive understanding of career transitioning involves knowledge of a student-athlete's sports career pre- and post-retirement from athletics and sport involvement. Sports career is described as an athlete's high level of participation in sport while making progress toward achievements and sport ability improvement over the span of multiple years (Erpic et al., 2004). Within the sports career are distinctive periods, otherwise known as transitional periods, that are defined by specific demands that compel athletes to adjust accordingly. Research on CT (Hill & Lowe, 1974; Erpic et al., 2004; Jimenez, 2010) suggests athletic identity effects athletes' ability to transition within the sports career and out of sports. Like the transition models already discussed, Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) were interested in understanding the factors that could potentially affect career transitioning. As a result, they presented a conceptual model for CT that consists of five distinct stages. The five stages include: 1) causes of CT, 2) adaption to CT, 3) resources for adaption to CT, 4) quality of CT, and 5) intervention(s) for CT.

Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) indicated age as the primary cause for career transitioning. Along with age, other causes for CT include injury, de-selection, and free choice. As athletes age, or as they reach the end of their athletic eligibility, they typically experience a loss in aptitudes necessary for peak performance and have already fulfilled their athletic prospects (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Injury depicts athletes' abilities to perform physically, whereas an athletes' decision to willing transition out of sport is considered free choice. Cause(s) of career

transitioning is categorized into two categories: normative versus non-normative (Blind & Greendorfer, 1985). Normative transitions are transitions that are willing chosen on part of the athlete, such as free choice and de-selection. Non-normative transitions are those that force athletes into retirement by external, often uncontrollable, factors. The most common non-normative transition is injury (Blind & Greendorfer, 1985).

Adaption to career transitioning consists of self-identity, perception of control, personal and social identities, and developmental contributions (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Level or strength of athletic identity is indicative of an athlete's ability to adapt to athletic retirement. An athlete whose self-esteem is exclusively linked to his level of athletic identity may be unable to endure transitioning out of sport (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Lavallee et al. (1997) specified that an incapability to bear with this type of loss be considered to be a traumatic event. According to Web et al. (1998) level and mastery of psychological control depicts an athlete's ability to handle transition (Jimenez, 2010). Psychological control in this instance is synonymous with emotional and behavioral regulation. Emotional regulation is considered to be a set of automatic processes involved in the initiation, modification, and maintenance of the occurrence, intensity, and duration of emotional states (Webb et al., 1998). Greater control over feeling and behavioral states allows for greater mastery of decision-making skills that will benefit an athlete's adaption to post-retirement life.

Transition Factors

A common pattern in all transitions models is the idea that coping strategies and processes are a predominant factor in depicting transition outcomes. More specifically, the transition demands along with the athletes' resources are a significant factor for successful coping (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Cote, 2009). Transition resources include all external

and internal elements that assist the athlete's coping process (e.g., personal motivation, the athlete's previous experiences, social/financial/organizational support)(Stambulova et al., 2009). Organizational support was found to be relatively high at the peak of an athlete's career, yet, tapers off considerably pre- and post-retirement (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Transition barriers are those factors that interfere with an athlete's successful coping. Notably, a similar part of experience may be an asset in one occurrence but act as a barrier in another instance depending on the situation. For example, athletic identity is a vital resource for an athlete participating in sports; however, it can become a barrier in the process of career transition and retirement. Fruitful change happens when an athlete can create and adequately utilize all the essential resources, and can conquer transition hindrances in the coping and adapting process. Alternately, a crisis transition occurs when an athlete is not able to cope or adapt to the changes and demands of the transition on his own.

Factors mediating adaption to post-athletic retirement as mentioned earlier include the student-athletes individual characteristics (e.g., age, status of physical and mental health) and developmental factors. More specifically, social identification along with athletic identification has been shown to be fundamental in the career transition process (McPherson, 1980; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Research has shown that a lack of diversity in a student-athletes' social identification may require greater adjustment during retirement and prevent athletes from assuming non-athletic roles post-retirement (Murphy, 1995; Werthener & Orlick, 1986). Due to high athletic socialization student-athletes may inhibit the development of essential life skills acquired outside of an exclusive athletic environment.

According to Ogilvie and Howe (1986), the degree to which a student-athlete identifies with her athletic role depicts the intensity of the identity crisis she will face at the termination of

her career. As student-athletes neglect other spheres of life outside of athletics, they may be depleting the necessary social support needed for coping with the transition process upon retirement. A lack of exploration of career, education, and lifestyle options outside of sports may leave a student-athlete feeling neglected upon career termination, as the athlete has not fostered supports necessary for non-athletic adaption. Marcia (1966) termed identity foreclosure as the process by which an individual makes commitments to a role without exploring other role options. Research has shown that identity foreclosure may be a hindrance to the development of coping skills and strategies necessary during career transitions (Gordon, 1995; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990).

Identity Transition

Muscat (2010) proposed four identity styles recognized as having a substantial role in depicting the amount of turmoil experienced in the transition process. While not mutually exclusive the four identity transition styles include (a) a more balanced identity, (b) lost identity, (c) intensification identity, and (d) living for sport identity (Muscat, 2010). Athletes with a balanced identity are successful in other areas of life, broaden their identity outside of athletics, and enjoy life throughout the transition out of sports (Oregon, 2010). These retired athletes are capable of transferring skills acquired and utilized in athletics into new and different territories. Respectively, many retired athletes do not disown their athletic identities completely when they transition out of sports and remain connected to their athletic history without it hindering their adaptation process. Those who have a balanced identity are able to experience emotional closure through recognition and acceptance of the retirement process.

Athletes with a lost identity style have a high and exclusive athletic identity. Often, these individuals are typically overwhelmed by feelings of confusion, stress, and loss of self as they

transition out of athletics. Due to a felt sense of lack of control over their retirement process they experience a lack of self-efficacy and autonomy (Oregon, 2010). During their athletic career, these athletes depended on extrinsically motivated athletic goals that provided them with their self-concept as an athlete (Oregon, 2010). Once their athletic careers conclude they experience a sense of loss and confusion, as they often did not plan for or account for alternate career paths due to role engulfment experienced in their athletic careers. According to Oregon (2010), lost identity style athletes' single self-dimensional tendency and lack of confidence in exploring new areas extend many years post-retirement.

Athletes who adhered to the intensification identity style are not able to accept their retirement and move forward into new life areas. Similar to the lost identity style in that these athletes have a high athletic identity, intensification identity athletes remain focused on their athletic goals; however, increase their athletic efforts and participation as a method of trying to attain their sports goals and objectives pre- and post-retirement (Muscat, 2010). A tendency to want to impress and please one's coach to meet their goals comes at the expense of one's own self-interest and self-awareness. Muscat (2010) reported that these athletes described an intermittent participation in athletics until they completely disengaged from sports, their teammates, and their coaches.

Finally, the living for sport identity style athletes cannot fully disengage from sport even after retirement. Athletes who ascribe to this identity style acquire all self-confidence and recognition from athletics due to their high and unwavering athletic identities. As retirement approaches, these athletes remain passive in planning for their non-athletic endeavors and are unable to transfer skills learned and used in athletics into their non-athletic lives. Upon

retirement, these individuals experience a grieving process accompanied by emotional and adjustment difficulties (Oregon, 2010).

Coping Perspectives

Alfermann and Stambulova (2007) suggest that there are three perspectives that assist athletes in coping with career transitions: (a) preventative, (b) crisis coping, and (c) negative-consequences coping. Preventative interventions are those done prior to an athlete's retirement. The preventative perspective asserts that interventions are put in place to help athletes become progressively cognizant of forthcoming transition demands and to develop necessary resources for effective coping. Crisis coping occurs when an athlete has experienced a crisis situation related to the transition. Interventions are then used to help the athlete analyze the crisis situation and to discover the best method of turning ineffective coping strategies used in the crisis situation into more effective strategies. Lastly, negative-consequences occur if an athlete has not coped with the transition of athletic retirement. Interventions pertaining to negative consequences of not coping are often clinical interventions and problem-specific (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007). Consequences of not coping with transition may include neuroses, eating disorders, and premature dropout (Alfermann & Stambulova, 2007).

Positive Reintegration Factors

Partridge (2005) acknowledges that many student-athletes experience successful reintegration into the work force, their communities, and other life experiences. However, a lack of adequate coping skills has been linked to difficulty adjusting to career transition (Murphy 1995; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). Student-athletes have exhibited both positive and negative behaviors post-retirement that have depicted their career transition outcomes. While some student-athletes immerse themselves in drugs and alcohol, other athletes

work to maintain routine in their lives by keeping active and training/exercising (Ballie, 1992). Reintegration is facilitated when student-athletes have knowledge of positive coping skills to help alleviate and navigate stressors associated with the transition process (Leffler, 2012). Certain successful reintegration skills may be intrinsic in some student-athletes, while others may need assistance learning them.

While countless student-athletes may experience sport related social isolation, those who have established positive social supports inside and outside of athletics will experience greater ease into the re-socialization process (Warren & Reynolds, 2017). Some athletes may experience a sense of relief from retiring from athletics, while others may have a negative experience, which will require knowledge and use of positive coping skills (Warren & Reynolds, 2017). Social support has been shown to influence student-athletes' adjustment to athletic retirement (Alfermann, 1995; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 1994, 1996; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 1998). Social support in previous research is considered to be the exchange of resources between individuals intended to enhance the well being of the recipient (Wylleman, Lavallee, & Alfermann, 1999; Shumaker & Brownwell, 1984). Adjusting to a new social environment outside of athletics may cause a myriad of distressing emotions; however, a diverse and abundant social support network can assist the transition process (Warren & Reynolds, 2017; Leffler, 2012). Student-athletes who are involved or become involved in volunteer work, clubs, hobbies, or other areas of interest will cultivate a greater social network outside of sport and experience an easier transition process.

Furthermore, the availability of social support has been shown to influence athletes' adjustment to athletic retirement (Alfermann, 1995; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993; Stambulova, 1994, 1996; Werthner & Orlick, 1986; Wylleman et al., 1998). According to

Murphy (1995), social support has been declared as the central factor to an optimal athletic career transition. Supports can range from peer student-athletes, coaches, retired athletes, family, friends, classmates, and others (Fuller, 2014). While some student-athletes are able to reintegrate into their university's social community, those that experience greater difficulty with the re-socialization process may benefit from counseling and support groups in order to develop new or additional social skills and provide an outlet to process difficult emotions (Leffler, 2012). Clinical psychologists, licensed professional counselors, school counselors, and clinical social workers are all resources for student-athletes prior to and during their times of transition to teach positive coping skills, provide support, and facilitate emotional expression.

Planning for athletic retirement and setting goals for post-retirement aids student-athletes' transition by allowing them to have more perceived control and influence over their future (Leffler, 2012). By focusing on future outcomes and objectives through goal setting, student-athletes may concentrate on working towards future accomplishments and goals rather than difficulties they may encounter during reintegration (Fuller, 2014). Literature also highlights physiological challenges student-athletes encounter post-retirement (Reifsteck et al., 2016). The majority of a student-athlete's physical training is sport-specific and directed by a coach. Student-athletes are more often not taught the skills required to maintain their physiological health upon exiting their sport. Therefore, learning skills of alternative fitness regimens that prioritizes overall health over sport and being aware of the physical changes and body image alterations that may occur during the reintegration process is necessary for successful student-athlete transition. Positive reintegration is influenced by coping skills, goal setting skills, and healthy living skills that strengthen various aspects of a student-athletes life and in turn assist student-athletes in having a positive transition and reintegration process.

Negative Reintegration Factors

Literature on successful reintegration for student-athletes has indicated that there are potentially more factors that contribute to a problematic reintegration experience for student-athletes (Warren & Reynolds, 2017; Leffler 2012; Fuller, 2014). Although social support has been shown to be a positive factor for reintegration, student-athletes' lack of diverse social supports renders them socially isolated upon reintegration due to their perception that non-athletes are not as supportive of them as their teammates (NCAA, 2016a). Although some student-athletes have fostered social supports outside of their teams, many of their closest supports are teammates or those in the student-athlete community. This indicates that student-athletes have less varied social supports and potentially less social assistance from non-athletic peers during their reintegration process.

Feelings of isolation may occur during reintegration as student-athletes realize that their athletic supports (e.g. coaches, active teammates, trainers) are not as readily available to them due to their ongoing athletic commitments and their lack of understanding of the student-athlete's reintegration experience. While unintentional, the exclusion from their athletic peers means that student-athletes' must create a new social role unrelated to their former social supports (Leffler, 2012). With fewer social supports the former student-athlete may have to navigate the reintegration process alone, leading to feelings of loneliness and distress (Fuller, 2014). In the absence of athletic support, student-athletes may turn to their families to provide the necessary support. However, due to the potential of not meeting family expectations former student-athletes may be unwilling to reach out to their families (NCAA, 2016a).

According to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), very few student-athletes will continue on to the next level of sport (2016b). Due to unrealistic or lofty

expectations of advancing in their sport student-athletes often do not prepare for or think about life outside of their sport. This lack of preparation for the reintegration into non-athletic society may create unforeseen difficulties for student-athletes. Partridge purports (2015) that many, if not all, student-athletes will experience difficulties adjusting during the reintegration process if they do not begin planning for reintegration, career transition, and retirement from sport. Likewise, student-athletes that experience non-normative transitions such as career ending injuries, removal from sport, or chronic pain may also have more distress upon retirement as it is often unexpected or accounted for (Partridge, 2015).

Various universities and colleges have established programs for student-athletes to prepare them for the reintegration process after athletics; however, many student-athletes are not being adequately prepared for this process (Warren & Reynolds, 2017; Leffler, 2012; Webb et al., 1998). A recent survey by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA, 2016a) of former collegiate athletes reported a high level of dissatisfaction with their level of career preparation. Life skills deficits may occur when availability of athletic department resources and continuity of athletic relationships are no longer available to student-athletes during the reintegration process (Leffler, 2012). Also, another negative coping skill to consider is substance abuse. Substance use has been prevalent in student-athletes careers (Dean & Rowan, 2013), putting student-athletes at a higher risk of using this coping skill during the reintegration process as they may be undergoing stressful circumstances (Leffler, 2012; Warren & Reynolds, 2017).

If student-athletes are dealing with difficulties during their reintegration processes and career transitions they may be more susceptible to psychological disorders including substance use disorders, adjustment disorders, anxiety, depression, loss of self-esteem, fear, and loss of self (Leffler, 2012). Mental and emotional factors often create additional stressors during an

inherently stressful event like reintegration, which result in psychological difficulties. Mental health professionals may treat and manage various psychological disorders that may occur during a student-athlete's reintegration into the general population. Not unique to the student-athlete population is the concept of stereotype threat, in which the general population may have negative preconceived notions about student-athletes that make integrating into the social community problematic. Research on stereotype threat and student-athletes has shown that the general college population has many stereotypes of student-athletes such as being lazy, dumb, and excessive partyers (Lawrence, Harrison, & Stone, 2009). Likewise, the possibility of faculty treating them differently, whether positively or negatively, due to their status as student-athletes is probable (Warren & Reynolds, 2017; Comeaux, 2010). While research on faculty treatment towards student-athletes is currently inconclusive, research does support negative assessment of student-athletes on part of the faculty (Comeaux, 2010). Negative stereotypes and stigma towards student-athletes may have a detrimental influence on the athletes' ability to effectively reintegrate into non-athletic society and influence their level of acceptance by the general population based on preconceived perceptions.

As previously discussed, a final negative factor influencing student-athlete reintegration is role engulfment and isolation (Warren & Reynolds, 2017). Student-athletes often immerse themselves fully into their sport and do not cultivate relationships, develop hobbies, or establish alternate career paths causing them to only strengthen their athletic endeavors, and subsequently their sense of self as an athlete. Similarly, demands placed on student-athletes during their athletic careers do not allow them to completely engage and join in a regular college experience (Singer, 2008). During the reintegration process, the social isolation that manifests during athletics will be realized and has the potential to cause complications for the student-athlete

(Warren & Reynolds, 2017; Comeaux, 2010). Susceptibility to vulnerabilities and insufficient coping skills may be the result of the isolation that results during their athletic careers. As mentioned previously, mental health professionals may aid student-athletes in having a successful reintegration due to their extensive knowledge on developmental and environmental effects on an individual.

Loss

A significant amount of research in the area of athletic retirement has focused on the experience of loss, although findings remain mixed (Giannone, 2016). One of the first studies conducted on loss and athletic retirement utilized Kubler-Ross' (1969) death and dying model to relate the psychological reactions of death and dying to the grief reactions of retiring athletes and terminally ill patients (Lerch, 1984a). As defined by Kubler-Ross (1969), the five stages included shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In terms of the shock and denial stage, Lerch (1984a) found that athletes might utilize denial coping strategies to avoid the experience of pain associated with athletic retirement. While the use of denial coping strategies may act as a short-term solution, sport psychology literature has identified negative long-term consequences associated with denial (Uphill, McCarthy, & Jones, 2009; Giannone, 2016). In the anger stage, athletes come to the realization of retirement and express angry emotions towards the athletic termination process. The bargaining stage is where athletes may attempt to make a focused effort to continue participating in athletics; however, when bargaining attempts do not work depression may set in (Lerch, 1984a). According to Brewer (1993), fluctuating levels of depression or depressive symptomology may be experienced in response to athletic retirement. Finally, in the acceptance stage athletes come to accept their retired status. In the final stage, acceptance does not constitute as contentment, but rather a new perspective has been founded

(Kubler-Ross, 1964). Lerch (1984a) has noted that the experience of acceptance for athletes differs from that of terminally ill patients, as retired athletes are able to move forward in life whereas unfortunately terminally ill patients are unable to.

Another study conducted by Clemment, Hanrahan, and Murray (2010) investigated the stressors athletes experience succeeding their transitions out of athletics (Giannone, 2016). The study used the dual process model of grieving highlighting the differences between restoration-orientation stressors and loss-orientation stressors (Clemment et al., 2010). The study's findings propose that athletes retiring from sport experience feelings of loss; yet, many of the participant's fixated their attention on alternate resources which acted as a beckon of hope as they made their transitions (Giannone, 2016). No details about the resources or methods for data collection were specified in the study. Regardless of the study's shortcomings, the findings provide insight into the fundamental role that coping has on the experience of loss and other post-retirement outcomes.

Kerr and Dacyshyn (2000) interviewed seven former elite female athlete gymnasts to explore their retirement experiences using a grounded theory approach. In the study, five out of seven participants described their transitions out of gymnastics as extremely difficult (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). However, all participants reported experiencing both negative and positive emotions accompanying their transition. More specifically, negative experiences reported by all of the seven participants included feelings of loss of control, frustration, missing elements of their involvement in sport, and disorientation. Positive emotions included relief from stress and a sense of freedom (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000).

Similar to Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study on female gymnasts and retirement experiences, Warriner and Lavallee (2008) focused on the role of identity and the physical self in

the adaption process in retired female gymnasts (Giannone, 2016). In the study, seven retired female athletes joined in retrospective semi-structured interviews that were analyzed using phenomenological analysis (Giannone, 2016). Warriner and Lavallee (2008) stated two predominate themes emerged from the data: (a) loss and turmoil, and (b) identity confusion. Six of the seven participants believed their retirement process to be traumatic, while feelings of hopelessness, emptiness, and loss were reported as negatively impacting their retirement experience (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Participants reported feeling uncertain about who they were outside of gymnastic and communicated being unsure of their values, interests, and aptitudes outside of athletics (Giannone, 2016). Moreover, this study suggests that athletic retirement and career transition provides a sense of loss and confusion related to personal identity as athletes retire from sport.

Summary

This chapter provides a context for the proposed inquiry by summarizing the limited literature with regard to female, student-athlete identity transition. Taylor and Ogilvie (1994) consider self-identity as the most important factor impacting transition into athletic retirement. Identity is one of the most prevalent themes in psychological discourse as identity formation occurs throughout the lifespan. Theories of identity development highlight the importance of developing a strong self-concept in one's adolescent years. Athletic identity is formed through social identity theory concepts as a measurement of an individual's identification with the athletic role. Studies on athletic identity (Anderson, 2009; Ballie & Danish, 1992, Brewer et al., 1993; Lally, 2007; Miller & Kerr, 2002) reveal that having a strong athletic identity weakens or diminishes other self-concepts developed in adolescence, leaving athletes unequipped to adjust to post-retirement transitions out of athletics. The review of the literature suggests athletes' identity

development is stunted or premature as athletes over-identify with their athlete selves at the cost of cultivating new self-concepts.

The review of the limited literature on student-athletes experiencing identity transition revealed a need for greater depth. Few studies on gender and athletic identity examined gender differences in relationship to how athletes perceive and manage their identities post- athletic retirement. The studies on gender revealed mixed findings on the association of gender differences and identity transition. Only two studies (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008) directly examined female athlete career transition and post-athletic transition outcomes.

Prevalent in the literature is the subject of athletic retirement. The connection between athletic retirement and athletic identity is a determinant of the retirement process and outcome of life after athletics. The qualitative studies on athletic retirement (Taylor et al., 2005; Fuller, 2014; Brewer et al., 1993; Lavallee et al., 1997; Webb et al., 1998; Sparkes, 1998; Stier, 2007), all but one (Lally, 2007), maintain that all athletes experience a sense of loss and have to renegotiate their identities after athletics. Career transitions include a sequence of transitions throughout the lifespan, including retirement from athletics and transition into new phases of life, that must be adequately coped with. Along with career transitions, identity transitions depend on the level of athletic identity of the athlete, as well as, how well athletes develop their self-concepts outside of athletics. Positive and negative factors mediate athletes' experiences of loss and confusion as they transition out of athletics. However, findings related to athletic retirement/transition and loss remains mixed (Giannone, 2016). More research is needed to determine the association of athletes' identity transitions and experiences of loss.

Based on the findings of the above studies, and the broad range of literature addressing student-athlete identity transition and loss after retiring from sport and its potential value for athletes and mental health professionals, this study is designed to explore what it means for retired female student-athletes to experience identity transition, what difficulties female student-athletes experience in their transition out of sport, and how female student-athletes use coping strategies to navigate their transition process. Hopefully, this study will contribute to already existing literature on athletes and identity transition, will offer a potential framework for understanding athletes' transition and retirement processes, and will inform future research, training, theory, and clinical practice.

Proposed Study

Athletic identity and transition are growing topics in sport psychology and mental health literature. While research on athletic transition is prevalent in the literature, research on female athletes is scarce. Furthermore, focus in research pertains to elite or professional athletes leaving gaps in the literature related to collegiate athletes experiences of identity and career transitions (Stephen et al., 2003). The present study intended to contribute to filling this void in the literature by utilizing a sample of former female athletes who concluded their participation in collegiate athletics.

The results of this study may lead to better understanding of the emotions and cognitive processes that a student-athlete may experience after transitioning into athletic retirement. The study may also have an impact in the construction of an educational program or service that can be implemented by universities and institutions to educate student-athletes on the post-athletic career and lifestyle opportunities they have available to them after they have retired from their sport. Knowing the determinants of athletic identity management allows psychologists and

mental health workers to adjust their interventions towards specific issues when working with retiring and retired intercollegiate athletes.

More specifically, Wylleman, Alferman, and Lavalle (2004) recommend prospective study directions regarding how gender specifics influence athletic retirement. They believe that it is of great importance to learn how to apply interventions and services that can be adapted to a broader spectrum of student-athletes. Notably, there is a lack of research on female student-athletes (Frey & Eitzen, 1991). Therefore, research contributing to the female perspective may help shed light on factors contributing to post-athletic retirement experiences.

CHAPTER III

SELF OF THE RESEARCHER

This study was an exploration of a phenomenon that I have experienced on a personal level during my life. Having discussed a rationale for this study's approach, I believe it is crucial to share my own personal role and interest in this research process and to share my awareness of my own views and experiences, especially as they relate to the phenomenon being studied. The purpose behind my disclosure is to aid in the foundation of transparency with my audience and to provide a description of my research journey that began with my personal identification with the focus of inquiry (Moustakas, 1990).

Being a retired female collegiate athlete from a Division I university, I have had prior experience similar to that of my participants. In 2008, I was recruited by several Division I universities for my skills in reining, a competitive equestrian sport. After official recruitment visits to numerous universities and consideration of my career goals, I chose Baylor University in Waco, Texas. Besides being a NCAA Division I university, Baylor is known for being a service-oriented and religious organization that aims to integrate holistic morals in each of its students.

My experiences included, but were not limited to, competing on the Baylor Equestrian Team and participating in school, leadership academy, trainings, and service work with my teammates and fellow Baylor athletes. I partook in collegiate athletics for the first two years of my college career, and I stepped down from my position as "starter," main competitor, when I was faced with familial issues back home and needed to be present with my family in San Antonio. During this time, I was tasked with the difficult decision of how I was to proceed with my athletic career while also attending to my family. It was with much difficulty and emotional

conflict that I made the decision to retire my position as a top tier, collegiate athlete. I was fortunate to have coaches that understood and that valued the cultivation and strengthening of athletic identity and community. I was given the opportunity to remain an athlete; however, I was not eligible to compete in future competitions due to my lack of availability and time conflicts.

Although the decision to retire from athletics was personal, the transition from athlete to non-athlete proved difficult and altered my self-identity and my overall self-concept. My transition was elongated due to my minimal involvement in athletics; however, I had to alter my self-concept through engagement in scholastic and social activities. There was a period of a couple months in which I felt severely depressed, lost, and isolated because my teammates could not relate to my transition. It was not until I became involved in the wakeboarding team/club at Baylor that I finally again experienced belonging and began to utilize concepts I acquired as an athlete (i.e. commitment, athleticism, practice, community, involvement, etc). From this experience, I assumed that the transition after post-athletic retirement is one that involves self-identity loss, self-searching, and renegotiation. From first-hand experience, I understand that there is a developmental process of self-identity that correlates to athletic retirement and self-concept. While I understand that each experience is specific and subjective to the participant, there seems to be a cyclical process to the renegotiation of self-identity through the life span.

My personal experience of identity-loss has encouraged me to seek out experiences of others to discern between our shared experiences and to see whether they align with my experience of identity-loss. This transition was such a pivotal time in my existence that it still reverberates in my everyday life and informs my current self-concept. I believe that my identity-loss was categorized as non-finite loss and was not readily accepted or recognized in a non-

athletic population. I had few individuals to turn to who understood what I was experiencing at the time before and after my athletic retirement, and I felt extremely alone and misunderstood. I struggled with weight gain, eating problems, depression, social relating, and more, and I believe that many of my difficulties were the result of me trying to figure out who I was after I stopped being a recognized athlete.

I find that my experiences may also give me insight into key terms, empathetic understanding, and my ability to relate with my participants. Due to the lack of knowledge related to female, athletic retirement, I find my research question particularly interesting in terms of relating female self-identity with that of athletic self-identity. Many studies I have read pertain to male athletes who have higher likelihoods of being drafted to play professional sports; whereas, female athletes are not likely to be drafted and therefore must consider life after sport more readily than men. I've watched my fellow teammates and friends who have transitioned out of sport challenged with re-acclimating to their bodies, their sexuality, their relationships, and more.

Given my experiences and background, I have worked to reflect on the positive and negative biases that I bring to this research about athletic retirement and self-identity loss. However, given that I am using a heuristic method in my research, I can give myself permission to embrace my intuition and familiarity with the subject and how my biases may serve as a benefit to highlighting the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1990). Thus, my inspiration to begin reviewing the literature related to athletic identity-loss began, as I wanted to learn more about the experiences of other female athletes. Conducting the research on a sample of retired female athletes emerged after identifying gaps in a comprehensive review of sports literature.

Organically, the use of a heuristic approach seemed fitting, as it allowed me to enter into the worldviews of my participants and acknowledge their human experiences.

My first assumption and bias was that there is a loss of identity experienced in the transition out of athletics. My viewpoint is that adjustment to a transition or change, whether positive or negative, necessitates social-psychological dynamics. In most adjustments to transitions, individuals experience a form of loss. Harvey (1996) suggests that most losses subsequently lead to fundamental alterations in identity. Given that the majority of athletes dedicate a large portion of their lives to athletics, it makes sense that once their athletic careers are terminated, athletes lose that aspect of their life. Most athletes begin their athletic careers in childhood with the expectation and hope that they will continue on through high school and hopefully college, allowing their athletic ability to function as an opportunity to acquire a university education. Some athletes hold on to the hope that after completing college, or during college, they will be summoned to compete in elite level athletics (e.g., professional or Olympics). Once the realization occurs that the athlete will no longer be competing at the collegiate level and will not be moving on to play professionally the athlete often experiences a sense of loss and confusion. The realization that alternate career paths must be considered might overwhelm the athlete as the athlete's sense of self and purpose as a competitor is no longer functional or necessary.

Secondly, I assumed that female retired athletes experience transition out of athletics differently form their male counterparts. As stated before, research on female retired athletes and their transition experiences out of athletics is limited. Although, some literature on male retired athletes exists, differences in transition experiences between male and female athletes are unknown. My bias stems from the lack of opportunities female athletes have to progress in their

sport. Very few female athletes graduate to participate in professional or Olympic sport competition after collegiate athletics. Given that there are only a few sports that provide professional playing outlets, female athletes have less of an opportunity to play professionally.

Along with less opportunity for advancement, gender differences may play a role in the timing of athletic retirement. I believe female athletes are aware of their lack of opportunity to play professionally, and therefore, consider career options outside of athletics prior to graduating from college. Female athletes might then begin to realize that not competing professionally after college forces them to consider what life outside of athletics may entail. I also assumed that female athletes begin to seek outside social supports to confide in and lean on as they slowly start to disconnect from athletics. Their social supports may aid in the transition process, as these supports are not interrelated to their athletic social circle and therefore provide more clarity on life outside of athletics. Collectively, I believe that female athletes experience a loss of identity that occurs earlier in their athletic careers as they realize their athletic selves will no longer be pertinent to success in their later years of life.

My third assumption was that female athletes experience difficulties with their physical bodies and their appearance post-athletic retirement. All athletes potentially experience a host of bodily changes upon leaving competitive sports, including loss of muscle and weight gain. Female retired athletes are no longer training at the collegiate level, and it may become harder for them to adjust and regulate their eating habits after retirement. This bodily transition affects their physical selves, which is central to their identities and their perceived self-esteem. Whether athletes are continuing to maintain their athletic conditioning or not, they are not performing or utilizing their bodies the same way as when they were competing at the collegiate level. The decline of their performance body might lead to feelings of shame and dissatisfaction with their

physical selves. Furthermore, changes in their body may include hormonal changes, as the stress from performance, both physically and emotionally, is no longer present. Hormonal changes potentially may impact physiological and psychological aspects of the retired athlete.

In conclusion, my biases and assumptions were prevalent in this inquiry so that readers have a contextual basis to interpret the findings. My assumptions were explicit so that I can reflect on my role as a researcher throughout this study. Introspection through journaling and constant reflection of my self in relation to my participants occurred throughout the entirety of the study.

CHAPTER IV

RESEARCH METHODS

This study was designed to explore the experiences of female student-athletes' transition after retirement from sport, to explore the process of transitioning from student-athlete to non-athlete, and to provide insight into difficulties experienced and coping strategies used in the transition process. This study described each participant's perceived impact of the transition from student-athlete to non-athlete. While the phenomenon of athletic identity loss and its clinical implications for working with student-athletes transitioning out of athletics has been addressed in previous studies (Brewer et al., 1993; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000; Lally, 2007; Gionnone, 2012), it had not been addressed using a heuristic inquiry methodology, with female collegiate athletes, or by eliciting a maximum variation participant sample (Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Maximum variation sampling in this study allowed for the identification of common patterns and themes that cut across participants' varied athletic backgrounds, sport choices, athletic experiences, and geographic considerations (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Student-athlete identity loss has both clinical and philosophical dimensions, as reviewed in the previous chapter.

The primary research focus was to describe and elaborate on the transition process female student-athletes experience during retirement from sport, and how they use their experience to inform their identity-loss and subsequent identity reformation. The objective was to obtain a detailed description of the experience from a few retired female student-athletes and reveal the essence of those descriptions to provide insight into the phenomenon of identity-loss after retirement from collegiate sports. The research questions emerged from gaps found in the

professional literature and on my assumption as a former student-athlete that identity-loss is a prevalent and elusive concept that student-athletes experience after retiring from sport.

The heuristic inquiry method (Moustakas, 1990) was employed from a relational and reflexive centered approach (Finlay & Evans, 2009) on the research that (a) honored the importance and intimacy of the relational dynamics between my participants and me, (b) acknowledged my subjective bodily experience and allowed me to use my body to detect the essence of the meanings of participant experiences, (c) sanctioned my ability to fluctuate between reflexivity and bracketing, and (d) involved writing in a texturally nuanced manner intended to allow readers to understand, connect, and glean insight from the findings (Finlay, 2014). Heuristic inquiry functions as one of many phenomenological approaches to qualitative research.

The central question included in each participant's semi-structured interview was: What was/is your experience of identity transition after retirement from collegiate athletics?

Sub-questions included:

1. What difficulties did/do you experience during your transition?

2. What was/is involved in your process of transition?

3. When did you first become aware of the transition?

4. What coping strategies did/do you use during the transition?

In this chapter, I present an overview of qualitative research and phenomenology. I also provide a description of the phases and processes of the heuristic inquiry phenomenological research method, a rationale for my selection of this design, the research and interview guide questions (Table 1), an explanation of the selection of participants and the role of the researcher,

the data collection procedures, the data analysis procedures, and the methods for verification of the trustworthiness of the study.

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research is distinctive compared to other forms of research due to its ability to provide detailed, in-depth, and holistic accounts of lived experience (Kroathwohl, 2009). In qualitative research, the researcher identifies with constructivism, which considers social reality as constructed and as created differently by varying individuals (Castellan, 2010; Gall et al. 1996). Qualitative researchers are concerned with how individuals perceive their world (Krathwohl, 1998), and these researchers interact with that which is being researched (Castellan, 2010; Creswell, 1994). In the qualitative research approach, the researcher focuses on a single concept inspired by personal interests, curiosity, and values and positions her- or himself to collect participant meanings around this concept in order to understand a person, group, or situation (Barrios & Lucca 2006; Creswell, 2009; Krathwohl, 2009). The goal of qualitative research is to "better understand human behavior and experience" and to "grasp the processes by which people construct meaning and to describe what those meanings are" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 38). Conversely, the goals of qualitative research can be to develop understanding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Maxwell, 1996), describe multiple realities, generate insight (Gall et al., 1996), and give a voice to and empower marginalized society (Castellan, 2010; Cherryholmes, 1993).

The qualitative approach is interpretive. (Castellan, 2010). Shulman (1986) describes the interpretive perspective as a focus on "discovering the meanings constructed by the participants as they attempt to make sense of the circumstances they both encounter and create" (p. 8). Similarly, the qualitative or interpretive researcher's role is trusting, involved, intense, and close

to the participants studied (McMillan, 2000; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Qualitative research

methods honor the subjective experience of the participant and the researcher (Minichiello &

Kottler, 2010).

A qualitative methodology aligned well with this research study on participants'

experiences of identity loss and its impact on their retirement from sport as it involved my

viewing of identity loss from both my perspective and the perspective of my participants. A

qualitative approach was necessary for this study, as it is designed to humanize and revitalize

people, problems, contexts, settings, and situations; emphasize knowledge in an area where

research is limited; describe complex personal and interpersonal phenomena that would be

difficult to portray using unidimensional scales associated with quantitative approaches; and

focus on process and its internal dynamics versus on effect or outcome (Creswell, 2012;

Krathwohl, 2009).

Qualitative research is an empirical method that involves the collection of raw data and

its analysis and interpretation (Ponterotto, 2005). This method of research uses the researcher as

its key instrument in the data collection and interpretation (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative

researchers argue that there are multiple ways of acquiring knowledge and that individuals can

interpret situations and make decisions that deviate from the norm (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010).

Qualitative methods have several advantages that allow the researcher to investigate issues and

themes that might otherwise remain untouched (Minichiello & Kottler, 2010). Qualitative

research has the ability to alter the researcher and the participant by affording the opportunity for

sharing and meaning-making of subjective experience (Finlay, 2011). Generally, qualitative

methods abide by a constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2009), which implies that knowledge is

based on personal and cultural contexts.

Philosophical Assumptions Underlying Constructivism

Several philosophical assumptions reinforce the selection of the chosen qualitative research design (Creswell, 2007; Ponterotto, 2005; Waters & Mehay, 2010). As the researcher, the constructivist paradigm is my philopshy of science and directly influenced the selection of the research paradigm guiding this research. The constructivist research paradigm has many philosophical assumptions, including ontological, epistemological, axiological, rhetorical, and methodological. These concepts expound from my, as the researcher's, personal and contextually constructed worldview.

Ontology. This assumption refers to the metaphysical exploration of existence, or the study of the nature of reality. Constructivists assume reality is relative in nature, and is constructed based on an individual's subjective and contextual meaning-making of personal experience. Relativism relates to the ontological idea that knowledge always comes from an "evolved perspective or point of view" (Raskin, 2008, p. 13). Those of a relativist position assume that the external world exists only insofar as our thoughts about it, meaning the world does not exist independently from our perception of it. Constructivists understand that there are multiple, equally valid, and socially constructed realities, rather than one true reality (Ponterotto & Casas, 2002).

Epistemology. Carter and Little (2007) argue that epistemology is the study, theory, and justification of knowledge. Constructivism has emerged throughout the years as a powerful tool for explaining how knowledge is produced (Gordon, 2009). Epistemology is concerned with the relationship between the researcher and the research participant. Constructivists find explanatory power through the dynamics of social relationships between individuals and advocate a

subjectivist position supporting that reality is co-created social construction. Knowledge, according to constructivism, does not exist in a state awaiting discovery but is constructed by humans through purposive and proactive interaction with the world (Gordon, 2009), meaning all truths are socially conditioned and value-laden. Researchers and participants are interactive and participate in a symbiotic researcher-participant dance. Through this interaction, the researcher and participant uncover deeper meanings and insights into the participant's lived experiences.

Axiology. This assumption is concerned with the role of the researcher's values within the research process. Constructivists argue that there is no separation between the researcher's lived experience and the research process. Constructivists believe the researcher's biases are inevitable and that researchers should discuss their biases and assumptions at length (Ponterotto & Casas, 2002). Those of a constructivist position stress bracketing, the recognizing and suspending, of the researcher's values without their removal, as the constructivist viewpoint understands that the dismissal of value biases is a misconception.

Rhetorical. Most crucial to rhetoric is the language or narrative used to present the process and findings of the research to the projected audience. A first person, personalized approach is adopted by constructivists to present findings and to acknowledge the researcher's personal experience, values, expectations, and biases and the impact these have on the research.

Methodological. Defined as the process and procedures of research, the methodology generates through the researcher's philosophy of science. According to constructivists, the methodology is naturalistic, highly interactive, and honors the centrality of the researcher and participant interaction and immersion into the research setting (Ponterotto & Casas, 2002).

Reflexivity. The researcher must carefully analyze the research process and the intersubjective dynamics that occur between the researcher and her participants, while also

noting the extent to which their assumptions have influenced the study. Essential to reflexivity and the constructivist paradigm is researchers bracketing and putting into perspective their preconceived notions and their values and biases (Finlay, 2002a, 2002b). Constructivists take a reflexive stance towards their research processes and reflect on the idea that researchers and research participants interpret actions and their meanings (Charmaz, 2006).

A constructivist approach "places priority on the phenomena of study and sees both data and analysis as created from shared experiences and relationships with participants and other sources of data" (Charmaz, 2006). Constructivist research depends on the exploration of participants' experiences of the situation and allows for the emergence of findings through questions that are predominately broad and open-ended that facilitate interactive dialogue and interpretation. Constructivism studies participants' production of meaning and actions in their specific situations, while the researcher and participants do so from as close to the inside of the participants' experiences as possible, as the researcher acknowledges that the experiences of the researcher participants cannot be replicated (Charmaz, 2006). Furthermore, constructivists understand that individuals engage their world and make meaning of it through social and historical lenses (Caldwell & Johnson, 2014). This means that like those individuals, constructivist researchers have a mutual influence between themselves and what they study, and their personal and cultural backgrounds shape interpretation. Arguably, the constructivist paradigm functions as the primary foundation for qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2009).

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a constructivist approach that is considered both a research method and philosophical discipline. Phenomenology has a strong philosophical constituent that draws heavily from the works of Edmund Husserl and those who expanded on his work, including

Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty (Creswell, 2012). Initially emerging as a study of philosophy, phenomenology was first defined by Husserl (1970) as "the science of essence of consciousness" and concentrated on defining the concept of *intentionality* and the meaning of lived experience, from a first-person point of view. Husserl (1970) refined the method of transcendental phenomenology, which is the study of essential structures that are left in pure consciousness. Primary to the Husserl's transcendental phenomenology was the idea that the meaning of lived experiences may be disentangled only through one-on-one communications between the researcher and participants. These communications or transactions are comprised of interaction, active listening, and observation in order to create a representation of reality more advanced than previous understandings (Husserl, 1972).

Husserl's successors included Heidegger, the founder of Hermeneutic phenomenology, Kierkegaard, the father of existential phenomenology, Sartre, an existential phenomenologist, and Merleau-Ponty, who developed a type of phenomenology that emphasized the role of the body in human experience (Moustakas, 1990). Across the years, phenomenologists critiqued, modified, and further developed Husserl's approach causing considerable diversity in the philosophical positions amongst phenomenologists (Moustakas, 1990). Although there are varying philosophical arguments for using phenomenology, all of the philosophical assumptions rely on studying individual's experiences as they are lived daily, while viewing these experiences as conscious and arriving at a description of the essence of these experiences, not analyses or explanations (Moustakas, 1994). In phenomenology, the researcher gathers participants' views and uses these views to describe what all the participants have in common as they experience the phenomenon. Instead of theorizing from these views or abstracting from participants' statements

to construct a model or theory, phenomenologists work closely with their specific statements and experiences in order to describe the essence of the experiences.

Phenomenology is a form of inquiry that seeks to understand human experience, to explore phenomena and how it is perceived and experienced by individuals in the phenomenological event (Moustakas, 1994). Due to the need to understand human experience, transcendental phenomenologists reject the dualism of "mind versus body" (the traditional distinction between object and subject) and distinguish between *nouema* and *phenomena* (Lin, 2013). *Nouema* is concerned with the unchanging and concrete (objects), while *phenomena* is an individual's subjective comprehensions of the objects. Because objects are conceivable only by human consciousness, phenomena are thus the reality of the world that we perceive (Lin, 2013). Perception is therefore viewed as the primary source of knowledge and understanding in phenomenology (Moustakas, 1990).

Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2013) philosophy of perception and embodiment stresses the importance of perception as an intersubjective experience of both the researcher and the participant. The relationship between the researcher and participant is a crucial illuminating space from which new meaning and insight related to the research may be developed. The researcher's subjective self-awareness is located within the intersubjective space between the researcher and participant, which in turn influences the research itself. There is an inherent prioritization of the intersubjective and relational dimensions of human experience within phenomenology, framing the relationship between researcher and participant as a vitally informative potential space to enhance understanding of experience (Bradfield, 2012). As this potential space of meaning-making is widened, richer understandings of experience from the participant's lived world may be developed.

Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2013) philosophy of perception and embodiment not only rejects dualism as it relates to "mind versus body" but also hold an understanding of the inseparability of our bodies from our cognitive, social, emotional, and relational realms. Merleau-Ponty (1945/2013) maintained the notion that humans are all embodied beings who function in an embodied world. However, in much of phenomenological research, the body of the researcher is missing, and the emphasis remains on narrative descriptions of participant experiences (Finlay, 2011). The body and the self of the researcher being synonymous and interchangeable terms are centrally positioned in the research process. The unity of the body and the self of the researcher allow the researcher to use her body (self) to better understand participant experiences in relation to their own experiences.

In heuristic phenomenological research, the researcher has a personal interest in the phenomena that is being explored and intimately connects with it (Moustakas, 1994). In hermeneutic phenomenology, the concept *verstehen* (Heidegger, 1962) signifies a felt subjective engagement with the lived experience of another, in which one subjectivity witnesses the depth of experience of another (Bradfield, 2012). This reflects the importance of the researcher's self, as that self is situated directly within the process of inquiry and is contingent on the researcher's empathetic involvement and sense of curiosity. Parker (1994) distinguishes the researcher's consciousness and subjectivity as a constituting element that becomes comprehensible through the course of a hermeneutic phenomenological research process.

Heuristic Inquiry

Although there are numerous feasible research phenomenological models to choose from, the model best suited for this research and the study is the Heuristic inquiry model (Moustakas, 1994). The Heuristic inquiry framework provides the necessary constructs by which I, the

researcher, can best understand and discuss the experience of retired female athletes' identity loss. According to Moustakas (1994), "the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self-awareness and self-knowledge" (p. 17). Self-discovery is fundamental in this method as I seek to answer personal questions of significant importance.

The nature of heuristic inquiry is phenomenological, originating as a process of internal search through which an individual discovers the nature and meaning of human experience (Casterline, 2009). Derived from the Greek work *heuriskein,* which means to discover, the heuristic method aims to discover the depths and heart of an individual's experience. Through the portrayal of relationships and events, thoughts and feelings, values and beliefs, the heuristic researcher recreates the lived experience from the frame of reference of the experiencing person. To know more fully what something is and means, the researcher employs the heuristic method as a method of discovering a newfound way of understanding the phenomenon of interest. Deepening awareness of the meaning of human experience not only increases scientific knowledge but also illuminates the self of the researcher (Casterline, 2009). The Heuristic method holds two assumptions: 1) the understanding of phenomena is deepened with disciplined, persistent devotion of intense study, and 2) the researcher's frame of reference, self-discipline, intuition, and indwelling are dependable sources for discovering the meaning of human experiences.

Both qualitative approaches, Heuristics and phenomenology, aspire to understand the wholeness and the unique patterns of human experience in a scientifically structured and disciplined manner. In both methodologies, data is derived from the first-person reports of personal experiences requiring the researcher to dwell intensely with subjective descriptions and

to search for underlying themes (essences) that illuminate the meaning of the phenomenon (Casterline, 2009).

According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), the essential core of heuristic investigation is the "focus on the human person in experience and that person's reflective search, awareness, and discovery" (p. 42). Each heuristic study is a distinctive, original encounter aimed at revealing the intimate nature of reality. The aim is not to prove or disprove the influence of something, but rather to discover the essence of the phenomenon and explicate it, as it subsists in the human experience. Heuristics is concerned with meanings versus measurements, essence over appearance, quality over quantity, and experiences versus behavior (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985). However, heuristic inquiry is not a process without discipline. Both phenomenology and heuristics move towards revelation of meaning and involves disciplined examination of the data. A meticulous commitment to studying human experience is essential to ensure trustworthiness.

Although heuristic inquiry, like phenomenology, attempts to reveal the nature and meaning of phenomena, it is distinctive from phenomenology in the following ways: (a) heuristic inquiry emphasizes relationships, while phenomenology supports detachment; (b) heuristic inquiry welcomes personal understanding, while phenomenology stresses structured experience; (c) heuristic inquiry welcomes creative synthesis through forms of artistic expression, while phenomenology requires distilled experience; (d) heuristic inquiry portrays the whole person, while phenomenology loses the person in the process of descriptive analysis (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

Heuristic inquiry views the researcher as a participant, as it allows the researcher to experience the intensity of the phenomenon (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). It is the researcher who constructs the story that illustrates the meanings and essence of human experiences

(Moustakas, 1990). In actuality, it is the heuristic researcher that seeks the inherent truth of the meaning of phenomenon through processes of "reflected learning that is self-directed, self-motivated, and open to spontaneous change in direction" (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010, p. 1572). As such, heuristic research is characterized as innately personal and gives participants an outlet for their stories to be heard and understood.

According to Moustakas (1990), heuristic inquiry is comprised of seven concepts and processes: identifying with the focus of inquiry; self-dialogue; tacit knowing; intuition; indwelling; focusing, and internal frame of reference. These concepts promote reflection on the researcher's thoughts, images, hunches, and deeper knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Moustakas (1990) also described six phases that shape the process of heuristic research: initial engagement; immersion; incubation; illumination; explication; and creative synthesis.

Concepts and Processes of heuristic inquiry

According to Moustakas (1990), heuristic research begins with a question that needs to be clarified and it represents a scientific search that involves seven concepts: identifying with the focus of inquiry, self-dialogue, tacit knowing, intuition, indwelling, focusing, and the internal frame of reference (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

Identifying with the focus of inquiry. Moustakas (1990) referred to this as one's ability to immerse oneself in the question, attain connection with it, and ultimately achieve a deeper understanding of it through an open-ended investigation, self-directed learning, and the engagement in active experience. Therefore, one must have a direct experience with the phenomenon to be able to identify with the experiences of others (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

Self-dialogue. Engaging in self-dialogue is a process by which the researcher enters the dialogue with the phenomenon that is being studied, and allows the phenomenon to have a

conversation with one's personal experience of it (Moustakas, 1990). It is the unraveling of a

dialogue between oneself and the subject of inquiry. This self-dialogue may be considered a deep

existential engagement with the subject of inquiry, one that utilizes the identity, purpose, and

relationship of the experience to explore the situated meaning of the subject. Keeping a journal is

a popular method of engaging in self-dialogue in heuristic research.

  Tacit knowing. The previous phase (self-dialogue) creates the foundation for knowledge

that is considered tacit. Tacit knowing is a private, personal, and explicit subjective knowledge

(Polanyi, 1958). It represents all internally possessed achievable knowledge that we cannot

describe or explain (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Tacit knowing is a crucial aspect of heuristic

inquiry, as inhibiting tacit knowing potentially limits possibilities for knowledge (Moustakas,

1990). It lays the groundwork for intuitive insights and knowledge.

  Intuition. Moustakas (1990) labeled intuition as one of the vital features of searching for

knowledge. It permits the researcher to recognize the proximate knowledge, and it increases the

likelihood of highly developed perception and understanding (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010).

Intuition is "the bridge between the explicit and the tacit" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 23). It is

necessary for the pursuit of knowledge as it guides the researcher's experience towards deeper

and extended meaning, understanding, and knowledge. The researcher must rely on his intuition

when researching experiences to understand the relationships, patterns, and make inferences

about others' experiences.

  Indwelling. Moustakas (1990) defined indwelling as "the heuristic process of turning

inward to seek deeper, more extended comprehension of the nature or meaning of a quality

theme of human experiences" (p. 24). It involves harnessing the intuitive and tacit, as well as the

explicit dimensions, in order to understand the wholeness of experience. The surfacing of these

previously mentioned heuristics then requires a profound attention towards the specific phenomenon. As the researcher returns to the phenomenon over and over again, a far richer and greater understanding of this particular aspect of human experience is gained resulting in a final creative synthesis.

Focusing. The creation of a meaningful synthesis is not the end of heuristic inquiry. Rather, a researcher is required to engage in focusing to emphasize one's insight, growth, and change. Focusing is a process in which the researcher recognizes the elements of the experience that were out of the researcher's consciousness (Douglass & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990). This process requires attentiveness to a chosen aspect of the experience. This concentration widens the meaning-space of what is presenting itself and allows a foundation for the explication of meaning that is existential, situated, and dynamical. It allows the heuristic researcher to clear the distortion of what might be stunting their understanding and opens a space for greater awareness (Moustakas, 1990).

Internal frame of reference. The internal frame of reference is the base for all knowledge. Without it, none of the processes aforementioned can occur, as the researcher must have a deep understanding of his personal experiences, as well as others' experiences. Moustakas (1990) stated "to know and understand the nature, meanings, and essences of any human experience; one depends on the internal frame of reference of the person who has had, is having, or will have the experience" (p. 26). Therefore, the researcher must honor the participants' internal frame of reference or else there is a risk that the individuals' experiences, emotions, cognitions, and meanings will be distorted (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010; Combs, Richard, & Richards, 1976).

Phases of heuristic inquiry

The seven core processes are synergistic with the six phases of heuristic inquiry, which include: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis.

Initial engagement. Moustakas (1990) contended that the task of initial engagement is "to discover an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications (p. 27). In this phase, the researcher engages in self-exploration and self-dialogue to discern tacit knowledge and discover the research question.

Immersion. In this phase, the researcher becomes one with the question and topic. The researcher must "live" the question, and engages in spontaneous self-dialogue and self-searching while pursing intuition and knowledge from the tacit dimension (Moustakas, 1990). The researcher's life revolves around the question as the researcher becomes one with it and is receptive to prospects of knowledge and assimilations. Often this phase can be an exhaustive process, as it requires the entirety of the researcher's being.

Incubation. During this phase, the researcher moves away from intense immersion with the question and becomes detached from it (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Much of the work is being done outside of the researcher's awareness as the inner workings of the tacit dimension and intuition continue to clarify and extend understanding (Moustakas, 1990).

Illumination. The illumination phase develops as the researcher becomes more perceptive to the tacit dimension of intuition and knowledge (Moustakas, 1990). The knowledge

that was occurring on the unconscious level in the incubation phase is now breaching and entering into conscious awareness. Reflection is needed in this phase; however, the workings of the tacit knowledge still promotes new awareness, modification of existing understanding, and discovery of an experience that was not directly present in the researcher's consciousness (Moustakas).

Explication. Explication refers to the process of deep analysis of qualities and themes that have contextualized during the illumination phase. In the explication phase, the researcher partakes in focusing, indwelling, self-exploration, and self-disclosure, which allows him to acknowledge the distinctiveness of experience (Moustakas, 1990). The complete picture of the phenomenon in question begins to form, as new views, alternative explanations, and new patterns are identified (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). Lastly, final modification and corrections are completed, and a comprehensive depiction of the phenomenon is made.

Creative synthesis. Characterizing the final integration of the data, themes, and qualities discovered in the explication phase, creative synthesis can be presented in the form of a poem, story, narrative, painting, or some other creative process (Moustakas, 1990). Creative synthesis is not a summary of the study; rather, it is the comprehensive representation of a human experience in all of its wholeness (Djuraskovic & Arthur, 2010). A representation of how the phases of heuristic inquiry interface with the concepts of heuristic inquiry (figure
 3) is used to capture how the concepts and processes interrelate.

Table 1

How Phases Interface with Concepts

Phases of Heuristic Inquiry	Concepts and Processes of Heuristic Inquiry
Initial Engagement	Identifying with the focus of inquiry Self-dialogue Tacit knowing Intuition
Immersion	Self-dialogue Tacit Knowing Intuition
Incubation	Tacit Knowing Intuition
Illumination	Tacit Knowing Intuition
Explication	Indwelling Focusing Internal frame of references
Creative Synthesis	Tacit knowing Intuition

Rationale for the Design

This study was designed to explore the experiences of Division I female student-athletes'

identity-loss after retiring from athletics. Based on Richardson's (2009) suggestions for future

research related to females' retirement from sport and Wylleman, Lavallee, and Alfermann's

(1999) call for qualitative methods to delineate various factors related to athletic transition and

retirement, I selected a qualitative approach for this study. A phenomenological approach was

selected based on the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty (1945/2013) as the phenomenon being

studied involved perceptions of the lived experience of a small group of individuals (Creswell,

2010; Krathwohl, 2009). The specific phenomenological approach applied in this study was the heuristic inquiry method developed by Moustakas (1990).

To understand my personal experience as a retired student-athlete and the experiences of my participants, I applied a heuristic inquiry approach to allow for increased and heightened understanding and integration of knowledge. The heuristic inquiry approach to qualitative research allowed me to conduct research in an embodied way, lending to my overall process of attunement and introspection (Moustakas, 1990). According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985) heuristic inquiry allows for questions to emerge from human experiences that have not extensively been researched. Therefore this research method was ideal in that female student-athlete identity-loss has not been an experience highly researched in the counseling field.

Selection of Participants

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of St. Mary's University, I began to recruit participants who met the criteria needed for participation in the study. Following recruitment of participants I began the data collection process. In the following section, I describe how I proceeded with the participant selection, sampling, and the recruitment process.

The participants in the study were retired female student-athletes who had athletic eligibility at a Division I university, and who have since graduated or are no longer affiliated with the school. Participants in this study had to self-identify as retired from sports. Invitations were extended to two retired female student-athletes, from two distinct regions of the United States, based on their previously expressed interest through personal communication in participating in the study. These two participants were provided with invitations and requested by the researcher to extend invitations to other female retired student-athletes who meet the

criteria for the study. Identification of two participants from varying regions allowed for greater variation in the type of collegiate sport included in this study (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2012).

The inclusion criteria for the study stipulated the following: (a) participants were female, retired student-athletes, (b) participants must have graduated from a Division I university athletic program, or were no longer athletically eligible in their sport at that university, (c) participants must have self identified as retired from their sport and were no longer competing at the Division I level, (d) participants were willing to describe their experiences of identity-loss, transition, and coping, (e) participants were willing to have their interview with the researcher audio recorded.

Participants were solicited using a letter of introduction that was sent via email to potential participants inviting them to volunteer to participate in the study (see Appendix A). Included in this letter was an explanation of the study's purpose, objectives, criteria for inclusion, benefits of participating in the study, and method of conducting the study. In response to my invitation by email, potential participants responded to the invitation to accept the invitation to participate or to ask questions about the study. Follow-up emails to participants included the following attached documents: the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B), the Demographic Information Form (see Appendix C), and the Interview Protocol (see Appendix D). Participants completed the Demographic Information Form and returned it through email.

Sampling Procedures

A snowball sampling method was used with a focus on recruiting participants who met the inclusion criteria for the study. In order to achieve a wider variety of sports in the participant sample, snowball sampling was advantageous because it utilized the social networks of identified respondents to provide an ever-expanding set of potential contacts (Thomson, 1997). The process

was set on the assumption that a "link" exists between the initial sample and other individuals in the target population, allowing for a series of referrals to be made (Berg, 1988).

The snowball sample for this study was selected based on the purpose of the study, on participants' experiences relating to the phenomenon being studied, and on my personal judgment (Babbie, 2013). Due to the lack of restriction on a minimum number of participants to achieve power because it was a qualitative study, I interviewed participants until I reached saturation. *Saturation* refers to the process of gathering and analyzing data up to the point where no new insights were being observed (Tay, 2014). The concept of saturation was important as it was used assess whether the study is based on an adequate sample to demonstrate content validity (Tay, 2014). Two to 10 participants are typically adequate to achieve saturation (Boyd, 2001).

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of female athletes who have retired from Division I collegiate athletics. I was interested in interviewing participants with a variety of athletic involvement and a variation in normative and non-normative transitions out of sport. My intention was to have a *maximum variation sample* (Patton, 2002) of selected athletes who have played different sports. This involved sending invitations to potential participants from a variety of athletic sports i.e. lacrosse, equestrian, softball, tennis, etc. Maximum variation sampling provided identification of common themes and patterns that span across participants' varied backgrounds, athletic experience, and geographic considerations (Creswell, 2012; Patton, 2002). Potential for greater transferability of findings was possible through the use of maximum variation sampling, as major themes emerged from the data.

Role of the Researcher and Personal Assumptions

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003), the researcher was considered an instrument of data collection. Therefore, in this heuristic inquiry, data were mediated through a human instrument, rather than through questionnaires of inventories. For this reason, qualitative researchers need to be explicit about their assumptions. The researcher's assumptions can enhance the study by providing a contextual frame for the reader to interpret the researcher's conclusions. Greenbank (2003) acknowledges the researcher's responsibility of describing relevant aspects of self, including biases, assumptions, expectations, and experiences to qualify her ability to conduct the research.

In this respect, I recognized as a retired female athlete that I carried certain biases and assumptions to this research study based on my own experiences. My role in this research study was that of a researcher-participant rather than a detached observer. I acknowledged that my connection to the phenomenon under study might impact my interpretation of the data and interactions that transpire from this research. I attempted to make my biases and assumptions as explicit as possible as I conducted this study.

An assumption that I carried was that as a retired, female athlete I would share many commonalities with the participants in this study. While we might have differences in various demographic factors, I believed that we would have commonalities based on our similar experiences as female athletes at Division I universities. When I interviewed my participants, I believed I would have an insider viewpoint, shared common language, and had an ease of communication with participants (co-researchers).

A key assumption of the heuristic method I selected for this study was the researcher's role is that of an insider. The heuristic inquiry method assumes an insider perspective for the

research, in contrast to the bracketing that occurs in phenomenological methods. In this heuristic approach, the researcher was the key informant of her own experience and recognized that the researcher's interest in the phenomenon being study was related to her personal story (Gruppetta, 2004). Gruppetta (2004) defined the term autophenomography as a type of research that combines the personal with the phenomenon or experience that is the subject of inquiry. With autophenomography, like heuristic research, the author of the study is the key informant of her own experience and extends empathy to the experiences of the other participants to add to the in-depth and nature of the study (Gruppetta, 2004). Similarly, in heuristic research most significant awarenesses are developed from the researcher's own internal searchers, as well as, from our attunement with and empathetic understandings of participants (Moustakas, 1990).

Data Collection Procedures

Following qualitative guidelines, interviews were the primary method of collecting data. Some potential participants who met the eligibility criteria were contacted via email and invited to participate in a one-time individual 60- to 90-minute web-based audio interview about self-identity loss and transition after sport. The interview was conducted using Vsee, a HIPAA compliant video conferencing tool (VSee, 2017). VSee was HIPAA compliant as it protects data privacy in all audio/video communication securely encrypting and transmitted the data so that all identifiable information is not breached and offered the HIPAA-required Business Associate Agreement that requires VSee to be responsible for securing all patient information (VSee, 2017). The interview process was open-ended, which allowed for flexibility in the dialogue and keeping consistent with the developing nature of qualitative inquiry (Gordon, 2014). Each interview was conducted from a relational perspective, paying careful attention to the intersubjective dynamics that transpired between my participants and me. Participants were

encouraged to include any relevant stories, journal entries, artwork, poetry, or other forms of creative expression that contributed to the intentionality of their experiences as they transitioned out of athletics. Forms of creative expression were collected via university email and stored on a personal password protected computer. In order to maintain focus on my participants and not on myself during the research process, I engaged in the reflexive process of keeping a journal to document my reactions and observations throughout the research process (Moustakas, 1990).

The researcher interviews were semi-structured, which allowed for follow-up questions based on participants' responses and for greater clarification of those responses (Gordon, 2014). Interviews were digitally, audio recorded and transcribed verbatim (Gordon, 2014). Using a web-based meeting platform ensured safeguarding of participant confidentiality. Literature has suggested that in-depth audio interviews are a viable option for conducting qualitative research (Drabble et al., 2016). Many qualitative studies address the logistical conveniences and practical advantages of audio interviews, including: (a) enhanced access to geographically dispersed participants, (b) increased interviewer safety, (c) reduced cost, (d) greater scheduling flexibility, (e) increased privacy for respondents, and (f) reduced distraction for participants (Cachia and Millward, 2011; Carr and Worth, 2001; Drabble et al., 2016; Shuy, 2003; and Sturges and Hanrahan, 2004).

Recruitment. Prior to the official interview, respondents were sent a cover letter (see Appendix A) via university email that invited them to participate in the study. Respondents who agreed to participate were sent the Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B), the Demographic Information Form (see Appendix C), and the Interview Protocol (see Appendix D) via university email to ensure attainment of ethical standards (Holloway, 1997).

Along with the forms, participants were sent a request to schedule a meeting time for the interview to take place. Questions and concerns related to the interview process were addressed prior to the official interview and subsequently throughout the progression of the study. The informed consent agreement was reviewed with each participant at the beginning of the interview, and informed consent was obtained verbally from each participant. Participants were able to chose a preferred pseudonym to safeguard participant confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were able to document their pseudonyms on the Demographic Information Form, prior to the interview occurring.

Data collection instruments. In this heuristic study, the researcher collected and recorded the data regarding the experience of inquiry through the use of a demographic survey (see Appendix C) and audio recorded semi-structured interviews. A demographic survey (see Appendix C) provided basic information about the co-researchers (participants), while the semi-structured interview guide provided guidelines for the interview process.

Demographic survey. Prior to the interview, each co-researcher was sent a demographic information form. The form provided basic demographic information. The questions in the form (see Appendix C) were used to collect factual information about each co-researcher that was used to provide the reader with some context for the participants' experiences.

Semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide (see Appendix D) provided the standard protocol for each interview conducted. The guide was given to each co-researcher to specify general interview guidelines and procedures for the inquiry. This allowed the co-researcher to acknowledge the interview process, and to ask any questions regarding the interview process prior to beginning the interview. Forms of creative expression (e.g., journal entries, poetry, pictures, etc.) were collected via email and included with participants' permission

in the results section of the inquiry in each participant's profile, including each individual's depiction and artifacts if provided.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data analyses are outlined in Table 2. Each semi-structured interview provided the raw data for the study (Moustakas, 1990). Data were gathered from one participant at a time, digitally audio recorded, and transcribed verbatim (Moustakas, 1990). Any information (such as names) in the interviews that made individuals identifiable was redacted or modified to make the individuals unidentifiable. New participants were interviewed until saturation is attained (Creswell, 2012; Gehart et al., 2001). Data were safeguarded on my personal, password protected laptop computer and on flash drives that are inaccessible in a locked drawer in my home. After personally transcribing each interview, member checking of transcripts, explained below, allowed for content accuracy prior to the data's analysis.

The researcher personally transcribed each interview. Due to the inseparability of the body from all lived experience, what Brooks (2010) refers to as *embodied transcription*, elaboration of themes and creative synthesis emerges from the epistemological tool otherwise known as the researcher's body. Non-linear engagement of the six phases of heuristic research, explained previously, allowed for analysis of the raw data. This process included movement among phases of immersion, rest and incubation, immersion once more from a transformed perspective, and identification of themes (Moustakas, 1990). According to Moustakas (1990), a structural and textural individual depiction of each participant's experience is then created, followed by a description of emergent themes. Lastly, a creative synthesis was formed and presented. This study used MaxQDA, a qualitative analysis software package (Verbi, 2017) to

facilitate and systematize coding and analyses of textual and audio data, as well as images of journals and other raw data shared by participants.

Methods of Verification

Two methods were used to establish and assure trustworthiness and rigor in this inquiry: (a) member checking and (b) triangulation. Member checking of the transcripts allow for verification of content accuracy prior to data analysis. Vogt (2005) described *member checking* as the act of researchers submitting their data or findings to their participants to confirm they accurately presented what their participants disclosed to them. Each participant was sent an original transcript to read and verify, amend, or comment on the transcript's accuracy (Stake, 1995). After each participant reviewed her transcript, necessary changes were made. *Data triangulation* is the process of checking the integrity of the inference one draws from the data and involves the use of multiple data sources (Vogt, 2005). To ensure validity of the study, the researcher used: 1) non-participant observations, 2) semi-structured interviews of the participants, and 3) any creative synthesis provided by the participants. Additionally, the dissertation adviser coded one or more interviews as to verify the researcher's analyses of the raw data. Furthermore, if participants were interested in the outcome of the study, the results and findings of the overall themes were made available upon request.

Moustakas (1990) acknowledged that the validation of heuristic inquiry remains within the researcher's inner process through the use of tacit knowledge and intuition. Therefore, validity and trustworthiness were guaranteed by returning to the data over and over again. In doing so, I was able to establish validity through self-search and presentation of others' experiences and significances accurately. Other methods such as engaging in reflexivity through

journaling, and using multiple sources of data collection, such as participant artifacts, were used to contribute to greater trustworthiness and authenticity.

Table 2

Research and Interview Questions

Type	Research Question	Interview Guide Question
Central	What is the experience of identity transition for female Division I athletes who retired from being student-athletes?	What was/is your experience of identity transition after retirement from collegiate athletics?
Sub-question 1	What difficulties do retired student-athletes experience during their transitions to retirement?	What difficulties did/do you experience during your transition?
Sub-question 2	What is involved in the process of transitioning to retirement?	What was/is involved in your process of transition?
Sub-question 3	When do student-athletes first become aware of the transition to retirement?	When did you first become aware of the transition?
Sub-question 4	What coping strategies do student-athletes use in the transition to retirement?	What coping strategies did/do you use during the transition?

Chapter V

RESULTS

The purpose of this heuristic research study was to explore the experiences of female student-athletes' transition after retirement from sport. Female student-athletes from varied athletic backgrounds, athletic experiences, training backgrounds, and geographic considerations were individually interviewed and asked the following guiding questions:

1. What was/is your experience of identity transition after retirement from collegiate athletics?

2. What difficulties did/do you experience during your transition?

3. What was/is involved in your process of transition?

4. When did you first become aware of the transition?

5. What coping strategies did/do you use during the transition?

Individual profiles detailing the demographic information affiliated with each participant were presented. An individual depiction of the phenomenon being explored follows each participant profile, along with an artifact for each participant who chose to include one. This was followed by a qualitative content analysis explaining the theme emergence process, describing the various emergent themes (Patton, 2002). A creative synthesis elaborated through my own intuitive process was presented. Finally, my findings were discussed in relation to previous literature and theory, and in relation to the justification of the study.

Table 3

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Sport	Type of Institution	Duration of Retirement	Region of US (United States Census Bureau, 2018)	Reason for Retirement
Barbara	26	Softball	Public	3 years and 6 months	Division 6- East South Central	Eligibility
Jane	24	Lacrosse	Public	2 years and 8 months	Division 5- South Atlantic	Eligibility
Eden	26	Golf	Private	5 years and 8 months	Division 7- West South Central	Injury and Personal Decision
Anna	24	Lacrosse	Public	3 years and 2 months	Division 9- Pacific	Eligibility
Claire	24	Tennis	Public	2 years	Division 6- East South Central	Eligibility
Carrie	23	Golf	Public	10 months	Division 4- West North Central	Eligibility

Description of Participants

The maximum variation sample (Patton, 2002) consisted of six retired female student-athletes from a variety of backgrounds, sports, and geographic locations. Demographic information was gathered from each participant using a one-page Demographic Information Form (Appendix C). This information is presented in Table 3, following which are individual participant summaries containing (a) a brief athletic profile that further details the athletic identity of the participant in alignment with the participant's self-description, (b) an individual depiction elicited from the raw data in the form of verbal descriptions of the participant's athletic

identity, and (c) an artifact in the form of artwork, poetry, pictures, or other styles of expression created to facilitate meaning-making of participants' experiences.

Barbara

Barbara is a 26 year-old female who participated and competed in Division I Softball in the East South Central region of the United States. Barbara described being involved in her sport from a young age. She talked about her father's role as her mentor and coach has not only led to her participation in sports but also influenced her decision to coach after she retired from athletics. Barbara competed all four years of her college career and went on to become a graduate assistant for the team as she completed her Masters degree.

When asked to describe herself as an athlete, Barbara described being an athlete who is well rounded and versatile. She explained the necessity of performing a wide-range of skills and positions that allowed her to be an elite player but also a valuable teammate:

Its not easy to be good at your sport, especially a sport like softball when it is so skill-based and there is multiple skills, you don't have just one thing you have to learn how to do, especially someone like me. I had to know how to pitch, hit and field, and be a leader and be in the best physical shape I could be in… It goes so much further beyond just what you see as success. It's being a good teammate... I mean if you're a good athlete and you're well rounded and you have all the intangibles, not just you look the part but you act the part. So any time I felt like I was doing everything right and I was also producing on the field, I respected the heck out of myself.

Barbara's understanding of her identity transition. Barbara's account of her identity transition as she transitioned out of athletics:

I guess at first, when I retired and my career was over for college softball, I took it pretty hard because it's something I did for my whole life… I still felt like I was an athlete shortly after, even though I knew I wasn't and I knew I was never going to play again but I guess when the next school year started for college and I would have had to report in as an athlete that fall…that's when it really hit me that I would never be playing again because I would see my former teammates showing up to school, meeting with the coaches, starting workouts, starting practices and everything, and that's when it really hit me… I wasn't a part of that for the first time in my life. That's when it really hit me and that was pretty sad because it was my first year out of it and not being able to do it and feel like I was part of the team.

Barbara's artifact. Barbara shared a photo of the softball field she played at in college. She talked about using photos from her athletic career to remind her of herself as an athlete and to relive her experiences on and off the field. The photo was not taken by the participant or her family members therefore is not displayed.

This is the field I committed everything to. Countless hours of hard work and big moments happened here. From the long practices after 6 am workouts and hours of classes, to the countless times I came out to the field by myself in the offseason to better my game, and the location of the biggest wins and toughest losses, this was my whole life for four years. This is also the place I got proposed to on because he knew how much it means to me. I love this field.

Jane

Jane is a 24 year-old female who participated and competed in Division I Lacrosse in the South Atlantic region of the United States. Jane attributed her participation in athletics to her family's involvement and interest in collegiate athletics. She made note of her brother's participation in professional league sports and the impact her brother's career had on her decision to pursue collegiate athletics. She participated and was eligible in her sport for four years at her university. Jane described her ability to compete and learn how to be a leader through her participation in Division I athletics.

I asked Jane to describe herself as an athlete. She described herself as an extremely cognitive player who actively sought to obtain a scholarship to a Division I university so that she could compete at an elite collegiate level.

I've always been pretty determined to in order to find a scholarship and find a school that I thought was suitable for me and be able to play at a really high level. So, it's definitely extremely competitive and I think I also took my off field training very seriously. So, I was always in the weight room. I was always doing extra conditioning and just trying to give me that sort of edge compare to my teammates and even other teams.

When asked to discuss her Division I lacrosse experience Jane paralleled her understanding to the experience of any other elite sport by providing insight into the routine of a Division I athlete.

It's basically like any other Division I sport. You have a lot of commitment for practice each week. It could be four to six hours a day or a two-hour practice a day, depending upon the

program or the type of coach I guess but it's usually at least some off field training like in a weight room and running, and different types of I guess things like that as well.

Jane's understanding of her identity transition. Following is Jane's description of her identity transition after disengaging from her sport, based on her experience as a retired female student-athlete.

For me personally, it was hard because I've only done lacrosse for four years and I went from internship to internship but never held a job. So once I got out and once I graduated, I just had this period of I don't know what to do with myself. I didn't even know how to work out because I wasn't going to a team lift or I wasn't going to a team run. So it was this sort of like feeling in limbo, kind of lost for a probably like a solid couple of months and even now, I still kind of feel like it because I'm not working a typical nine to five job but it's definitely been hard and it's definitely been something where you're kind of feeling lost especially compared to my friends who were non-athletes because a lot of them are in successful jobs or they feel good about what they're doing and they're really on a strict schedule and for me, I don't have a schedule at the moment. So, it's sort of this limbo period. So, it's been awfully tough.

I think just feeling kind of lost and not having as much of a purpose everyday because even though I didn't have that positive of an experience with my college career, it still gave me purpose and still gave me a really rigorous schedule that I had to uphold and lived by every single day including seven days a week. So I think for me that I felt like just really lost for a long time because I didn't have that structure.

Jane's artifact. Jane expressed using artwork to make sense of her transition out of athletics (Figure 1)
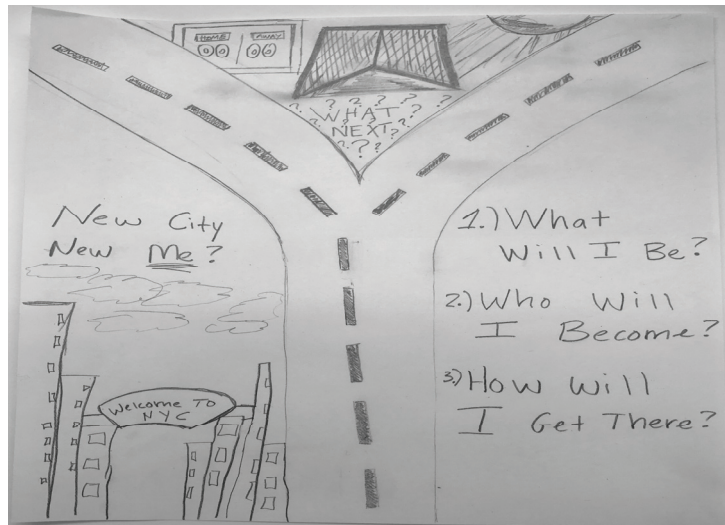
Figure 1. An illustration Jane drew to make meaning of her identity transition out of sports.

Eden

Eden is a 26 year-old female who participated and competed in Division I Golf in the West South Central region of the United States. Eden described choosing the sport of golf after undergoing a minor injury playing on her adolescent basketball team and realizing basketball did not suit her. She described being fairly competitive in golf and going on to win her first tri-state golf tournament, and ultimately receiving attention from university golf coaches scouting for recruits. Eden noted that she chose to attend her university based off the women's golf team's coaching staff at the time of recruitment.

Following is how Eden described herself as an athlete.

Consistent. I like consistency. I like to be consistent. My whole goal my last year college, was to never shoot in the 80s which would offer- that's pretty normal as a college athlete that for that full year qualifying sick, feeling good, whatever, rain, snow, I didn't want to

shoot above a certain number and I've maintained that for the entire year which I was really proud of. But I was kind of one of those everyday players that you could count on between a 68 and a 77. My scores were always going to be used, I'm always going to show up to practice. I'm just going to do the things that I need to do to be a contributing player. And that was my whole goal. I knew I wasn't a player who was emotional enough to go out or crazy enough I guess to go for hints that were tucked tight that you have to go for to shoot a crazy little number like a 62 and that wasn't my personality.

When I asked Eden what being an athlete means to her she recounted the pride she felt knowing that she was a dependable player. She mentioned she felt satisfaction in being a player her coaches counted on to act as a role model to newer teammates.

Personally, I looked at it as an accomplishment. I looked at it as kind of like a job well done. If it's a signifier that I had put in the work in high school, I had all of the things that I needed to do to be recruited nationally and I mean for me, it wasn't necessarily about what happens off the course, it was more what happened on the course that was important to me. The celebrity status seems to eclipse golfers, it doesn't really happen to us. So it's kind of not a big deal that I was really proud of what I did on the course everyday and how I played and how coaches gave me a new- how a lot of coaches or assistant coach that I had the first three years, that told me that coaches compliment me for how consistent I was and how I talked to the other players and how they would want to pair their players with me because they knew that a) I was going to go out and shoot a good score, b) I was going to show a younger player what it's like to be just kind of a veteran.

Eden's understanding of her identity transition. Eden suffered an injury that resulted in her taking some time off from golf. She discussed believing that her injury would eventually heal and she would be able to compete again. Eden stated, "I thought that I was going to be able to come back from it, I thought I was going to be able to turn pro, and so up until the surgery, in December of 2012, I was still kind of holding on hope that after I had the surgery and hit a bucket of balls… I kind of realized it was too late."

Following is Eden's recollection of her identity transition after she realized that her retirement from golf was inevitable.

> I think that like 6 or 7-month period where I kind of had hope but I was kind of easing into normal life which was good for me. But I was definitely depressed; I definitely felt a sense of loss. It was like I had done this for ten years, it had been a consistent part of my life and it was gone. And so that was a little difficult but I think if I hadn't had my faith that God had a better plan, I wouldn't have gotten through it. Because when you put that much effort and energy into something, and then you lose it, I mean it's going to feel like a loss. It's kind of looking back like, why do I even do this? Sure, it paid for college but I could've gotten a part time job and done something else or made better grades, or all these other things but it just felt like a door had been slammed to my face.

Eden's artifact. Eden shared a bible verse that best represented her identity transition (Figure 2). Also, she provided a picture of the golf course where she spent her years practicing. She talked about how image provided her with peace and hope.

> Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the

God of my salvation. God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the

deer's; he makes me tread on high places.

Habakkuk 3: 17-19

Figure 2. A photograph Eden used to give her strength during her transition out of athletics.

Anna

Anna is a 24 year-old female who participated and competed in Division I lacrosse in the

Pacific region of the United States. Anna discussed growing up playing lacrosse and being

recruited to play collegiate lacrosse, along with many of her club team members. She expressed

gratitude for having the opportunity to play for a successful high school team, which she

believes, allowed her to be scouted and recruited by Division I universities. When discussing her

lacrosse background, Anna mentioned, "Lacrosse had always been a part of my childhood

growing up and so when it came time to go to college I wasn't quite ready to give it up yet."

Anna discussed participating in lacrosse at a young age as a form of socializing. She mentioned her friend's father being her coach from an early age and through high school, which made lacrosse feel like a "second family environment."

When I asked Anna to describe herself as an athlete she portrayed herself as a team player, someone who uplifted her teammates and provided support.

I'm thinking encouraging, only because I feel like and this is just me as a person…I like, I'm a people pleaser. I like to make other people, other people feel better and so I think on the field I have always tried to be the one if someone messed up, like going up to them, "hey don't worry about it. You got the next one. Remember you are on the end line running sprint." I would always be talking to the person next to me like, "hey Jan you got this, like keep going, let's go." So you know I think encouraging is probably a good one.

Anna's understanding of her identity transition. Anna was the only participant who navigated her transition experience with relative ease. She recounted a stable and focus-driven transition that was followed by immediate immersion into the working world:

Not that it was some big, emotional thing ever anyways… Then, I started my internship and really my working career right after I graduated, like a week. So, I didn't really have time to settle or have free time to really mess around or do fun stuff. But I think when it kind of hit me was when everyone started going back to school in the fall and all my younger teammates were going back and starting fall camp and after seeing, and going to football games and just being at college regardless of being a student athlete, just going back to college and having fun. It's kind of just like, "Oh man. I'm a real person now. This is kind of a bummer."

Anna prefaced her transition by admitting that she actively sought to disengage from her sport and her athletic identity prior to her athletic career ending. She believes she adjusted her attitude toward her athletic career, which supported her in negotiating the loss of her athletic identity prior to her retirement:

So I think as the reality sets in, as student athletes about to graduate and they don't have the opportunity to play professionally after, things kind of start to set into perspective a little bit of, okay you know, a year from now, I'm going to be in the working world in the real world regardless it's cool if I played in a, play a sport but it's also not going to affect whether someone hires me or not… I don't want to say that I like stopped trying hard but it is definitely like there becomes a point when you're like alright this is going to go how it's going to go and I'm going to make the most of it and so I'm going to have fun not kind of care what happens.

Anna's artifact. Anna shared a picture of a tangible artifact, her Nike headband (Figure 3).

This is the headband that I wore in almost every game during my junior and season year seasons. While it may seem like just a headband, it was actually passed down to me from one of my teammates, and was passed on to her by another teammate. I admired them so much as friends and players that when I put it on before games it made me think of how this sport is more than just being an athlete, it's about being a friend and sister.

Figure 3. An artifact Anna provided that represents her athletic experience.

Claire

Claire is a 24 year-old female who competed and participated in Division I tennis in the East South Central region of the United States. Claire described being from a foreign country and having the opportunity to come to the United States to attend a Division I university where she played tennis. At the age of 19, she made the decision to come to the United Stated and continue to play tennis because she was not ready to give up that part of her identity. When discussing her decision to play at the Division I level she stated:

> I mean it has taken up so much of my life. It was part of my identity. And so at age of 19, I was just not ready to let it go, especially not so abruptly. Because, again, if I was like, if was in Holland, I was at the point where full-time tennis was just super expensive. And for me, I felt very limited by just only playing tennis. Like I didn't want to choose that lifestyle. But to completely let it go and only go to a university and just really not play tennis anymore more so than just recreational every now and then, that was a very, very big change too. So I think that it was important for me at the time for sure to make such a big move in order to play tennis some more for a few years. And also, I knew that

especially in the United States, it was going to provide me with opportunities in the future.

Claire described herself as an athlete with an extreme work ethic and dedication to her development as a player. She had an awareness of her athletic abilities but also her areas for growth, and knew that she had to put in extra work to remain at the top of her athletic class.

Throughout my like tennis career, I definitely was one that had to work extra hard to be able to compete with girls that just naturally had like really big talent. And I'm not saying that I wasn't talented but I would definitely describe myself as like a hard worker…I guess I always knew that I definitely had to at least make sure that physically I was in my perfect shape and I couldn't let any of that go because I felt like I wouldn't be good enough if I did. I think because of that, I was very disciplined. I guess just putting in the work that I felt was necessary in order to compete at the highest level.

Claire's understanding of her identity transition. Claire discussed her internal struggle of wanting to leave her legacy as a player at her university but also knowing that once she played her last match that her time as an athlete was over. She described mentally preparing herself for the end of her athletic career:

It was mostly in my senior year. I really started focusing on what would be in my life after and almost like an internal conflict because in my mind, because I knew the end was coming, I was trying to tell myself that tennis was no longer that important and that I only had less than a year left at the point to play, and after that it would be not the end of the world if I lost matches. But if I got on the tennis court and play my matches, I would obviously still be and feel competitive. So then, during my last match I got very emotional and competitive…It was

like a mental battle where I felt sports wasn't that important anymore and that it would be

over soon and I think I was trying to put things in perspective for myself because it was

coming to an end.

Claire understood that the association of her identity with her sport would no longer serve her

in her post-athletic life. She realized that in order to safeguard herself in her identity transition

she needed to begin to separate from her athlete-self prior to her last match. However, the athlete

in her was unwilling to fully let go despite the knowledge that she needed to disengage from her

sport as she still felt the desire to perform well:

Just to try to put things in perspective and for me to let go of… I guess, the nervous-wracking

attitude about wanting to do so well in my last semester. So that transition started more so

before I was already done and I almost think that that was jus a self-protection thing. You

don't want to just fully deny that it's done and what it could've been, if it does, your identity

crisis was just way bigger.

Claire's artifact. Claire symbolized her transitional experience through the image of an

elephant. The photograph was not displayed due to not obtaining permission from the

photographer.

Claire stated, "This did a good job representing an animal with a lot of strengths but she

looks lost, which is how my identity crisis felt at times after my tennis career was over."

Carrie

Carrie is a 23 year-old female who competed in Division I golf in the West North Central

region of the United States. Carrie talked about wanting to make a difference in athletic

culture through her involvement in her sport. She mentioned feeling inspired by a

professional athlete who overcame numerous obstacles in his athletic career, which led her to choose her golf as her sport of choice. Also, she noted her father's influence, as he was professional athlete for some time.

Carrie described having a negative experience at the Division I level. She acknowledged her sense of pride in being an elite athlete, and the fact that she had reached an elite level as an athlete. Unfortunately, Carrie felt as if she was not "good enough" as an athlete upon attending her university. When asked to describe herself as an athlete, she stated:

You know and there's still like that kind of pride in it when you can say, "I play for Division I program." But for me, I was proud that I was there, but I kind felt like I was… I was not good enough or that I wasn't wanted there. I felt like there was always that message like… "Well I can replace you easily because there's so many people that would love be in your position." … It was just like, when you're struggling, all you need is just a support…somebody to kind of pat you on the back and not say, "Well, get out then. We don't need you."…So I can see how athletes would kind of slip through the cracks in that program because it's, because I feel like they're kind of seen as…some programs see us as disposable or recyclable. Get somebody new in here. Don't know where that came from but that was just my perspective.

Carrie noted how the pressures of going from high school to college athletics influenced how she felt about herself and her performance as an athlete:

There was so much more pressure. There is a huge difference as far as the pressure because I spent all that time working up to that point and then it's like, "Oh my gosh, it's here," you

know. Are you going to sink or swim? How I saw myself as an athlete was just a failure really…and it's sad to say because I wasn't, but I felt like I was.

Carrie's understanding of her identity transition. Carrie was the only participant to make the personal decision to retire from Division I athletics prior to the end of her eligibility. She talks about questioning her decision to retire and the fears she faced after making her decision:

> When I took that step forward, I knew that I was going to have to face the idea of, "Did I just fail?" I spent my whole childhood working towards this and teenage years and…that's a hard pill to swallow for sure in the moment… Whenever I went off to college I mean that whole experience and I was just so angry and everything. I even was like, "Why would you do this to me God? I thought this is supposed to be what I was supposed to do. I thought this was why you put me on this planet for," you know?

> She also explained the revelations she had throughout her transitional period:
> I felt a pull that second semester of my senior year…but then, it was Ash Wednesday. Id never gone to Ash Wednesday in all my college years and then that Ash Wednesday, I was like, "You know what? I'm going to go." and then that's kind of when it all made sense to me. Why did I go through so much pain? What is really important in life? It's not sports. That's the first time I really read the Bible. And after doing that, it started to make sense to me. And then I realigned my values and my goals and what I wanted in life.

Carrie's artifact. Carrie illustrated a lotus flower (Figure 4). She talked about how the lotus flower represents beauty and growth, two themes that emerged from her transitional experience.
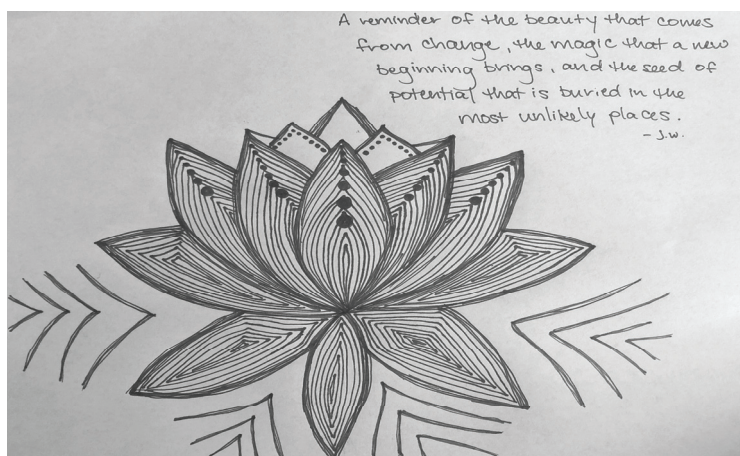
Figure 4. An illustration Carrie drew to make meaning of her transitional experience.

Analysis of Data

Based on the heuristic inquiry approach, data were gathered and organized from one participant at a time (Moustakas, 1990). Due to the snowball sampling method, the maximum variation sample resulted in more of a convenient sampling, as the sample appeared to be homogenous in nature. Maximum variation sampling was achieved regionally and by the type of sport, as the sample was varied geographically and contained participants who competed in varying types of sports; however, was not varied culturally. The sample ranged from four out of the five regions of the United States and contained five different types of sports. Interviewing of new participants continued until saturation was attained (Creswell, 2012; Gehart et al., 2001). Saturation was achieved as the amount of variation in the data leveled off and no new perspectives or explanations were being gleaned from the data. Five out of the six interviews were congruent in their perspectives of their experiences of athletic retirement; while one participant shared commonalities with the five participants she was the only participant to

provide any new insights on identity transition after retirement from athletics even though her experience was similar in many ways. Repetition of the same perspectives, insights, and commonalities of experience allowed me to know when saturation was reached.

Data were subjected to the heuristic analysis process outlined by Moustakas (1990). Findings were illuminated after a search for "qualities, conditions, and relationships" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 11) that emerge from the power of revelation in tacit knowing during periods of immersion in and incubation of the data. I began by immersing myself in the participants' data individually by listening to the audio recordings of all the interviews multiple times while writing concurrent memos and making note of exact quotations. I also reviewed participants' artifacts, if provided. During this period of immersion I practiced self-dialogue, and allowed my tacit knowing and intuition to guide my listening, reading, and sensing of the data. Following the listening of the audio and transcribing each interview verbatim, I allowed myself a period of disengagement, otherwise known as the incubation period from the data. This period of incubation was used to employ my intuition and allow it to work, and to allow my tacit knowing to become explicit, which corresponds to the illumination phase of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990).

After my period of incubation that lasted about three weeks, and the subsequent illumination that ensued from my extended time away, I entered the explication phase where I fashioned individual participant depictions. In this phase, I wrote individual depictions for each participant. Each depiction included selections from the interviews and artifacts gathered from each participant's experience of identity transition after retirement from sport. I reviewed the depictions individually, oscillating between audio-recordings, listening to the participants' voices, hearing their characters come to life through the audio, while also looking at the visual

representations of their depictions and artifacts. Returning to the data I used holistic coding (Dey, 1993) in attempt to grasp themes and subthemes in the data by absorbing them as a whole. I did this by providing a single code to large sections of the data to capture the overall sense of the participants' experiences and to clarify possible categories that may develop. Once holistic coding was used to summarize segments of the data, pattern coding (Miles et al., 2014) was implemented as a form of second cycle coding that grouped codes into the emergent themes.

The data collection and analysis process revealed a series of themes describing phenomena found in sport psychology professional literature. The themes emerged in two prominent emphases: (a) meaning and experience of being an athlete, and (b) impact of retirement on the athlete. Participants sharing of their experiences of being an athlete throughout their lifespan and how their athletic identities structured their formative life experiences generated the emphasis on meaning and experience of being an athlete, which included two themes: identity as an athlete, and identity foreclosure, and a subtheme: association of identity with sport. A set of eight codes were narrowed down to two codes, definition and perception, which led to the theme of identity as an athlete. The following codes: achievement, dedication, no other options, tunnel-vision, and sacrifice led to the theme of identity foreclosure, as participants stressed the commitment to and reinforcement of their athletic identities leading up to their retirements. The subtheme of association of identity with sport generated from the theme of identity foreclosure as athletes described basing their mental and emotional states on their athletic involvement and performances. The codes that generated the subtheme of association of identity with sport included: failure, proud, pressure, burned out, and takes a toll.

Responses to questions 1 through 5 generated the emphasis of impact of retirement on the athlete, which included two themes and three subthemes: identity loss, fears of "normalcy,

purpose, limbo, and personal agency. The theme of identity loss began with ten codes that were narrowed down to four codes: confusion, lost, anger, who am I. The subthemes of fears of "normalcy," purpose, and limbo emerged from the following narrowed down codes: special, normal, lack of structure, struggle, and fulfillment. The theme of personal agency emerged from the following codes: perception, awareness, responsibility, and growth.

A composite description of the themes was presented after the emergence of themes through the engagement of the six phases of heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990) used in conjunction with holistic (Dey, 1993) and pattern (Miles et al., 2014) coding. This was followed by some periods of time were I focused on my experience through this process and the data analysis that was done up to that point in my process. I allowed time to approach the data in a meditative and reflective state, engaged in personal journaling, and revisited my own artifacts related to my experiences as an athlete. During this time I was struck with the inspiration to produce the creative synthesis for this heuristic inquiry. My creative synthesis was "an original integration of the material that reflects the researcher's intuition, imagination and personal knowledge of meanings and essences of the experience" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 50). Validity, trustworthiness, and authenticity were ensured by returning again and again to the data (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas (1990) believed the validation of heuristic inquiry lies within the researcher's inner process, in the use of tacit knowing and intuition.

Themes

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of female student-athletes' transition after retirement from sport. The study sought to identify themes that influence female student-athletes' transition out of athletics, and to better understand the manner of how female student-athletes experience and perceive their transitions.

Identity as an Athlete. All of the participants in this study described an exclusive, narrow focus on sport related goals prior to the time of their disengagement from sport. For example, when participants discussed their experiences prior to and during their Division I athletic experiences, all athletes described the commitment and dedication that they displayed to their sport and how there was little focus on non-athletic endeavors during this time. Their daily routine revolved around athletics, thinking about their sport, maintaining nutritional and conditioning habits to perform and be successful in their sport. All athletes mentioned the difficulties of having a job or registering and participating in a major that did not compliment their athletic schedules. All non-sport related engagements were of secondary importance because participants were required to have flexible schedules to train, travel and compete at times that corresponded with their athletic season.

Each of the six participants described a sense of being different from their non-athletic peers. Their narratives illuminate the differentiation that they sensed while being a Division I athlete. To further develop participants' definition of an athlete, each was asked, "What does being a Division I athlete mean to you?" The following excerpts are participants' descriptions of the elements that compose their personal definitions of a Division I athlete.

Barbara described her understanding of an elite athlete by providing examples of the commitment and flexibility that athletes have to maintain in order to succeed at the Division I level. Barbara stated, "I did wake up early and work out hard every morning and then went to class and then went to practice and then did homework. I mean…that grind is tough." When asked what being an athlete means to her she replied, "I think, I guess in one word, I would say respect. Because I understand what goes into the process of being an athlete and I guess that can

go back to the title, the athlete. But, yeah, I guess respect would be the biggest word I would use to describe athlete."

Barbara further clarified respect as more than the admiration she receives from her peers and others, but also a form of self-respect she cultivates for herself through her continuous commitment and hard work in her sport:

It goes so much further beyond just what you see as success. It's being a good teammate and you know always being on time, and all of that. I mean if you're a good athlete and you're well rounded and you have all the intangibles, not just you look the part but you act the part. So any time you know I felt like I was doing everything right and I was also producing on the field, I respected the heck out of myself and I respect that athletes that I saw around me on campus in other sports, my teammates when I saw what they were doing, how hard they would work, the sacrifices that they would make. And so yeah, it's a self-respect thing and also I knew people respected me because I was doing everything that I could to be the best I could be. So its a respect thing from all around, because there's just so much that goes into it, if you want to be the very best that you can.

Jane talked about her accomplishments as a Division I athlete and the reputation that she upholds being an athlete from a successful athletic program:

I think for some people, they... I don't want to sound obnoxious but I think for some people, they're impressed and they think that's really amazing and to do it for four years, it's pretty remarkable and then also for me in my situation, it was impressive because we won our first National Championship for that program and in my senior year, we were

able to do that again. So, I think certain people, they really wowed by that and I think it's something that's quite honorable.

Jane also discussed the respect elite athletes receive for their commitment to their sport, however, she commented on athletes' non-athletic peers lack of understanding towards the sacrifice athletes make in order to be successful. Like many of the participants, Jane described the camaraderie between elite athletes and the ability to relate to other athletes at the Division I level. Jane shared that "confidence and dedication" are two qualifiers that identify her as an athlete and what she deems important to her:

I think a lot of people admire the dedication that goes into playing college sports but not a lot of people really understand it or really know what it's like to sacrifice that much time for four years and compete at that level, and how serious your coaches and everyone around you makes it. And I think for me, it's really nice when I see another college athlete and I can be able to talk about that, you know there's a sort of respect between two people for that.

Anna spoke positively of her athletic experience and stated, "I was always proud of... At the end of the day, I loved the fact that I played the sport. I think it helped me grow into a way more confident, independent, hard working individual, and I'm proud of that and I will not be ashamed to tell anyone that I am a student athlete." She further exemplified what being an athlete meant to her by characterizing athletes as individuals who require a certain level of control. She stated, "I mean, I always crave discipline. To be a student athlete, we have to be disciplined. You have to have some level of discipline." Anna discussed the discipline she maintained during her athletic career, "I think that kind of helped shaped my work ethic and mindset down the road as an athlete and as a teammate."

Eden described herself as an athlete who was steady and reliable. To her, being an athlete meant being "consistent" on the course. She shared that she understood her identity as an athlete at the Division I level as an achievement:

Personally, I looked at it as an accomplishment. I looked at it as kind of like a job well done. If it's a signifier that I had put in the work in high school, I had all of the things that I needed to do to be recruited nationally and I mean for me, it wasn't necessarily about what happens off the course, it was more what happened on the course that was important to me.

Claire talked about being aware of herself as an athlete who was not naturally gifted in her sport. She discussed being aware of the extra work and dedication that was required of her to be a successful athlete and how she achieved her success at the elite level:

I was very disciplined. I guess just putting in the work that I felt was necessary in order to compete at the highest level. So whenever it came to doing workout, behind the scenes when someone was not watching me, I was always--I mean, not always but most of the time--very dedicated to put in the work knowing that if I wanted to reach the final goal, that's what I had to do. And I think the fact that I was aware of the fact that I have to put in that extra work, that motivated me to actually do it.

Claire illustrated how she felt "special" being an athlete, and the fellowship and belonging she felt with other collegiate athletes upon attending college:

It always kind of makes you special in a way, I guess until the moment when I just got to college, which was so nice. So many people were kind of going about or living their life the same way, just different sports obviously. But for them, it was also something they have been doing their entire life.

Carrie discussed the reputation that is attached to being a Division I athlete:

Well, first of all there's so much emphasis and I just feel like in American culture to be

Division I. You know like, "Oh you're Division I? That's awesome" You know and

there's still like that kind of pride in it when you can say, "I play for Division I program."

But for me, I still-- I was proud that I was there."

All participants' answers provided rich and detailed descriptions of what being a Division

I athlete meant to them. The participants described key aspects of an elite athlete as dedicated

and committed to their goals as athletes. For example, the participants discussed the motivation

that allowed them to concentrate on their athletic goals and be fully committed to their athlete

selves.

Closely linked to the characteristics of motivation, athletes described disciplined as a

defining characteristic of who they were. Four of the six participants used the term "consistent"

or "dedicated" as defining terms of an elite athlete, and all participants attributed their Division I

athletic recruitments as a factor of the commitment they exemplified in the years leading up to

their collegiate careers. Barbara discussed the commitment athletes display in their daily

schedules, what she termed the "grind" and stated, "I mean, that grind is tough and you hate it

some days but like I had an appreciation for it after I wasn't an athlete because I don't know how

in the world I did it. Your mind and your body are tired at all times." Carrie described her

motivation to continue playing Division I sports was due to not wanting to let her family and

friends down. Carrie stated, "Coming from a small town, I wouldn't say that I was like a small

town celebrity but I felt like everyone had their eyes on me because not a lot of kids from small

towns go off to play Division I sports." Claire discussed her self-motivation, "I think the fact that

I was aware of the fact that I have to put in that extra work, that motivated me to actually do it."

All participants discussed that part of their self-definition was a sense of "pride" or accomplishment being an athlete at the Division I level. The characteristic of pride reinforced the athletes' efforts to remain motivated and committed, driving the participants further into their athletic identities.

Identity foreclosure. Five out of the six participants experienced full immersion in their athletic identities prior to their disengagement from athletics. The participants who experienced identity foreclosure described fully committing to their athletic identities and foreclosing on any other identities, while also conforming to the expectations of others.

Carrie discussed associating her self-identity with her sport and her inability to differentiate her performance in her sport from her feelings about herself.

I mean I didn't really separate myself from golf and my identity. I thought golf was me, which was, looking back, that was pretty problematic. But I was young and kind of naive and so it developed a very volatile relationship with myself.

Carrie talked about her experience transitioning from high school to college and how she perceived a lack of control over her life due to participation in her sport:

Like I said I was just miserable. I feel like college is just, college in general is that time for you to discover who you are anyways, you know? And I felt like I just was kind of like passed off from high school to, you know-- For me it was like, 'Oh you know.' I mean high school and with my parents, they decide everything for me. And then I was like I had this transition to a new parent. Always telling me where I had to be all the time can't do this, you must do this, you know, I don't care how you feel about it. It was, I don't have that time to release and take a breath and be like, "Okay, what am I going to do with the rest of my life?"

Claire spoke about her sport being her primary identity from a young age:

If people thought about me, I think probably tennis is the very first word that came up in their minds. So that's really how I identified myself from probably the age of ten to really the age of 22, when I was done with college. So for me, personally, being an athlete meant that like really was just kind of what I was and how I knew people thought of me.

Eden shared that her coach's expectations of her led to her career-ending injury. She discussed not listening to her body and ultimately following her coach's orders as to remain in her coaching staff's good graces. As a result of the demands of her sport she was not able to develop and nurture alternate identities, such as her identity as a student, and fully committed herself to her sport:

I had a pretty rigorous major that required some attention and I had fallen behind because we had traveled a lot and so I told my coach that I was going to take a couple weeks off and he- I don't remember, if it was an email or text or a call, but he basically said that I wasn't being a good team leader if I didn't come out and practice and show the younger girls my work ethics and I'm sitting there going, but I'm tired. I'm late in school, it's cold, I really don't want to practice but I guess I'll show up and hit balls for 30 minutes a day…. So it didn't really make any sense. But I went, I guess the second or third day of that, I was hitting balls and I felt something snap in my left hand and it wound up being my tendon and it was immediate pain, it was terrible.

Jane talked about her intense focus and training in her sport and how her over commitment to achieving a starting position on the team caused her education to suffer as a result of her foreclosed identity:

So, I came in freshmen year and had a horrible GPA but lacrosse-wise I was looking

really...you know I felt really good. I felt really confident. I felt like I could actually earn

a consistent playing or starting job and I was in the position to do so because of the

training and how I prepared for that but then once I got my first grades for the first

semester, I said "Well, I need to make some sort of compromise here and start focusing

on other things outside of lacrosse."

Jane speculated that due to her athletic potential, ability, and coaching staff she felt

confident as a player and that further enforced her athletic identity. She stated that it was not

until she realized that with the right support she could excel in other areas of her life that she

understood there was more to her identity than just athletics:

I got more interested in school and I'd never really been able to explore school the way I

did or wanted to do and I think that sort of you know kind of pushed me to just not be as

interested in spending six hours of practice when it's a two-hour practice or something or

less watching film or I'm not going to go out do that type of conditioning drill today

because I have this assignment that's due. So, I think my interest definitely shifted. I

became motivated and dedicated in different areas and it was also...it affected my play on

the field, which is a shame. So, it was basically like the more successful I was in the

classroom, the less successful I became in terms of lacrosse and play. So, it was

unfortunate to see that but then at the same time my priorities also shifted and school

became more important to me.

Barbara described experiencing fear and confusion over her career ending and not

knowing who or what she was going to be post-retirement and how that affected her abilities as a

player towards the end of her career. However, she stated that she was able to overcome this

difficulty through her understanding of her identity as team "captain" and falling back on her primary identity as an athlete to help her through her career ending games:

> There was a few weeks span even at SCC tournament which is before post season officially starts where I was just not myself because I was freaking my own self out in my head thinking like you know, 'what if we lose out in regionals and we don't make it to supers and we don't go to World Series?' That was the goal of the whole time and I did freak myself out and I was thinking about that like when softball ends what in the world am I going to do. So, I wasn't myself for a good period and then I got it together, thank goodness. I was a captain; I had to like - I had to get it together.

Anna was the only participant to proclaim that she understood that her athletic career would end after college prior to entering into Division I athletics. Anna stated, "I knew that lacrosse wasn't necessarily a lifelong sport and so I always kind of was… I knew the day would come where my career would be over and I was always very fine with that." Therefore, Anna was able to develop multiple aspects of her identity throughout her collegiate years. Unlike the other participants, Anna talked about her coach's understanding of the importance of excelling in academics and how that support enabled her to excel in her major. Anna stated, "My coach first and foremost was very, very good about academics, for it's academics first." She went on to talk about the importance of academics, "I mean academics are going to last you your whole life and propel your career whereas playing a sport is, it's temporary, it's something fun and definitely was a huge priority but in the scheme of life it wasn't going to impact my life 20 years from now, whereas academics do. So it was kind of also that mindset like yeah I have to miss practice but at the end of the day I'm still making this class that I need to take to graduate to get my degree, and to get a job."

Association of identity with sport. All but one participant described aligning their views of themselves with their personal performances and level of successes in their university athletic programs. Five out of the six participants discussed conforming to the standards and demands of their coaching staff and as a result experienced a lack of control over themselves and their decision-making.

Jane described her experience in her athletic program as she shifted her focus to non-athletic endeavors and discussed the way her coaching staff influenced her experience. Jane shared how her coaches' lack of interest in her as a player influenced her negative perception of herself as an athlete and ultimately aided in her disengagement from her athletic program:

> I know one of them is very dedicated to lacrosse and you know like lives and breathes lacrosse so, she was I think a little bit hurt when I did that especially because I was like the type of player that would stay late after practice and work on my shooting or and she would be there and she would coach me. So, I think when she saw that I was doing other things, it was sort of...it sort of offended her almost, but with my head coach, I was very surprised because she had been pushing girls to do things that summer and tried to get other girls to work at things like that. So, once I did that and then I saw how she responded to me...it really bothered me and upset me and it sort of made me feel like she didn't value me as a player or as a person even because I stepped away from lacrosse for three months at the most.

Barbara talked about the internal battle she had with herself the weeks leading up to her last moments on the field and how her potential performance affected the way she conceptualized herself as an elite athlete:

So, going into my senior year, I was really in my head at times. I remained decently

consistent but there was a point towards the end of the season, I felt the crunch time of

like my last two moments on the field were approaching and I honestly played probably

some of the worst part I ever play because it was totally in my head, I was terrible and

oddly enough like, you just kind of say screw it and you know, you have to kind of go for

it. So, once we really hit the peak of post season in my senior year, I was playing very

free, I was enjoying it, I was my full self as an athlete but there was a few weeks span

even at SCC tournament which is before post season officially starts where I was just not

myself because I was freaking my own self out in my head thinking like you know, what

if we lose out in regionals and we don't make it to supers and we don't go to World

Series? That was the goal of the whole time and I did freak myself out and I was thinking

about that like when softball ends what in the world am I going to do. So, I wasn't myself

for a good period and then I got it together, thank goodness. I was a captain, I had to like

I had to get it together. So, I did thankfully at the end of the season but there was a time

where I really struggle.

Carrie talked about not being able to differentiate herself from her sport and the negative

impact her foreclosed identity had on her self-perception:

I mean I didn't really separate myself from golf and my identity. I thought golf was me,

which was, looking back, that was pretty problematic. But I was young and kind of naive

and so I developed a very volatile relationship with myself because whenever I didn't

play good, I was very…I couldn't separate playing bad from a reflection of who I am as a

person. So I always felt like I was a failure as a person. And if I didn't play good it was

just so painful.

Carrie discussed lacking awareness of the detrimental effects of viewing her self-worth in relationship to her athletic performance had on her overall mental health during her athletic career. She stated, "At that time I did not realize that I was making such a mistake seeing myself just as a success or failure based on my performance." Carrie discussed not feeling in control of her life during athletics, "They always have you doing stuff, I mean on the go, left and right, and all around and like…you don't get a chance to breath and that's just the expected life for you. And so, to really take it all in and it was, that was hard for me."

Claire talked about her desire to shape her legacy as a successful player the closer she got to retiring from her sport. Like Anna, Claire realized and made an informed decision to begin to focus more on her academic endeavors throughout the entirety of her college career. Although Claire knew her career was coming to an end she still felt like her performance in her senior year was a direct reflection of her primary identity as an athlete at the time:

Having been a competitor for the past sixteen years of my life, I could all of a sudden go on the tennis court and play what I've already played a million times before and then think, "Oh, this doesn't really matter, I was way too competitive for that". And so sometimes when I had a lot of other stuff going on during the match, it would just influence my level of playing a lot and then all the sudden by the time the end of my senior year came, on top of those thoughts, I wanted to end it with a successful legacy at [name of university], I guess. And so I wanted to get a lot of wins then but after I stopped playing, if you want things through that league and all you do on the court is just think about stuff, it doesn't really increase your level of tennis. So I definitely struggled with that, and I also noticed a change of relationship with my coaches because I think they were very much aware that I had ambitions.

Eden was the only participant who had a non-normative transition due to an injury she acquired during practice that forced her to retire early from her career. Eden described receiving a call from her coach who was insistent she attends practice. Eden stated, "He basically said that I wasn't being a good team leader if I didn't come out and practice and show the younger girls my work ethic and I'm sitting there going, but I'm tired. I'm late in school, it's cold, I really don't want to practice but I guess I'll show up and hit balls for 30 minutes a day." Eden discussed not listening to her body and reluctantly showing up to practice. While practicing, she stated she "felt something snap in my left hand." After months of holding on to hope that she would fully recover, she realized that she was never going to be able to play professional golf due to her injury.

All participants, aside from Anna, fully foreclosed on their identities as athletes. While some participants, such as Jane and Claire, experienced periods of awareness that enabled them to begin to deconstruct their primary identities as athletes and focus on outside endeavors these participants still experienced a sense of loss related to their sense of who they were outside of athletics upon retirement.

Identity Loss. A reoccurring theme found in the interviews was the participants' sense of identity loss after retirement. Five out of the six participants described feeling a sense of identity loss as a result of their athletic career ending. These athletes experienced overwhelming feelings of stress, disruption, and confusion prior to and during their transitions out of athletics. Anna, the participant who did not experience a loss of identity, described feeling a loss socially and experienced transitory feelings of sadness in relationship to her transitioning process.

Each of the participants discussed their process of disengagement from their sport and their retirement process. Eden was the only participant to withstand an injury that resulted in an early retirement and inability to potentially qualify to play professionally. Anna was the only participant that described experiencing minimal negative effects as a result of her retirement. Similar to the other participants, Anna discussed feeling a distinct difference in her transition from an athlete to a non-athlete. She stated, "I'm a real person now. This is kind of a bummer" when describing her transition. She attributed her feelings of loss to being socially isolated after she completed college.

Carrie discussed the confusion she experienced shortly after making her personal decision to retire from her Division I athletic career. She stated that, "the following days after that, I was like, 'How do I, how am I supposed to…what am I supposed to make of this? What am I supposed to see myself as? … Does this mean I'm a failure or does it mean that this is going to set me up for better things?' You know, for the longest time, I always thought that it meant that I was a failure and that's why I avoided it."

She talked about defining herself through her sport and how athletics gave her a sense of purpose and meaning. Her awareness of her primary identity as an athlete and the loss of her athletic self resulted after her retirement from Division I athletics:

> I think the role that I was on as far as completely identifying who I was as a sport and putting my self-value and my self-worth on my performance, that was such an unhealthy and dangerous road that I was on…I still would have struggled personally because my mindset and my outlook was not right. And so I think that I had to go through that struggle to come to realize that how distorted my values were and how I was living my life…And just my perspective.

Five out of the six athletes who described experiencing a loss of identity did not adequately prepare for life after athletic retirement and were genuinely surprised by their reactions to no longer being an elite athlete. Barbara stated, "It's gotten easier because it's more normal now that I'm not an athlete, but it still does bother me because in my mind that was still fresh out even though you know it's coming up on four years of full retirement but yeah, it still bothers me. I guess maybe if I had something else like a big career, maybe I wouldn't feel that as much." Furthermore, before retirement, they did not experiment with multiple life domains, and lacked the ability to explore or plan new vocations. Several years after retirement some of the participants sustained a lack of confidence to explore new identity domains and remained uni-dimensional in their self-concepts.

Eden discussed her transition period from athlete to non-athlete and the regret she had not allocating time and effort into developing other facets of her identity:

I think that like 6 or 7-month period where I kind of had hope but I was kind of easing into normal life which was good for me. But I was definitely depressed; I definitely felt a sense of loss. It was like I had done this for ten years, it had been a consistent part of my life and it was gone. And so that was a little difficult but I think if I hadn't had my faith that God had a better plan, I wouldn't have gotten through it. Because when you put that much effort and energy into something, and then you lose it, I mean it's going to feel like a loss. It's kind of looking back like, why do I even do this? Sure, it paid for college but I could've gotten a part time job and done something else or made better grades, or all these other things but it just felt like a door had been slammed to my face.

Claire described her thoughts immediately after her athletic career was over and she played her final match:

It was a very abrupt stop of my tennis career. Obviously, I knew that that moment was coming and exactly when it was coming so I had started-- I mean, building up to that moment. But when my final match was done, it was just so bizarre because you've been working on it since you were six years old. Personally, I didn't want to try and go pro afterwards. Then all of a sudden, you're done and there's not really much of... It's a pretty extreme difference between playing college tennis and then all of a sudden trying to find something recreational to do. So the difference was huge. I went from playing about 20 to 25 hours a week to really not touching your racket for seven months. That's definitely kind of shocking in terms of a change on myself.

Carrie opened up about feeling angry and confused on a spiritual level. She remarked, "I was just so angry and everything. I even was like, 'Why would you do this to me God? I thought this is supposed to be what I was supposed to do. I thought this was why you put me on this planet for.'" She discussed feeling immense unease regarding her decision to retire from Division I athletics and struggled with the permanency of her decision to retire.

Fears of "normalcy". Two of the six participants admitted their fears and preoccupations with being normal after no longer being considered an athlete. Athletes shared their preoccupations with the lack of feeling "special" or held in certain esteem after losing what they consider their athlete status. Athletes experience a sense of privilege that differentiates them from their non-athletic peers. Part of what propels their identity foreclosure is the pedestal that their support systems put them on and also the sense of respect they receive both from themselves and also others. Claire discussed being aware of her athletic career ending and her process of renegotiating her identity. Claire experienced the feeling of normalcy that ensued after her athletic career was over. She stated, "I was scared to not be special anymore, I guess because

my entire life had been, 'Wow [Claire] plays tennis so much, [Claire] is good at tennis, [Claire] combines tennis and school,' like I always felt like I had something extra than other people. Then I felt like it disappeared after I got done with tennis."

Claire discussed how she struggled with being "normal" and her efforts to define herself after losing her primary identity as an athlete. She acknowledged that she still experiences difficulties finding methods to distinguish herself from everyone else even though she has renegotiated her sense of self through her identity as a foreigner in the United States:

But I feel that, like, feeling of restlessness that I would lose that piece of identity and I think letting tennis go was obviously the biggest change in myself. But even now I'm still in the States after graduating, like I found a job here, it's different. Like it feels I'm different here because I'm foreign, working here. I'm different at home because I live and work in the United States. And I can definitely tell that ever since, like really tennis was no longer a part of my life that I've been looking for other ways to feel special I guess.

Barbara described recognizing her identity loss through the retirement of her title as a Division I athlete. She explained how her title defined her sense of self and how the loss of her label as an elite athlete has generated feelings of loss and confusion that she still struggles with currently. She mentioned how without her title she categorized herself as "just a grad student:"

I have a lot going for me and I still do, I guess, but even not being like a grad student anymore I feel like I don't have as much going for me… but I feel like the title, it's like Division I softball player in the Southeastern Conference like that wasn't my title anymore. I wasn't a DI softball player anymore. So, taking that title away, I was now just a grad student. So, like being a grad student I thought it was pretty cool and now, I'm

just [Barbara], the wife. So, I'm just like-- I feel like having that title like I know what I

am capable of and I know like what I've accomplished but without it being in the present,

I think it takes something away from my self's perception of me.

These athletes had difficulty accepting and adapting to their new "normal" lives and had

minimal experiences of exploring different identity roles due to having spent the majority of their

lives in their elite roles as athletes. Like Barbara, their self worth and personal security came

from the recognition and rewards of their former elite athletic roles and the value they placed on

their Division I statuses. Barbara mentioned that she continues to struggle with her own self-

perception. She stated, "So, it's good days and bad days, I think people go through that and no

matter what job they have or what is going on, you know, self-perception is tough. It's just all in

how you look at it."

Purpose. Three of the six participants emphasized their struggle to attribute meaning and

purpose to their lives after transitioning out of athletics. Jane talked about not identifying as an

athlete post-retirement and as a result feeling confused as to who she was and who she was going

to be. Jane stated, "That was definitely I guess hard to deal with because it had been a part of me

in how I sort of identified myself first all along. That once I was saying goodbye to it, it was like,

'Whoa, what's next? What type of person am I going to be?' Or, 'What, where am I going to

thrive? Where am I going to focus? What am I going to do with myself basically?'"

Barbara talked about coaching softball lessons as a method of staying involved and

connected to her athletic self while also giving back to the community. Barbara stated, "I do

private softball pitching and hitting lessons and that does fulfill me in that sense. I feel like I'm

helping younger girls, like I used to go to lessons and I just feel like I am giving back in that

way." She described the difficulties she experienced attributing meaning to her life outside of her

identity as an athlete. She stated, "So I am able to stay involved but I don't know, it's not the same as when I was a grad student, I feel like I have good days and bad days. Some days I'm like you know, I could be doing a lot more and have a better sense of self but other days, I felt very fulfilled because I am a good team player to my husband and I've given softball lessons. So, I feel like the softball part of my life has a check next to it."

Carrie described how the negative experiences she endured as a Division I athlete helped her find her newfound faith and perspective on life:

Sports could teach you a lot of things. I learned so much from golf aside from what happened. And it was so valuable to me. But there's so much more outside of it. And I feel like giving to people. I feel like with sports, you don't necessarily get to give to others like you could get through other… through your career. And it brought me closer to God. And that was really how I put the most meaning on it. I was like, wow, that was so hard for me. But how much longer would I have gone without having this perspective, a new perspective on life that was so much happier and healthier and…being a person I'm supposed to be. I was never supposed to be a golfer the rest of my life. I see that now.

Limbo. Five out of the six participants discussed their transitional period from retirement to now. Some participants admitted that they still are trying to figure out how to identify and attribute meaning to their lives. While some participants have found significance in their vocational careers, others have experienced what Jane identified as "limbo" which can be thought of as a period of transition in which the participant has yet to reform their identity post-retirement.

Jane discussed retiring from lacrosse and not having a clear perspective of herself or what she wanted to do vocationally. Jane felt a sense of loss and inability to act independently without having the structure of athletics or coaches dictating her schedule:

So once I got out and once I graduated, I just had this period of I don't know what to do with myself. I didn't even know how to work out because I wasn't going to a team lift or I wasn't going to a team run. So it was this sort of like feeling in limbo, kind of lost for a probably like a solid couple of months and even now, I still kind of feel like it because I'm not working a typical nine to five job but it's definitely been hard and it's definitely been something where you're kind of feeling lost especially compared to my friends who were non-athletes because a lot of them are in successful jobs or they feel good about what they're doing and they're really on a strict schedule and for me, I don't have a schedule at the moment. So, it's sort of this limbo period.

While Eden expressed her gratitude for reconnecting with her identity in Christ as a result of her career-ended injury, she stressed the importance of looking to the future of what she will become versus what she's lost. Eden stated, "We're thinking about starting a family and so what will my day look like as a wife and a mother, how am I going to handle that. I'm definitely making more plans for what I will become now because I know that that's equally as important as what you're not." Jane went on to state, "The one blessing out of all that being injured thing was that I found my identity in Christ which I should have never let golf overcome my identity in Christ. That was a poor choice on my part but outside of that, I would say my identity is more wrapped up in what I do. I guess, like I take care of my husband, I make sure that my mom's doing okay, I... It's more on things that I'm going to become as well." While, Eden conveyed she

has not reached all of her goals post-transition she is future-focused and works to strength those potential identity facets.

Although Claire aimed to be proactive in her transition process, she talked about the period of time during her transition where she felt unsure of how to define herself:

It definitely got followed by a time of insecurity, because it was kind one of those things where I was trying to prove to myself that I wasn't just normal and I was trying to think of things that I could be exceptionally good at compared to other people. I think sometimes looking around and seeing people that just still identify themselves as an athlete or any other like really special, that part of my life was over and I had to look for something new.

She described the realization of the finality of her career and the fear of not knowing how to identify herself. Claire stated, "And I realized that year more than ever that all of the sudden I had to start thinking about how was I going to identify myself in the future…. All of the sudden questions came up like which job am I going to look for, which firm do I want to associate myself with."

Barbara described her "in between" time, the time that occurred from the end of her athletic career and now. She said, "I was a graduate assistant for two years. So, I did team travel, I would help plan their flights, their hotel, buses and all that stuff. So, I would even work for the team over the summer and I was able to watch some of the girls practice too. So I still felt like I was involved for two whole years. So, that period in between made it a lot easier for me now because I didn't just get cut off completely and move away and not have involvement with the team." Although, Barbara discussed wanting to be an account manager after college she decided to postpone that goal and stayed involved with the team to mediate her transition out of athletics.

Barbara noted that she is currently not employed due to familial obligations, however, is actively involved in giving softball lessons.

Carrie talked about struggling to determine an appropriate life path for herself after she decided to voluntarily retire from Division I athletics. She discussed experiencing a newfound freedom outside of athletics and a continual struggle with deciphering who she truly was without her primary identity as an athlete. Carrie stated, "I was close to graduating with my degree in accounting. I chose accounting because, first of all, my dad is in like the financial field. He always has been. And I feel like I kind of have like a business mindset. But I also just wanted to make a lot of money, and also achieve things. And if that really wasn't me, like that just wasn't…it didn't really align with like who I really was as a person."

After realizing that accounting was not congruent with who she felt she was as a person, Carrie revealed that her time between retiring from Division I athletics and transferring to another university allowed her to discover that she gravitated toward a profession in mental health. She went on to state, "And so that's why this whole transition for me, I mean that year, that senior year of college was the most pivotal year of my life hands down. I mean it was the most pivotal experience for me because I went through that. The reason why I am where I am right now, talking to you. And also in the college, in the counseling field which I love… like it's so pretty amazing to look back on, honestly."

Personal Agency. The fourth theme of personal agency emanated from the question exploring retired female athletes' experiences of transition out of Division I athletics. Personal agency refers to an individual's awareness of initiating, executing, and controlling one's own volitional acts. In essence, it is the individual's capacity to act independently and make one's own free choices. All of the participants demonstrated varying degrees of personal agency in

navigating their transitions out of athletics. Exhibiting a high level of personal agency meant the participant was able to mobilize skills and resources on their own to achieve desired end goals, such as acquiring a job. Participants who had low levels of personal agency experienced difficulty planning, pursuing, and realizing their abilities to act on their own behaves. Personal agency was viewed as an internal coping method of mediating one's transition out of athletics. All athletes demonstrated personal agency at varying times throughout their transitional processes. Therefore, participants who demonstrated high levels of personal agency immediately after their athletic careers ending are detailed prior to those who developed a high sense of personal agency well into their retirements from athletics.

Anna discussed her understanding of the need to find balance in her educational and athletic endeavors throughout the duration of her collegiate years. She maintained that she was aware that her athletic career was temporary and had a definite end prior to entering college, therefore she discussed working equally as hard in school to ensure that she would have professional opportunities once her athletic career was over. Anna stated, "Just taking responsibility when you can, and being a hard worker and showcasing that you're a team player when you can. But also learning how to balance things and manage your time and be as productive and as good a team player as possible." Her ability to develop two identity statuses, her athletic and student identities, simultaneously allowed her to transition from one career to another with relative ease.

Anna exhibited high personal agency both before and after her athletic retirement, as she was able to be aware of and mediate her transition out of sports through the use of the transferable skills she perfected throughout her athletic career. Here she details a skill and lesson she learned through her athletic career that she felt aided her in the working world:

The one thing that I did really take away and I still remind myself of it when I need to in life and in my personal relationships and in my working relationship was just don't make excuses. People don't care about your excuses. It looks bad on you if you have any excuse so don't make them… Speak up when it really isn't your fault and when there is something or someone else to blame, but if it's something that's not worth picking a fight about, just don't make excuses. Change it, because people don't appreciate it. I think that's been my biggest takeaway and I actually feel like I think of it more now in my regular post-athlete life than I did during my time as an athlete.

Anna talked about securing a job right out of college and actively working to strengthen other aspects of her identity through her new vocational pursuits. She mentioned staying connected and talking to her former teammates as a method of coping that helped her when she finally realized that her athletic career had come to an end. She stated, "I think just trying to reach out to people when I was feeling lonely. The nice thing about where I moved after I graduated, it kind of aligned with theirs because it's closer to home. So, I went home a lot of weekends, hanging out with my parents and my family, just kind of trying to surround myself with people." Anna clarified that at times she felt isolated and lonely yet she spoke to and related with other retired athletes as a means of support.

Claire talked about acknowledging the loss of her identity as an athlete while realizing the skills and abilities she developed as an athlete would aid her in her capability to be successful in other ventures of her vocational and recreational pursuits. Her confidence in the skills she harnessed as an elite athlete allowed her to feel assured that she would be a valuable asset in the working world.

I was feeling very confident about having a perfect background, which I know was not perfect. It's like a background that would open a lot of doors. So I felt confident in that and I knew there was going to be options. I just kind of needed some time to think what I wanted to do. And that was kind a time too where I decided to go more towards the business world because I felt like that was a new interest with me and looking at the big picture of things, like that motivated me, that gave me…like I had a passion for that. But those are all some of the things that developed after my tennis career mostly.

Claire also realized that her experience of being an athlete was invaluable to her development and instrumental in her future quests in life. Claire expressed, "I think I mostly started realizing that by talking to people, like my background and all that tennis has given me and the way it has built me as a person would never…that was never going to be taken away from me. But definitely, trying to find out what I wanted to do, getting excited about new things." She stated that it took her five months to secure a job post-retirement from athletics. She talked about actively pursuing methods and avenues of feeling a sense of purpose and competition that she thrived on as a Division I athlete. Claire stated, "I was content about that job and the firm I was going to work for so I think that made the whole time period where I was feeling lost, a little bit shorter for me personally." Claire acknowledged that having other athletes to express her transitional concerns and experiences with aided her in coping with her athletic retirement.

Barbara talked about being a graduate assistant for the team post-transition out of athletics as a method of easing her transition out of sports. She stated, "I was a graduate assistant with the softball team after. So, being involved did help. I believe that just being completely cut off from your routine and from your sport right after you retire, I feel like that hits you a lot

harder but luckily for me, I had an easier transition because I was a graduate assistant with the team." Barbara understood that her involvement in her sport provided her with a sense of belonging and leadership that she had not yet found outside of athletics, therefore remained involved with her sport to mediate the intermediate effects of retirement.

> I think for me, being the graduate assistant and being present for every practice in game and team leading definitely helped me transition. I think I still felt like I was a part of it in the sense even though I wasn't playing. So now, I'm not a graduate assistant and I think because I was that eased my transition and it was a lot easier for me to step away completely because I had that buffer period where I was still kind of involved even though I wasn't player.

Barbara also discussed the transferable skills she implemented in her time at graduate school. She related, "I mean it transfers really easily, I mean all those qualities, the intangibles that I picked up from being an athlete in college. Just being on time places, even just respecting others, taking leadership when I needed to take leadership, working hard, I mean all of that, I mean you can transfer that to everyday life." Barbara went on to mention that as a method of coping she coaches softball lessons. She demonstrated through a high level of personal agency her ability to remain connected to her athletic self by giving back to her community through her involvement with her sport. When discussing her method of coping, she stated, "I am able to contribute to the softball world and give lessons and you know, offer up coaching…and staying involved with it, that definitely helps just being a coach and sharing what I've learned from the game that I love, that is the biggest help and what is what makes it easy." Barbara mentioned that although she experiences periods of time in which she feels sadness about her retirement she is

able to remain future-focused on the potential for growth in other areas of her life, such as being a future mother.

Carrie described having a volatile relationship with herself during her collegiate athletic career. She mentioned perceiving a lack of control over herself and her behaviors during college due to her coaches and the athletic culture. It was not until she made the personal decision to retire from Division I athletics and transition to a Division III university did she realize that her tumultuous experience in athletics was actually a catalyst to her personal growth and awareness of herself as individual apart from her identity as an athlete.

> So that's why this whole transition for me…I mean that year, that senior year of college was the most pivotal year of my life hands down. I mean it was the most pivotal experience for me because I went through that. The reason why I am where I am right now, talking to you. And also in the college, in the XXX field, which I love… like it's pretty amazing to look back on, honestly.

Carrie demonstrated high personal agency when she decided to retire before her eligibility ended at her Division I university despite her fears of making the wrong decision and made the transfer to a Division III university where she stated she began to realize her purpose and future direction in life. When asked if she prescribed to any coping strategies that helped in her process of transition she discussed focusing her energy on her relationship with God, especially through journaling and devotionals. She stated, "I read the Bible like everyday and just tried to reconstruct the meaning behind everything and why…just reconstructing my perception of a lot of things, especially myself." Carrie documented the enormity of her decision to disengage from Division I sports and the internal struggles she faced when deciding how to construct a life she felt empowered in and proud of for herself. Her sense of personal agency was

strengthened when she was able to make decisions for herself rather than abiding by or conforming to the expectations of others.

Eden talked about not allowing herself the time or space to grieve the loss of her athletic identity. Although she mentioned that she went to graduate school and then later attained employment, she discussed feeling overwhelmed and not in a positive mental state. It was not until some time later that she sought professional help to address her mental health issues. While Eden acknowledged having success vocationally, she admitted to not allowing herself to fully process the finality of her athletic retirement. Eden expressed the importance of actively seeking help for transitioning out of athletics:

It just became overwhelming. I think that schools should probably offer a service where you're allowed to go or you're required to go and talk about it even if you think it's different or silly. I don't think I would have had some of the mental problems I had later on if I had talked about it because…let's be real, in the grand scheme of loss, losing your sport or retiring from your sport isn't the worst thing that's going to happen in your life, it's just not. But learning how to handle a loss like that will help you so much later in life. If I had learned how to do that, I would have learned how to make sure that my mind didn't go to such terrible negative places.

Due to Eden's injury she admitted that her transitional period out of athletics was elongated as she kept hoping surgery would allow her to play again. Upon the realization that she would never play professionally she felt the weight of her grief, however, did not actively pursue help until the side effects of her unacknowledged grief starting appearing in other facets of her life. She acknowledged it was not until she decided to attend therapy that she felt fully in control

of herself and her way of being in the world. Also, Eden expressed regret for not attending graduate school immediately after her injury. She described the "holding on" she experienced as she was hopefully that she would one day be able to play her sport again. Eden provides a piece of advice about being pro-active with an athletic retirement plan or strategy:

Never hold tightly to your sport because at any moment it can be ripped out of your hands and taken away from you. You need to have a life outside of it. If you don't, you're just going to get stomped whenever it ends. Everybody's professional athletic career comes to an end. Even if you want to be a professional athlete, that will come to an end. So you need to have a plan B. At all times you need to have an exit strategy.

Jane described her collegiate athletic experience as negative due to factors including her coaches and teammates treatment of her during her last two years of eligibility. She talked about becoming more focused on her education in her junior year of college that triggered a shift in her coaches and teammates attitudes towards her and they began to question her commitment to the sport. Jane noted that she participated in internships, however, had never held a job. Therefore, she described a period of loss and confusion that ensued after she transitioned out of athletics.

For me personally, it was hard because I've only done lacrosse for four years and I went from internship to internship but never held a job. So once I got out and once I graduated, I just had this period of I don't know what to do with myself…Even now, I still kind of feel like it because I'm not working a typical nine to five job but it's definitely been hard and it's definitely been something where you're kind of feeling lost especially compared to my friends who were non-athletes because a lot of them are in successful jobs or they

feel good about what they're doing and they're really on a strict schedule and for me, I don't have a schedule at the moment.

Jane admitted that she currently struggles with her identity loss and has not yet found her sense of purpose or passion outside of her sport. She remains optimistic and has explored various vocational options, yet, craves the structure and discipline of her athletic career to keep her grounded in her identity. Jane stated, "I think just feeling kind of lost and not having as much of a purpose everyday because even though I didn't have that positive of an experience with my college career, it still gave me purpose and still gave me a really rigorous schedule that I had to uphold and lived by every single day. So I think for me I felt just really lost for a long time because I didn't have that structure." She relayed the difficulties of athletic retirement and re-defining her self-concept through her discussion of potential vocational options, admitting to her personal struggles with athletic retirement. Jane stated, "In terms of trying to figure out what I want to do with my career and where I'm going and what type of person I want to be beyond sports has been pretty difficult." She has demonstrated varying degrees of personal agency through her active pursuit of reforming herself and her career post-athletic retirement.

When asked about coping strategies she has employed to negotiate her transition, she described developing and committing to strenuous workout routines that help her stay in optimal physical shape. Jane described experiencing mental health struggles of transient anxiety, lack of sleep, and appetite, and how working out alleviates many of her aliments. She described coming into her own personal agency and not relying on the directives of her coaches to tell her how to lead her life. Jane stated, "I think a lot of these things that we've been talking about I'd never thought of when I was in college and I never really needed to think of them, versus now, you have this feeling of, 'Okay, you're much more independent. Your coach isn't going to tell you to

do this. You need to tell yourself. You need to make yourself more proactive in your daily

schedule and just have more responsibility.'"

Each participant demonstrated personal agency at various stages of their athletic

retirements. Degrees of personal agency were dependent on the personal factors of each

participant's transitional process. Evident in all participants' descriptions was the awareness that

a re-evaluation of their identities was paramount in the re-development of their sense of self

outside of athletics.

Essence

Each participant in this study experienced a form of grief and loss while navigating their

transitions out of sports. Before and upon retirement, athletes became aware of the loss of their

athletic selves, or in Anna's case, the loss of her social self through a process of transition that

not one of the athletes had been prepared for. As aforementioned, the idea of athletic retirement

has been a focus of sport literature for many years (Brewer at al., 1993); however, how to

prepare for retirement and what transitioning out of sport entails is not included in the

development of athletes throughout their athletic careers.

Participants in this study described feeling isolated by their peers, disillusionment with

who they thought they were without their sport as their primary identity, and in some instances a

fear of reaching out to support systems for help and validation of their processes of transition and

loss. Invalidation and disenfranchisement by others may complicate the natural processes of

grieving and reconciliation with the loss of one's athletic self (Doka, 1989). The meaning of

athletes transitioning processes goes well beyond surface level changes and indicates a deeper

rooted loss and renegotiation of their lives on all facets of personal, social, spiritual, emotional,

and physical realms. Through each participants' narrative and account of their transitioning

process it is evident that there is a loss of self that goes unrecognized by everyone but the athlete as she aims to pick up the pieces of what is left after she moves on from her primary athletic identity.

The development and cultivation of a female athlete's identity has shown to be not only cyclical but also relational in nature (Kerr & Dacyshyn, 2000). Facilitation by support systems and the collective dream of athletic success develops athletes into these "superhumans" by which they are not only athletically gifted but they carry the weight of expectations set for themselves and by the others who have so willingly supported them to be elite athletes. When these athletes are no longer reaping the benefits of athletic success and notoriety it seems that these support systems play less of a role in the facilitation of success post-retirement. It is almost as if the supports that were catalysts in the development of these athletes do not have the insight or do not know how to acknowledge the death-like experience that these athletes encounter as they are forced to reevaluate life after elite sports. As a result, the grief and loss that these athletes experience becomes disenfranchised due to society not endorsing or accepting such loss, as it is not readily recognized in society's formal and unwritten rules about the structure and process of grief.

Creative Synthesis

The final component of the presentation of heuristic data is creative synthesis (Moustakas, 1990). Moustakas (1990) promoted a wide range of creative and expressive outlets in the creation of the creative synthesis, which may include the use of stories, poetry, artwork, or

metaphors. Through the process of immersing myself in the data and allowing the data to incubate, the following letters emerged and were illuminated:

I wrote two letters, one before beginning the research process, and one during and after the research process. The letters are from my current self to my former athletic self.

Dear self (former athlete),

I'm sorry I've been so absent. I know you are confused, I can feel your hesitance in my bones. Much time has passed between now and then. Where are you, where have you been hiding? You can let me see you now. I know you went away to protect me, but you don't have to hide now. So much has changed since we last met.

I'll begin where we left off. What is it? Eight years now since we last spoke? It feels like an eternity. You'll be happy to hear I'm doing well. I've been praying and talking to God, I've been looking inward trying to find you again. But I was scared. It took me years to discover who I was with you not around. How will I be if you come back? I'm scared all of those memories, all the sadness, and fear will come flooding back. Do you still feel those things? How can I touch you without getting hurt again? I want to meet you again, I just don't know how.

Dear self (former athlete),

I've been thinking about our relationship, and I think I'm ready to talk. I think I understand why you had to go away and why I didn't stop you from leaving. I need to feel those feelings to remind me of who I am, it feels like a part of me has been missing

for a long time. I felt bad for not contacting you sooner. I've tried to build myself around you, but was so afraid to touch you again due to fear.

I just want to thank you for everything you've done for me. My earliest memories of you, some of my best memories, and also some of my worst memories all come flooding back. The loss of you is the hardest when I remember the girl I was when I was with you. I was strong, fearless, and bold. I've been looking for ways to feel that way again. You allowed me to reach for goals I would never fathom having reached in my lifetime. You provided me with a sense of purpose, and accomplishment. You gave me a gift. You are the gift. You helped me. I see all of this now, when before I couldn't hold the space for you. Your presence was too painful and your disappearance was even worse.

You developed me as a person, all the endless hours of dedication, compassion, and competition helped mold me into someone who is driven and bold. I needed you to be who I am today; it just took me so long to realize this. When we parted, it felt like I lost you forever. I'm sorry I didn't honor what we had and wasn't strong enough to take you with me, but now I realize you've been there all along.

Sincerely,

My whole self

Athletics Department-Based Resources

A Division I athletic program can provide a wealth of resources to its student-athletes depending on the size of the university and its funding. At the Division I level, the athletics departments often provide an entire staff focused on helping student-athletes to be successful

athletically, academically, and vocationally. This was not the case for the participants and the universities used in this study.

According to the NCAA (2018), all Division I universities require their student-athletes to participate in a Life Skills program. The program was developed as a method used to prepare student-athletes with "life skills" that are useful throughout their college experiences and after graduation (NCAA, 2018). The program was modeled after Dr. Rice's "Total Person Project" which believes that student-athletes' success is the result of a balanced life, including athletic success, academic achievement, and personal wellbeing (NCAA, 2018). In this study, each participant was prompted to speak on their experience with the Life Skills program that was offered at their university.

Barbara commented that while her university offered a program that was available to student-athletes, however, participation in the program was not mandatory. She mentioned that her athletic department had advisors that she could reach out to if she needed academic or vocational assistance, however, no assistance associated with caring for the student-athletes' personal well being was provided. "It was more career-driven. There was nothing to my knowledge where they offered any kind of I guess counseling for how do I move on after I'm done playing at all. I think it's more just, 'All right, now, you're an adult. Go get a job. You're done playing. You're done here.'"

Jane discussed how her peers did not take her athletic department's Life Skills program seriously and how she did not find the presentations they offered very helpful. Jane also stated that the program was only career-focused and "there was nothing devoted to mental, physical or any sort of type of emotional well-being beyond sport."

I remember having these meetings with people that were speaking about life after sports. But, it was never taken seriously and it was never suggested that we either attend or really value what these people were presenting to us by our coaches or other people around us. I was slightly interested and wanted to at least just hear what they were saying but I notice a lot of teammates really didn't care, didn't bother and didn't view it as a helpful resource and instead viewed it as more -- a time-wasting activity, I guess, and it sort of became another thing that you have to go to after practice or it was another meeting that you have to go to in addition to having to be in class that whole morning and then having to go to practice. So, it wasn't -- I don't think it was taken as seriously as it should have been and I don't know if many athletes had really utilized it or the resources that they offer.

Eden indicated that she did not participate in a Life Skills program or any preemptive program that was used to help athletes manage their transitions after sports due to enrolling in the spring semester. Based on what she had heard about the program that was offered to students she indicated that the program was not helpful to athletes. "No. I think the university definitely failed a lot of people there. There might have been. I came in in the spring. I know a lot of athletes had something happen in the fall semester. I don't know what that was but judging by the fact that nobody seemed to have money at the end of their stipend. I seriously doubt that they really learned how to take care of money."

Anna discussed having a program that was vocationally focused to help athletes prepare for careers after athletic retirement. She explained that she took full advantage of the seminars and networking events that they offered, including career fairs. She admitted that the program did not focus on other transitional obstacles or the development of the athletes aside from their

vocational resources. "They were focused on work-life balance or a lot of times though, especially seminars, they focused more on transitioning into the professional career." Anna admitted that a feeling of isolation was her greatest transitional difficulty, and she felt that her university could not do anything to help her with that issue. She stated, "I think socially, like we've kind of talked about, was the element that I kind of missed out but I don't think there is anything that the school could have done to help kind of ease that or make that a little less... I don't know. I don't want to say lonely."

Claire specified that her university offered a Life Skills Program, however, due to the course not being mandatory she did not realize it was offered to her until after she retired. "I think they did have a special senior year for Life Skills where they offered classes on how to prepare you for the business world and those kind of life skills but I think, at that point you weren't required anymore to take that class. And so, I personally didn't even know about that when I was a senior, so kind of shows you the way it was communicated." Claire also supplemented Anna's account of the program offered by stating that the program was career-focused.

Carrie discussed how she was not aware of a program at her university. She provided an anecdote about a former teammate that experienced an amalgam of mental and physical issues that were overlooked by the team's staff and NCAA officials. She described a need for a program that best serves athletes in a holistic manner to address a wide variety of developmental and transitional issues faced by athletes both pre- and post-retirement. When discussing her former teammate she detailed, "There was no help given to her. She wasn't seeing somebody for it. It was kind of like brushed under the…flipped under the rug and that was like super, super heartbreaking to me because I just feel like coaches, they have…I feel like these people in

athletics they have so much potential to really make a difference for these individuals especially if they're struggling with something like that. And that message was kind of given, like 'hey, we don't…that's not our priority here.'"

According to participants' accounts there are a lack of programs aimed to assist student-athletes in having successful outcomes after retirement from athletics. According to Bjornsen and Dinkel (2017), Division I coaches regarded the NCAA Life Skills program as being useful in constructing well-adjusted student-athletes. Due to the lack of organized programs to help student-athletes it is recommended that life skills programs and academic support are readily available so that when an athlete is ready and actively seeking help they are able to receive help. Unfortunately, a Life Skills program can only be useful to student-athletes who actively participate or seek help on their own volition, as the university does not mandate the program.

Lally (2007) maintained that athletes must actively being to withdrawal their identities from sport prior to retirement in order to help them positively transition into life after athletics. The gradual effort to decrease one's athletic identity over time allows for a more steady and affirmative transition (Lally, 2007). However, some athletes are unwilling or hesitant to disengage from their athletic identities prior to retirement as a result of the perceptions and pressures of their coaches, teammates, and others. Therefore, programs aimed to support and aid student-athletes navigate their transitions may be useful.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION, SUMMARY, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion

This heuristic inquiry explored the experiences of retired female athletes after transitioning out of Division I athletics. This study sought to understand the identity factors that influence female student-athletes' transitions out of athletics, and to better understand the manner in which these individuals experience and perceive their transitions. In the following section, I discuss the findings of this research study as they related to previous literature and theory, and to the rationale for the study. The findings of this study center on four themes: identity as an athlete; identity foreclosure; loss of identity; and personal agency.

Identity as an athlete

According to Taylor and Ogilvie (1994), identity is the most important factor that can impact transition into athletic retirement. How athletes form and reinforce their identities depict the degree to which athletes foreclose on their athletic identities and how they restructure their identities after transitioning out of athletics. The majority of participants in this study described being different from their non-athletic peers due to their strong commitments to their athletic identities. Every participant, aside from Anna, had adopted a salient athletic identity in an attempt to become a successful Division I level athlete and adopted an athletic role set that necessarily required them to abandon any semblance of social and academic role sets. Participants focused all their energies on athletics, to the detriment of acquiring skills for a holistic experience of life and as a result the participants found themselves socially isolated from their non-athletic peers, and minimized their academic engagement and experience.

From a psychosocial identity development perspective, the participants in this study passed over the fidelity stage of adolescence due to the high demands of working to become a collegiate athlete and were unable to experiment with various roles choices (Erikson, 1968). Adolescent years, also known as the specialization and investment years (Bloom 1985; Cote, 1999), were when the participants were most susceptible to identity molding as the they were beginning to view athletics as a more serious and viable career option (Erikson, 1968).

During the investment years, beginning at age 16 (Bloom, 1985), aspirations of participating in collegiate athletics begin to form and become a reality. A transition from high school level to the Division I level takes place when these athletes become more committed to their sports and begin to view themselves as capable of enduring and persevering in the face of obstacles (Kleiber & Kirshnit, 1991). Each participant discussed the dedication and commitment necessary to become and remain a Division I level athlete. The more deeply rooted these athletes became in their athletic identities the higher level of importance each athlete ascribed to their athletic self-concepts. Each athlete discussed various motivations that further reinforced their athletic salience, ranging from pride and admiration from others, to the expectations and demands of social supports.

Erikson (1968) distinguished the development of an individual's identity is dependent on interactions with individuals or groups starting at an early age. Many, if not all, athletes begin the early stages of sport development and commitment at a young age (Cote, 1999). Relationships with parents, teammates, and coaches foster early development of athletic identity. Every participant in this study attributed their identification as an athlete through their relationships with social supports and cultural influences throughout their adolescent years. The establishment of their identities' was based on relationships with individuals or groups that validated their self-

concepts as athletes (Burke & Reitzes, 1981). The participants' athletic identity was not a "one off" decision but an ongoing mutually supported relationship that continuously formed their athletic identity. The forming of their athletic identity was part of a shared understanding of belonging and part of a collective dream of athletic success.

Notably, the participants' role engulfment and salient athletic identities impeded other aspects of their development. Socialization is a huge factor in participation in athletics. The expectations and standards of coaches, organizations, families, and peers help fashion athletes' reinforced commitments to their sport and performance. Through this study's interviews, it is evident that modifying participants' identities after being labeled a "Division I" athlete requires an adjustment period, namely a "post-transition". Elite athletes undergo a socialization process that can make it difficult to reform their identities after sport. Difficulty reforming their identities can be in large part due to a change in the way an athlete now relates to the environment and to others. What was part of a once unconscious repertoire of relating to the world the athlete now finds herself looking for a new "ground" of being in which to relate from.

The athletic desires and goals participants held prompted their willingness to accommodate their coaches and teammates at the cost of their own personal goals, objectives, and at times, well being. Majority of the participants in this study discussed the significance of the years leading up to their collegiate careers and how their relationships with coaches and teammates contributed to the positive or negative outcomes of their athletic goals and their experiences of being a collegiate athlete. They described being vulnerable to the socialization process that occurs in adolescence as they entered their sports when their identities were not fully developed and they did not have a firm sense of themselves in the world. From an early age, athletes begin to play their sports and learn to dedicate themselves to the game, their coaches,

and their teammates. Their identity development is reaffirmed and strengthened through various milestones and rewards that come with having the athletic talents necessary to be successful as athletes, and in turn continue to encourage them to dedicate themselves to their athletic concepts.

Identity foreclosure

James Marcia (1966) developed a model of identity formation that has been used as a basis for inquiry on adolescent identity within the athletic population (Brewer et al., 1993; Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer, 1996). Marcia's description of identity foreclosure fit closely with the experiences of the participants in the current study. Marcia's (1966) last identity status, identity foreclosure, is consistent with the majority of the participants' experiences in this study. Identity foreclosure describes an individual who has experienced little to no exploration of alternative identities and demonstrate low levels of autonomy, and use of external locus of control (Cramer, 2001; Marcia, 1966). In this study, the participants with foreclosed identities were committed to their athletic identities and have not explored alternate identity options, ideologies, or careers.

Congruent with Marcia's identity foreclosure status, the participants in this study adopted beliefs, values, and actions that had been programmed by authority figures, such as coaches and parents, and the athletic culture they had grown up in, and these principles persisted throughout their personal development. Typical of individuals who ascribed to the identity foreclosed status is individuals who cannot tolerate ambiguity and rely on structure or routine. All of the participants in this study discussed their reliance on routine and preference for structure that allowed them to have a sense of stability. Participants were used to having their schedules, preferences, and goals dictated to them by authority figures. When faced with retirement, those

participants who no longer had a routine described feeling lost and experienced confusion in their daily experiences. Learning to act and think for themselves, and not for the goals of the collective team, took significant effort and elongated adjustment period as the athletes began to function for the benefit of themselves.

Participants with high athletic identities foreclosed on their identity development with the backing of outside supports driving their participation, constant immersion, and commitment to their sport. This supports the notion that athletes' identity development is relationally created, as athletes identity foreclosure is reinforced through a cyclical pattern of social reinforcement. Participants built their sense of identities around their sports. The dialogues had with influential supports, such as coaches and family, and the praise they received from being a "good" athlete acted as a psychological foundation for the athletes. The interaction between the self and other (e.g. coaches, family, friends, and community) through which the athlete attempts to solidify her identity is analogous to what Cooley (1902) deemed "the looking-glass self." If athletic participation and social supports are viewed as a "mirror" into which athletes gaze into and invent themselves, it is clear how devastating it may be when that looking-glass or mirror is permanently shattered as athletes enter retirement, leaving them isolated, disconnected, and disillusioned.

Immediate family, peers, friends, teammates, fans, and media appear to be an important aspect of the process of establishing and maintaining the self-images of athletes, beginning at a young age. Most participants had found athletics to be a primary means through which to establish a sense of who they were in the world as early as the time they reached high school. Due to the elite abilities of these participants, the expectations of their audiences and their coaches became extremely powerful and were often internalized and magnified within the own

personal expectations they set for themselves. All but one participant discussed how the expectations of others made them hold themselves to the same standard of expectations other people had for them and if they did not perform well they would be extremely disappointed with themselves. These athletes felt that they must continually succeed and prove, then re-succeed and re-prove their status to their coaches, teammates, and themselves. As a result, the participants learned to seek and need the approval of others to feel that they are worthy as individuals. This cyclical pattern of socialization further drives athletes to focus on and immerse themselves in their athletic identities, stripping athletes of their independence and ability to think and act for themselves.

Identity Loss

As a consequence of participants foreclosing on their athletic identities, all participants experienced difficulties in exiting their athletic role set. All participants reported a continual sense of loss when questioned about their post-athletic career transition experiences. Their feelings ranged from the initial distress of retirement to continually holding out hope of acquiring a professional sport career after faced with loss of eligibility or injury. This sense of loss is consistent with Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) findings that during post-athletic transitions, athletes experience a traumatic sense of identity loss. Consistent with these findings, this study's participants overwhelmingly felt their institutions did not provide extensive and readily available pre- and post-transition services.

After years of athletic identity development and reinforcement, athletes who have foreclosed on their identities become locked into their primary self-concept of athlete, foregoing any identity alternatives. Upon retirement, athletes are forced out of their athletic roles and left to adapt to the adjustments of a normal life outside of athletics. Retired athletes encounter issues

related to the loss of a role or primary self-concept with perceived importance, leading to diminished functioning (Brewer et al., 1993; Lavallee et al., 1997; Pearson & Petitpas, 1990). Sport retirement has been linked to the loss of the athlete role, feelings of sadness and loss, and identity confusion as many athletes struggle to find new identities and remain dependent on sport as a source of identity even after they have disengaged from athletics (Brewer et al., 1993). All participants in this study described losing their athletic identities and the corresponding emotional and physical reactions to their perceived losses.

Similar to the participants in this study, Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) study on elite gymnasts discovered that participants experienced confusion, disorientation, and feelings of loss following retirement from elite sport. Evident in the participants' narratives were the themes of identity confusion and identity loss following disengagement from sport. However, Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) findings were limited to only the sport of gymnastics, narrowing the generalizability of their results. All six participants in this study experienced a form of identity loss post-athletic transition. They discussed experiencing confusion as to who they were outside of sport, when their athletic identities were no longer beneficial to their overall self-concepts.

One participant in this study gave thought to different roles during adolescence and aimed to maintain a balanced life throughout her collegiate experience. Although she reported a manageable transition with little identity confusion, she struggled to adjust socially and described a loss of identity in her social sector. Although most participants immediately secured post-athletic careers or endeavors, all participants discussed struggling to adjust to the loss of their athletic identity. Similarly, Beamon and Bell's (2011) study participants described feelings of depression and loss, and expressed social isolation as a result of the loss associated with no

longer being an athlete. Two participants in this study communicated extensively about the loss

of their social realms due to athletic retirement.

Negative associations can occur with the loss of identity at any stage of development

(Erikson, 1968). Particularly, for many athletes their sport is their entire focus and greatly

determines the manner in which they view themselves. When stripped of the title of an elite

athlete, athletes are then forced to renegotiate who they are and how they categorize themselves

in relation to others. The often-idolized athlete then becomes a normal individual in society,

often leading to negative reactions, emotions, and methods of coping for the athlete as she begins

to reevaluate her role in the community. The majority of participants in this study revealed their

level of athletic identity was synonymous with their perceived value and purpose, and in many

cases the primary identifier of whom they were in the world. Participants described their fears

associated with the loss of their athletic identities as this indicated the loss of their "special"

status and indicated their emergence into the normal and unknown.

Each participant in this study commented on their feelings of being special and valued by

their respective communities as a result of their athletic status. One participant in particular

discussed her fears of normalcy as a result of retiring from her sport. She discussed the need to

find an alternate career or endeavor that would fill the void associated with the loss of her

athletic identity. Emotional roadblocks occur when retired athletes struggle to find a career post-

transition that offers the same intensity and status as when they were elite athletes. Most careers

outside of sport do not deliver the same emotional and significant rewards as participating in

Division I athletics. When the athletic careers of these participants were over, they were not

prepared to follow another life goal as the only goals they had related to their sport careers. Their

sports have consumed their lives. They needed to establish new goals, a new career, and a new

identity because there is a loss of self with the loss of their sport. As a result, depression and feelings of confusion ensued as participants tried to keep their athletic identities in tact, as they know no other alternative identities. They do not have alternative careers or purposes that give them the same sense of chasing the highs of being an elite athlete.

A loss of identity for some athletes when transitioning out of athletics can leave the athlete with an inability to move forward in the next phase of their life. A few participants in this study revealed that they remained in, what one participant deemed, "limbo" which was an in between state of transition. Role engulfed athletes who did not adequately plan for their transitions may take more time post-retirement to evaluate potential career alternatives and reform their identities. For most participants, this included not receiving much or any assistance with preparing for their transitions into sport retirement. These athletes had the transferable skills necessary to be successful in their post-athletic lives, yet they needed support in identifying and understanding how to use those skills and learn how those skills apply to a world outside of athletics. Participants who foreclosed on their identities did not explore outside options, and ignored their own best interests for the sake of their team, coaches, and families that resulted in many athletes experiencing debilitating self-doubt during their transitions. When it came to these athletes working towards alternative career or educational options, self-doubt only further prompted procrastination, reluctance, and confusion.

Personal agency

Individual differences in adjustment can occur among athletes who have similar developmental tasks, sports-related positions, and social roles (Stambulova et al., 2009). Individual differences may be due to psychological, developmental, and social issues that define individuals' responses to retirement transitions. The results of this study suggested that Division

I athletes with heightened athletic identities who demonstrate strong self-efficacy and personal agency (e.g., sense of control) are more likely to experience positive retirement transitions and achieve balanced identities post-transition out of sport. In this study, athletes who were able to demonstrate high degrees of personal agency before, during, or after their athletic retirements experienced positive identity transitions. Similar to personal agency, self-efficacy is the belief that one can cope with a given situation, and has been used to predict how one will fair entering into a new situation and the respective affective reactions to the situation (Bandura, 1982). Participants in this study that described high SE were able to plan accordingly for their transitions out of sports and actively sought out career and educational possibilities, while low SE participants experienced longer transitions and were not sure of viable career or educational options available to them. Participants with low SE described disappointment with the lack of support they received from their coach and family supports and attributed their delay in moving forward to creating new identities and career paths to outside sources.

Personal agency in the present study involves the belief that one possesses control over one's own personal volitional actions in the world. Participants who demonstrated high personal agency at early stages in their transitions believed that they had some jurisdiction over their transitional outcomes, whereas participants who did not exhibit personal agency until much later in their transitions believed that their life outcomes were the result of factors outside of their control. Athletes in the current study who demonstrated personal agency pre-retirement from sport had the self-assessed ability to adjust to the changes that accompanied retirement. These participants understood that their sport-careers were coming to an end and chose to begin preparing and planning for their retirements. They took the time to develop plans to be able to quickly adapt to their new situations and develop other life domains pre- and post-retirement,

thus experiencing positive identity transitions. This supports the literature that pre-retirement planning is associated with positive athletic retirements (Alfermann et al., 2004; Cecic Erpic et al., 2004; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993), and that re-evaluation and re-adjustment of oneself and one's goals pre-retirement is associated with identity reformation post-transition (Lally, 2007; Lavalle & Robinson, 2007). The present inquiry further supports research on athletic identity transitions that indicates adjustment must begin long before athletic retirement (Lally, 2007).

Participants who demonstrated personal agency and participated in pre-retirement planning adapted more readily to their new identity roles in their retirement experiences. This is consistent with previous literature that suggests diversification in various identity roles is associated with positive adjustments in identity during transitions (Schlossberg, 1984; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). Athletes who were able to visualize and plan for possible future roles after retirement, such as relationships, careers, and interests, were better equipped to negotiate positive transitions out of sport than athletes who believed they had few or no options after retirement. Theses athletes were able to come to the realization that their sport careers would come to an end and as a result they were able to gradually decrease or step away from their salient athletic identities and begin exploring new self-concepts outside of athletics. This supports the notion that a decrease in athletic identity pre-athletic transition facilitates athletic retirement transitions (Lavallee et al., 1997); however, issues with identity reformation post-transition may lead to prolonged transitional experiences (Stambulova et al., 2009; Wylleman et al., 2004). Athletes who exhibit personal agency and are proactive in seeking out new identity roles may experience satisfaction with these new roles and are able to decrease their level of attachment to their athletic identities over time. Thus, promotion and exploration of other self-concepts throughout adolescence, combined with execution of pre-retirement personal agency and planning, may be

beneficial in helping athletes invest in other roles outside of athletics in order to develop

balanced identities.

Alternatively, participants who did not engage in pre-retirement planning or exploration

ended up having less balanced identities and lacked feelings of personal control and agency,

leading to longer adjustment periods post-retirement transition. After retirement, these athletes

had no idea who they were without the title of "athlete" being their primary identifier. They

lacked the self-belief that they possessed the necessary resources and ability to handle the

challenges of retirement due to their inability to act on their own volition. These athletes relied

on the direction and adhered to the expectations of coaches, family, peers, and athletic culture

from a young age and therefore after retirement felt void of direction and self-efficacy. Werthner

and Orlick (1986) discovered that 64% of Olympic athletes perceived they had a lack of control

in sport and subsequently felt lost and directionless in retirement.

The findings from the current study support the notion that the developmental task of

personal agency and independence associated with adolescent identity development may be less

attainable if athletes have overcommitted themselves to their athletic roles (Brewer et al., 1993)

Achieving independence and affirming personal control is considered fundamental in the process

of identity formation for young females (Gilligan 1993; Josselson, 1987). However, from a

young age, these athletes were involved in sports that regulated most, if not all, aspects of their

lives, therefore limiting the development of their personal autonomy. Consequently, all of the

participants in this study struggled to adjust to the independence allowed by retirement,

specifically because they had never experienced being in control of their own lives. It is clear

through this study that athletes who did not have the opportunity to develop this task may stall

their identity development through elite athletic participation. Overall, research indicates that

examination of the developmental task of personal agency in adolescent identity development warrants further investigation. Developmental theories highlight the role of personal control and autonomy, but not personal agency in identity formation (Erikson, 1968; Chickering & Reisser, 1969).

Male Differences

Developmentally, male athletes are supported and nurtured in their athletic identities from an early age alongside their female athlete peers. Both male and females begin shaping and molding their identities around their athletic selves beginning in early childhood and adolescence (Brewer et al., 1993). Conversely, it seems that a diversion materializes beginning in college when female athletes are faced with impending retirements or limited professional options beyond college, while male athletes are either choosing to opt for retirement or continue on to more professional avenues. As the participants in this study talked of their athletic development, all of the participants described the socialization process of their athletic identities and spent time discussing the social and relational aspects of their identity formations. Time spent with their teammates, coaches, and supports defined how athletes categorized themselves and how they found affirmation in themselves as athletes. Their relation dynamics also acted as a checks and balances system that depicted the levels of their personal agency and independence throughout their athletic careers.

Male athletes appear to be molded from similar forms of socialization; however, it seems that their experiences of athletics in their early development are less about their relational components and more about their potential for successes in long-term professional sports goals (Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). It could be that male athletes care less about the relationships they develop in their sport careers and attribute more meaning to their individualized goals as athletes.

Furthermore, female athletes and their athletic retirements are not readily recognized in sport literature, while male athletes' retirements have been a topic of discussion and a point of interest in sport research (Brewer et al., 1993; Sinclair & Orlick, 1993). This could be due to the amount of attention and recognition society gives to male sports, not to mention, the celebrity-like status society attributes to professional male athletes in American culture. Society may have an increased awareness of the grief, loss, and mental health issues male athletes experience as a result of their athletic retirements. Since female athletes rarely reach the same celebrity spotlight that male athletes do, they appear to be unacknowledged as having experiences similar to, if not the same, as retired male athletes. A possible lack of respect for female athletics and sports may create a lack of understanding and empathy for female athletes who experience retirement situations similar to their male peers, leading to the disenfranchisement of retired female athletes' grief and loss.

Giannone (2010) recognized interpersonal relationships as being central to identity formation in female athletes. Support was provided for this claim as a common finding in Kerr and Dacyshyn's (2000) research on female gymnasts suggested that identity issues in female sport retirement could be related to interpersonal loss of relationships, and the social roles related to female gymnastics. However, as stated before, research on athletic retirement and female vs. male transition outcomes is extremely limited (Williams, 2012). More research on male and female differences in athletic transition outcomes is needed.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of retired female athletes after transitioning out of Division I level sports, and to better understand how these athletes experienced and perceived their transitions in identity. The participants in this present study

described pronounced elite athlete identities prior to transitioning out of athletics. During retirement from sport, all participants described undergoing periods of adjustment and loss during their transitions. More specifically, all but one participant described experiencing a loss of identity that continued well into their post-athletic careers. This study indicated that, with one exception, disengagement from Division I athletics provoked significant grief and required extensive adjustment. This supports previous studies documenting challenging transitions from elite sports (Blinde & Stratta, 1992). The theme of identity loss was evident in the accounts of six participants. However, one participant gradually disengaged from her athletic identity over the span of her collegiate career and did not experience serious adjustment post-retirement. Identity confusion emerged in the narratives of the participants and indicated that this confusion was partially due to the process of identity development and an over commitment to sport at a young age. Erikson (1968) declared that adolescents must experiment with several identity roles in pursuit of a holistic self-identity. All of the participants in this study remarked on their extreme dedication to their sport beginning in early childhood or adolescence. In this respect, for the majority of the participants in this study, elite athletic involvement discouraged their ability to experiment with different roles in adolescence leading to foreclosed athletic identities. These athletes lacked the opportunity or inclination for such exploration and became "unidimensional", developing high, exclusive athletic identities (Brewer et al., 1993).

Interestingly, the participants who were able to demonstrate personal agency and take action over their transitional experiences reported more manageable transitions than participants who felt they had minimal control over their situation. Extensive support was found for the assertion that Division I sport involvement affects the development of self-identity and that this interaction contributed to the participants' sense of identity confusion in their transitional

processes (Brewer et al., 1993). This study suggests that elite sport involvement precludes identity role experimentation and the acquisition of personal agency. It also potentially impedes the formation of independence and autonomy, which only further delays the process of identity transition, loss, and renegotiation post-retirement.

In this study, all participants experienced a loss of identity and had difficulties renegotiating their sense of self. Due to a lack of resources, poor or inadequate coping skills, and inability or hesitance to communicate with others, these participants experienced difficulties in their transitions in identities from athlete to non-athlete. Participants discussed their feelings of being "special" of which they derived from constant and continual reinforcement from their coaches, team, parents, and media from an early age. Upon retirement, whether voluntary or involuntary, these athletes described their specialness being stripped away from them, leaving them unsure of how to regain their bolstered sense of self that propelled them in their sport careers. In this study's interviews, athletes talked about wanting to "feel special again" and seeking out alternative methods of sourcing feelings of specialness and their sense of celebrity from their glorified athletic selves. Some participants felt as if they were being scammed by the collegiate athletic system as they were once viewed as important and crucial to the system and upon retirement are stripped of their honorary status and left by themselves to pick up their lives outside of sport.

The process of athletic identity formation and role engulfment can best be described from a gestalt perspective. As humans we have an innate drive towards health and growth. This growth can become stagnant or leave gaps in our self-concept causing the self to become unbalanced. From this perspective the athlete's athletic identity remains in what is called the foreground of the phenomenological field, while her whole self remains in the background. All

the focus is on the individual's athletic identity as the athletic self remains in the foreground or the focus of the individual. The athlete is unable to oscillate between other identities due to being stagnant and stuck in her athletic self. This becomes problematic, as the individual's athletic self and whole self are not clearly defined or distinct from each other. Gestalt theory abides by the law of homeostasis, or self-regulation, which is the individual's ability to seek balance within herself, and between herself and her environment (Brownwell, 2009). Athletes who are able to effectively navigate their identity transitions are capable of stepping into their athletic identities and functioning from their athletic selves until the need of the athletic self is no longer necessary and they are able to return to their whole selves. Health is defined by the individual's capability of bringing awareness to what the individual needs, and to bring to the foreground the dominant need of the whole. Once the need is satisfied then the body returns to a state of balance of the whole self.

As counselors we must help athletes create flexible and holistic personal identities that integrate their athlete and non-athlete selves. The athletic self can no longer be viewed as adjunctive to the individual's whole self but integrated from an early age so that the she may be able to function from multiple parts of her whole identity. By learning to integrate all aspects of one's identity the athlete is able to develop multiple self-concepts that are beneficial to her overall functioning and growth. Research on transition and retirement theories (Webb et al., 1998; Grove, Lavallee, & Gordon, 1997; Sparkes 1998) confirm that athletes who foreclose around their athletic identities face poor retirement outcomes due to the intense focus on their athletic roles and lack of alternative internal resources.

Implications

This research study was guided by two central premises, one suggesting that elite athletes inevitably go through a period of transition as they retire from sport, and the other postulating that during these transitions athletes experience a loss of identity and subsequently a period of identity reformation as they transition out of athletics. As counselors we want to facilitate these periods of transition for athletes to help mediate the effects of their transition difficulties. Their understanding of transition and retirement from sport may clarify its meanings and experiences for counselors who aim to help athletes through their transition experiences leading to the development of better athletic assistance programs for elite level athletes.

Due to the nature of identity foreclosure (Marcia 1966), which is the athletes' early commitment to one facet of their identity, athletes at a young age build their foundations on an impermanent part of their lives. Because athletes foreclose on their identities they are incapable of expanding their identities and seeking alternative options regardless of whether their sport has professional opportunities post-university. To athletes, their crises around athletic retirement seem less about athletics and more about how their foreclosed identities have structured the manner of how they perceive and experience themselves in the world. Athletes may have been told that their athletic careers would come to an end; however, their ability to absorb this reality may have been limited just how their abilities to expand their sense of selves beyond their identities as athletes were limited beginning in childhood.

Athletes received messages and signals from their families, peers, coaches, and teammates that have propelled them in their athletic careers and subsequently reinforced and strengthened their athletic identities. It is also through these support systems that athletes are

relayed the messages that they are no longer viewed as athletes in the eyes of the non-athletic community based on markers of athletic retirement such as loss of eligibility or not returning from an injury. Athletes begin to understand the loss of their athletic selves through watching their teammates as they continue to compete, by being treated differently by coaches, or not being held in the same esteem by others. Ironically, the people that sought to reinforce the athlete's identity are also the people that send the message that the athlete has lost her utility and purpose in the athletic community. This is when athletes come to understand that they have lost their value and most begin to reformulate their sense of self and expand their identities. The almost tunnel-like vision that is identity foreclosure keeps athletes from expanding and developing their identities leaving them feeling lost and confused when their primary identity is no longer purposeful.

It seems that athletic identity loss is less about no longer being an athlete and more about identity development and reinforcement throughout the lifespan. Identity loss may appear to be more prevalent in athletes due to the transient and short-lived duration of elite sport careers. Female athletes must undergo these identity crises earlier than their male counterparts who may go on to play professionally. Regardless of the lack of professional opportunities for female athletes, the loss and subsequent reformation of female athletes' identities are comparative to male athletes who may experience similar loss in their professional careers. The notion of how athletes forecloses on and develop around their athletic selves sheds light on how to mediate eventual identity loss later in their lives. It seems that female athletes are constantly overlooked due to their lack of professional opportunities and are not given proper attention and assistance in navigating identity reformation.

It appears that support systems, such as coaches, parents, and families, aim to rear their females in sports in a manner that does not differ or vary from the way in which they raise their males. Parents enroll their children in sports at an early age, and females and male adolescents begin the process of sport socialization in very similar ways. Both male and females go to practice, compete, and are supported by their coaches and parents in continuing their sport careers from an early age and beyond into their adolescence. The stark reality is that while these athletes, both male and female, may continue on to become elite athletes, the realities of females competing beyond the collegiate level are slim. As to not discourage or hinder female athletic engagement and progression, parents and coaches continue to create an environment where the athlete continually reinforces her athletic identity through participation in sports.

Not to say this is providing a disservice to female athletes by not educating them on the realities of the lack of professional opportunities post-collegiate athletics, but the education and constant encouragement on the parents and coaches part to broaden female identities might circumvent the female athletes' identity foreclosure and allow more informed decisions on the athletes' part to form multiple facets of their identity. It is possible that coaches do not realize their persistent reinforcement of their athletes' identities through their verbal and non-verbal actions further engages their athletes' identities, and how their actions and comments structure their athletes' expectations of what they perceive to be their athletic abilities and futures. Coaches know that the likelihood of their female athletes' progressing to a professional level is low and yet coaches, parents, families, and our society do not acknowledge the grief and loss reactions of female athletes who have been encouraged their entire lives to dedicate themselves to their sports and often their teams.

Conversely, female athletes may be aware of their lack of professional opportunities and decide not to disengage from their sport early in their collegiate careers to prevent subsequent identity loss. Whether or not these athletes are aware of their career finalities does not disqualify the concept of identity foreclosure and the fear, or lack of knowledge, of how to be in the world in a way that is different from what they know and have always known which is being an athlete. Without assistance and acknowledgement from relational supports, athletes may struggle to broaden their sense of self through other outlets because they are unable to assert themselves and act independently due to years and years of being told what to do by others. The fear of the unknown may be what is keeping them stuck in their high athletic identities and could be what makes their transitions out of athletics more intense. In this study, Jane and Carrie are two athletes who discussed knowing that their athletic careers would end post-collegiate retirement; however, whenever they tried to disengage on their own they were negatively reacted to by their coaches and teammates, which further prompted their fears and confusion about how to navigate their identity transitions.

As noted in the themes, the lack of personal autonomy might hinder female athletes in looking at all of their options regarding their decisions to disengage from sport early on to prevent negative retirement reactions. The athletes in this study all had high athletic identities but when faced with the reality of their inevitable retirements they struggled to find methods of disengaging from their sport and adjusting their identities to adapt to their new ways of being in the world outside of athletics. Perhaps the real issue is adolescent development and the importance of broadening athletes in a more holistic manner that encompasses multiple aspects of their identities. The lack of professional opportunities for female athletes is but a small aspect of the inevitable identity crises that occur upon retirement. All athletes undergo this transition at

some point in their lives. Female athletes must process their transitions on their own essentially due to the lack of understanding and acknowledgement of how impactful a high athletic identity can be on an individual, both male and female. It seems that male athletes' identity loss and transition is more recognizable due to the magnifying glass that most professional, male athletes are under in the public. Male athletes must also know at some point in their careers that their careers will have an end point, whether they choose to acknowledge their retirement or not. Similar to male athletes, female athletes experience the same identity transition just at a different level of sport advancement. Female athletes may be enduring more distressing transitions simply due to the idea that they are processing this change without the help or acknowledgment of others simply because they lack a professional title.

Through the findings of this inquiry, the following assertions can be made: (a) Division I collegiate female athletes inevitably undergo transitions out of sport and experience a loss of their athletic identities; (b) athletes continue to over-focus on their sport, despite knowing their athletic career will end and they will not go on to play professionally; (c) athletes are not supported in dialogue to explore life after sport due to coaches or outside support systems not being open to help with transitions; (d) possessing a high athletic identity is a risk factor for athletes leading to poor or maladjusted transition experiences; (e) athletes need early career development and mental health assistance to assist in all transitional experiences throughout their athletic careers.

Two participants in this study discussed experiencing grief in their transitions out of athletics. Despite the explicit nature of grief not being discussed in each participant interview, I experienced their grief and felt the presence of their anguish and loss in my interviews with each participant. Disenfranchised grief in response to major losses that do not involve death is often

poorly recognized by society, and often reserved in its healthy expression. Grief becomes

disenfranchised when individuals do not have societal validation of their loss and their grieving

processes. Because society does not view athletic identity loss as a "real" loss, our society does

not support athletes in their grief processes so athletes feel as if they cannot talk about the loss

and grief they experience. Despite disenfranchised grief being prevalent in grief literature (Harris

2011), there is no research to my knowledge conducted on disenfranchised grief and athletic

identity loss. Perhaps due to the nature of disenfranchised grief participants in this study may not

have felt comfortable discussing their grief.

When discussing the participants' identity loss, all participants experienced emotional

and physical elements of loss. Disenfranchised grief is similar to ambiguous loss and may be

accompanied by shame and self-loathing that further complicates individual authenticity and

truthfulness in relationships, thereby aiding to the struggle of coping with the loss (Harris, 2011;

Boss & Yeats, 2014). Athletes may feel that their loss is not socially accepted and feel shame

around seeking help and talking to others about their grief therefore leading to delayed coping

and reformation of their identities.

Grief counseling may be beneficial for athletes who experience trouble with grief in

response to the loss of their athletic selves. More research on the explicit nature of grief in

athletic identity transitions may lead to a better understanding of grief and loss experienced by

athletes and help tailor counseling services to aid athletes in their grief processes. Searching for

meaning and reconstituting one's world are fundamental challenges of adapting to loss (Harris,

2011). Each athlete in this study aimed to find purpose in her life after sport and reconstruct her

life post-transitional experience. Through acknowledgment, acceptance and integration of the

past with the present counselors may be able to help athletes express their emotions, gain social support, and create meaning in their lives.

These findings have implications for future research, theory, and counselor training, supervision, and clinical practice. They underscore the importance of including sport counseling training in educational and other counselor preparation settings. These findings also contribute to the previous body of research and professional literature new understandings of the relational dynamics of early athlete development and the grief experiences of elite athletes.

Recommendations

This study generated findings that form a solid foundation for recommendations in areas ranging from counselor education and training to empirical research. This study's findings suggest the majority of athletes experienced a narrowing of identity development early on in their development and that identity development is a lifelong progression that goes well past adolescence. These observations should raise awareness of elite athletes experiences of how they are parented, coached, and supported by their teammates and peers, and suggests that more research is needed in regards to how relational connections support athlete identity development. Strategies need to be developed to support more well-adjusted athlete identity development, development of diversity in other life realms, and greater athlete autonomy and personal agency. Strategies are also needed to educate the community on athletes' identity development, growth, and change. Athletes' experiences of interactions with teammates, coaches, and families reflect patterns of both positive and negative adjustments in identity pre- and post-retirement.

Limitations

A snowball sampling method was used for this study with the hopes of attaining a maximum variation sample. Although a maximum variation sample was attained regionally and

by the type of sport, the sample appeared to be more homogenous than anticipated. The researcher used the snowball sampling method due to not having a specified database or other method of contacting potential participants. In future studies, the use of a purposive sampling method might allow for a more varied selection of potential participants. This limitation makes it difficult to generalize the study's findings, as the study's findings did not represent a culturally diverse group of people.

Another limitation was the small number of participants, which restricted transferability of the findings (Krathwohl, 2009). Smaller sample sizes may permit researchers to develop a deeper understanding of participants' experiences; however, little to no transferability can be made from the findings of this study (Morse, 1994). Also, it is possible that participants who agreed to participate in the study, all of whom are retired athletes, privileged the study's focus on identity transition in athletic retirement, and therefore attempted to meet what they may have perceived as my expectations as the researcher and as a fellow athlete. Participants who agreed to participate in the study may have felt more compelled to share their experiences and volunteered to do so due to the nature and purpose of the study compared to athletes who may have had more normative experiences as athletes.

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APPENDIX A

St. Mary's University

An Invitation to Participate in a Research Study

Dear Colleague,

My name is Catherine C. Wooten, and I am a doctoral candidate in the Counselor Education and Supervision Program at St. Mary's University, with a master's degree in Counseling and Guidance from Texas A&M University at San Antonio. For my doctoral dissertation, I am conducting a research study entitled: **A Heuristic Inquiry Into Female Student-Athletes' Experience of Identity Loss After Retirement From Sport.** The purpose of this study is to capture, in a one-time web-based telephone interview, retired female athletes' descriptions of their lived experiences of identity loss and transition after retirement from sport. I am seeking research participants who would allow me to interview them regarding this experience. I invite you to consider participating in this important and timely research study.

Those who participate in this study will: (a) describe what it means for them, as retired or non-collegiate athletes, to experience identity loss; (b) describe transitioning from being an athlete to a non-athlete; (c) describe highs and lows of transitioning; and (d) provide examples of coping during the transition process.

The interview is expected to last from 60 to 90 minutes. The interview will be audio-recorded digitally using technology that safeguards confidentiality, transcribed verbatim, and verified (and modified, if necessary) by the respondent. The content of the interview will represent the raw data for the study. Participants are encouraged to provide any relevant forms of creative expression, such as artwork, stories, poetry, music, or journal entries that have contributed to the meaning making of their experiences as they transitioned out of sport.

From the information provided, relevant themes and patterns will be identified and culminated into a creative synthesis of the essence of participants' collective experience. Participants will provide a pseudonym of their choice as a method of preserving anonymity and confidentiality. The use of pseudonyms will aid me in ascertaining themes without identifying participants and will be used to distinguish participants in the writing of the findings.

There is minimal to no risk anticipated in participating in this study. Benefits of participation include contributing to the existing body of empirical research and literature on athletic retirement and transition, personal clarification on one's own process, coping mechanisms, achievements in transition, and adding to the limited amount of research on female athletes. You will not be compensated for your participation. Participants verifying a history of trauma will be omitted from the study as discussing their transition experiences or past events may induce traumatic memories.

The criteria for inclusion in this study is:

1. Participants are female, retired student-athletes.
2. Participants have graduated from a Division I university athletic program, or are no longer athletically eligible in their sport at that university.
3. Participants must self-identify as retired from their sport and are no longer competing at the Division I level.
4. Participants are willing to describe their experiences of identity-loss, transition, and coping.
5. Participants are willing to have their interview with the researcher audio recorded.

If you meet the above criteria or want to suggest a colleague who does, or if you have any questions or concerns about this research study, please contact me at cwooten@mail.stmarytx.edu. After expressing interest in participating in the study, I will email you the informed consent form, the demographic information form, and the interview protocol. Also, I will send a few suggested times for the interview to take place that you can choose from, along with instructions on how to join me for the interview. Questions about the study may be asked at any time.

Participation in this study is voluntary, meaning you may withdraw from the study at any time. I also may remove you from the study at any time for reasons including communication or language problems. The data collected from this study will be used for education and publication purposes. You will not be identified personally in the reported findings.

Any questions about this study, or related concerns may be directed to the Principal Investigator, Catherine Wooten, MA, LPC, at +1-210-861-9542 or at cwooten@mail.stmarytx.edu or to the dissertation advisor, Dr. Carolyn Tubbs, Ph.D., at +1-210-438-6400 or at ctubbs@stmarytx.edu.

Questions related to your rights as a research participant or concerns about this research study may be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, St. Mary's University, at +1-210-436-3736 or at IRBCommitteeChair@stmarytx.edu. All research projects carried out by investigators at St. Mary's University are governed by requirements of the university and the federal government.

I appreciate your time and consideration to volunteer as a participant in this study. I am excited about the possibility of your participation and look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Catherine C. Wooten, MA, LPC

APPENDIX B

Informed Consent

Please consider this information before deciding to participate in this research study entitled: **A Heuristic Inquiry Into Female Student-Athletes' Experience of Identity Loss After Retirement From Sport.**

Purpose of the research: To capture, in a one-time web-based, audio interview, retired athletes' descriptions of their lived experience of self-identity loss after retiring from NCAA Division I athletics.

What you will do in this research: You will participate in a one-time digitally audio-recorded interview.

Time required: The interview will be between 60 and 90 minutes in duration. Transcript verification will vary, depending on your schedule, and will require you to share your email address with me.

Benefits of this study: Benefits of participation include contributing to the existing body of empirical research on athletic retirement and transition and informing mental health practitioners' training, practice, and theory in working with athletes.

Risks of this study: There is minimal to no risk anticipated in participating in this study. Participants verifying a history of trauma will be omitted from the study as discussing their transition experiences or past events may induce traumatic memories.

Confidentiality: Your participation in this study is completely confidential. Participants will provide a pseudonym of their choice as a method of preserving anonymity and confidentiality. Your identity will not be stored alongside your data.

Compensation: You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Participation and withdrawal: Participation in this study is voluntary, meaning you may withdraw from the study at any time. Inform the researcher is you wish to withdraw.

Contact Information: Please direct all questions related to the study to the Principal Investigator, Catherine Wooten, MA, LPC at +1-210-861-9542 or by email at catherinecwooten@gmail.com.

Whom to contact about your rights in this research: Questions related to your rights as a research participant or concerns about this research study may be directed to the dissertation advisor, Dr. Carolyn Tubbs, Ph.D., at + 1-210-438-6400 or at ctubbs@stmarytx.edu, and/or the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, St. Mary's University, at +1-210-436-3736 or at IRBCommitteeChair@stmarytx.edu. All research projects carried out by investigators at St. Mary's University are governed by requirements of the university and the federal government.

<u>Oral Informed Consent</u>: The purpose of the study has been sufficiently explained and reviewed by the researcher. I agree to participate in this study and to allow the researcher to digitally audio record the interview. I understand that I may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. I also understand that the researcher may remove me from the study at any time.

APPENDIX C

Demographic Information Form

Date: _____

Pseudonym: _____   Age: _____

Race: _____   Highest Degree: _____

Phone Number: _____   Email: _____

Sport Played: _____

Duration of Participation in Sport at Intercollegiate Level (days/months/years): _____

Institution: _____

Date of Graduation: _____

Duration of Retirement (days/months/years): _____

Reason for Retirement (check all that apply):

_____ Eligibility   _____ Injury   _____ Personal Decision

_____ Other (Please specify): _____

How would you describe yourself now? _____

Any other relevant demographic information:

APPENDIX D

Interview Protocol

1. Engage in conversation, answer participant questions, etc. before interview questions

2. Review the central purpose of the study

3. Review Informed Consent Form and obtain oral informed consent from participant

4. Start recording device

5. Express gratitude for participant's participation in the study

6. Obtain and confirm participant's completed Demographic Information Form

7. Familiarize participant with the interview questions

8. Begin interview. Conduct interview using the following questions and probes:

    a. To start, please tell me a little bit about your sports career.

        i. How did you decide to become an intercollegiate athlete?

        ii. How did you get recruited by your university?

        iii. What were the highlights and lowlights of your intercollegiate career?

        iv. Were your expectations of an intercollegiate career met or unmet?

    b. What words do you use when identifying your exit from intercollegiate sports, and how would you describe the exit?

        i. When did you first become aware of this transition to retirement?

        ii. What was involved in your process of transition to retirement?

        iii. What difficulties did you experience during your transition to retirement?

        iv. What coping strategies did you use during the transition to retirement?

        v. How long did the transition to retirement take?

      c. Would you have wished for or done something different to make the transition better for you?

           i. Do any particular experiences or people stand out during your transition to retirement?

9. Listen to the participant

10. Respond, prompt, and/or clarify, as necessary

11. Thank the participant for volunteering in the inquiry

12. Remind the participant that the interview transcript and findings will be sent to her for verification, and modification if needed

13. Open up dialogue for participant to share any final thoughts, express concerns, ask questions

14. End telephone interview, stop recoding device