

# Theoretical Perspectives on Career Transitions in Sport

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## **Abstract**

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This chapter outlines theoretical perspectives on career transitions in sport. Models that have been employed to explain this phenomenon will initially be delineated, including theories of social gerontology, thanatology, and human adaptation to transition. This will be followed by an outline of a conceptual model of sports career transition (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). This model focuses on how the causes of career transition, developmental experiences of the athlete, and coping resources affect the quality of adjustment to career transitions in sport.

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## **Theoretical Perspectives on Career Transitions in Sport**

The sport-scientific community has made an effort to conceptualize the career transition process ever since a debate emerged regarding the incidence of distress experienced by retiring athletes. Numerous investigations have been made into athletic career termination, with various explanatory frameworks being employed to explain the phenomenon. Theorists have, however, predominantly made parallels between career transitions in sport and social gerontological models of aging, thanatological models of death and dying, and models of human adaptation to transition.

## Social Gerontological Models

Gerontology, as a scientific field of study, has been defined as the systematic analysis of the aging process (Atchley, 1991). This academic discipline consists of biological, social, and psychological subdivisions, with social gerontology concentrating on the mutual interaction between society and the aged. In its broadest sense, social gerontology attempts to explain the lives and activities of those who appear to age successfully. Numerous gerontological orientations, therefore, have been utilized to explain the general process of retirement from the labor force.

Sport theoreticians have suggested that several models of social gerontology are applicable in the study of transitions in sport (e.g., S. H. Lerch, 1981; McPherson, 1980; Rosenberg, 1981). In an attempt to understand the problems and processes confronted by retiring athletes, the career transition process has been compared to the following social gerontological perspectives: activity theory, subculture theory, disengagement theory, continuity theory, social breakdown theory, and social exchange theory.

### Activity Theory

Havighurst and colleagues (Friedmann & Havighurst, 1954; Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953) were perhaps the first theorists to propose a relationship between social activity and adjustment to retirement from the work force. This pioneering conceptualization of aging, known as activity theory, suggests that individuals strive to maintain homeostatic levels of activity throughout the life span. If the adjustment process is to be successful, the once active roles that are lost upon retirement need to be substituted with new ones (Havighurst & Albrecht, 1953). Although this perspective has received empirical support in the gerontological literature (e.g., Lemon, Bengston, & Peterson, 1972), it has been suggested that activity theory, not unlike the field of gerontology itself, is based on an inadequate if not invisible theoretical foundation (Longino & Kart, 1982).

In terms of retirement from elite-level sport, some theorists have suggested that there is potential in examining the application of activity theory. McPherson (1980), for example, contends that this perspective has utility for individuals who substitute an activity for the athlete role. Rosenberg (1981) has also stated that when athletes retire voluntarily it is usually not because their skills and efforts provide the rewards they once did, but because alternatives to sport look more attractive. Activity theory, however, may not apply universally to athletic career transitions because there is usually neither a cessation of work activity nor total retirement from participation in sport. Although activity theory may explain the situation of retiring athletes who successfully adjust by

retaining previous activity patterns, Baillie and Danish (1992) believe that the schedules competitive athletes adhere to during their playing careers are difficult to duplicate outside of sport.

### **Subculture Theory**

Rose (1962) responded to a need for theory building in the area of social gerontology by theorizing that it is possible to successfully adjust to retirement from the work force with less active roles. This subculture theory, which asserts that prolonged social interactions among individuals lead to the development of a group consciousness, assumes that people can be less active and well-adjusted during retirement even if the situation is different from overall social norms. Although investigators have demonstrated an application of this perspective (e.g., Longino, McClelland, & Peterson, 1980), the widely shared view among the gerontological community is that subculture theory is most applicable when it is integrated with other social gerontological theories (Marshall, 1978).

Because athletes have fairly distinguishable (sub)cultural characteristics, Rosenberg (1981) contends that subculture theory is of value in explaining sports career termination. Although it is questionable as to whether this theory can predict successful athletic retirement, it does assist in revealing the sources of potential adjustment problems experienced by athletes in transition. This perspective, however, has received considerable criticism in the literature because the athlete in transition is moving out of, and not into, the proposed subculture (Gordon, 1995).

### **Continuity Theory**

Continuity theory originated with Atchley (1976), who focused on the evolution of individual adaptation to normal aging. Unlike the aforementioned social gerontological models, this theory allows change to be integrated into one's prior history without necessarily causing disequilibrium. The importance of a stable pattern of previously established role behavior is assumed in this model, with an emphasis on maintaining continuity throughout the aging process. Thus, the best adjusted individuals experience minimal change and greater continuity following retirement from the labor force (Atchley, 1989).

In terms of athletic career termination, it has been proposed that continuity theory can predict the level of adjustment to retirement by examining the significance of sport in the lives of athletes (S. H. Lerch, 1981). If one's athletic role is seen as more meaningful than other roles, an athlete may experience some difficulties in redistributing them upon retirement (Rosenberg, 1981). On the other hand, if sustaining the sporting role is not a priority for the athlete in transition, the reallocation of time and energy to remaining roles will

not create problems in the adjustment process. The decisive question in the application of continuity theory to athletic career termination, therefore, is whether or not retirement from sport is important enough for individuals to reorganize their hierarchy of personal goals.

The belief that retired individuals are content with less active schedules has been challenged in the sport literature. Utilizing continuity as a predictor of adjustment to retirement, S. H. Lerch (1981) empirically tested continuity theory with a sample of retired professional baseball players in the United States. In this particular study, it was hypothesized that optimal adjustment would characterize the retired athlete whose postathletic career remained connected to sports, income remained relatively stable after retirement, and level of subjective and behavioral commitment to sport was maintained. This modification of continuity theory was also supplemented with a number of variables that social gerontologists have found to be related to retirement adjustment (*viz.*, education level, preretirement attitude, and health). S. H. Lerch found, however, that no continuity variables were significantly related to adjustment to retirement from sport.

### **Disengagement Theory**

Cummings, Dean, Newell, and McCaffrey (1960) introduced disengagement theory as an extension of Erikson's (1950) model of life-span development. This structural-functional theory of aging, which argues that the elderly and society mutually withdraw, is based on the findings from the Kansas City Study of Adult Life (Cummings et al.). In this longitudinal investigation, it was suggested that a desired equilibrium is obtained when younger workers enter the work force and replace the disengaging older, retiring population. A system-induced mechanism allows society and the elderly to progressively retract from one another, allowing the aging population to spend their remaining years in leisure. Retirement, according to disengagement theory, is viewed as a necessary manifestation of the mutual withdrawal of society and the aging population from one another.

Because most athletes do not leave the work force permanently upon athletic career termination, retiring from elite-level sport does not appear to fit the theory of general disengagement. Whereas disengagement theory assumes that athletes and the sport structure mutually withdraw from one another, S. H. Lerch (1981) demonstrated that a large number of athletes try to hang on to their sport long after their skills have begun to deteriorate. Moreover, retiring athletes clearly cannot afford to withdraw from society (Gordon, 1995). It has been suggested, therefore, that disengagement theory offers little to the understanding of retirement from competitive sport (E. M. Blinde & Greendorfer, 1985).

## Social Breakdown Theory

Social breakdown theory was adapted to gerontology by Kuypers and Bergston (1973) and details the cycle associated with the process of social reorganization after retirement. Incorporating elements of activity theory, subculture theory, and continuity theory, this conceptualization proposes that individuals become increasingly susceptible to external labeling following the loss of a retirement-related role. This social evaluation leads one to gradually reduce one's involvement in certain activities until the role is completely eliminated from one's life.

In the sport literature, it has been suggested that social breakdown theory has clear application to athletic retirement. In particular, Rosenberg (1981) has indicated that the withdrawal cycle illustrates how elite athletes are vulnerable to social judgment upon career termination, particularly unfavorable redefinition. Edwards and Meier (1984) have empirically investigated the relationship between adjustment to retirement from sport and several variables proposed to be significant in social breakdown theory, including socioeconomic status, preretirement planning, and health. In this study, the data from former professional ice hockey players in North America yielded significant support for the social breakdown paradigm. In the case of career termination, however, the retiring athlete is often aware of their deteriorating athletic skills, as well as a lack of congruence with their peers. According to the social breakdown model, this may lead the athlete to withdraw further from the sport and become susceptible to more negative evaluation. To avoid such a decline, Baillie and Danish (1992) recommend that athletes need to prepare for the redefinition of social breakdown prior to the actual retirement. This procedure, which has been referred to as social reconstruction, assists the retiring athlete in restoring and maintaining a positive self-image and, thus, reduces the impact of negative external evaluation. In career counseling with athletes, Rosenberg (1981) believes a fitting prelude to a discussion of social breakdown is exchange theory.

## Exchange Theory

Exchange theory was initially developed by Homans (1961) to explain how aging individuals rearrange their activities so that their remaining energy generates maximum return. This paradigm has since been adapted to illustrate how successful aging can be achieved through the specific rearrangement of social networks and activities (e.g., Blau, 1964). Rosenberg (1981) has suggested that social exchange theory is one of the most salient gerontological theories applicable to retirement from sport. In addition, Johns, Linder, and Wolko (1990) have demonstrated in a study with former competitive gymnasts in Canada that

the examination of factors that contribute to retirement from sport through a social exchange perspective has some merit. More recently, however, theorists have criticized the social exchange perspective as being inadequate when applied to athletic retirement (Gordon, 1995; Koukouris, 1991).

It has been suggested that the processes associated with exchange theory do not stand up because they deny the possibility of the development of a career after sport (Koukouris, 1991). Social exchange theory, however, may be heuristically useful in providing athletes with a perspective on what their relationship is with sport, as well as what may happen to that relationship upon career termination. As Gordon (1995) has suggested, “resources such as physical talent may be able to be exchanged for meaningful rewards from the sport system, but these resources are finite and their inevitable deterioration will affect the degree of control over the sport relationship” (p. 478).

Despite the intuitive appeal of social gerontological theories, many questions have been raised by contemporary theorists about their applicability to career transitions in sport. For example, the general assumption that athletic retirement is a system-induced mechanism that forces athletes to disengage from their sport has been criticized (e.g., Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Koukouris, 1991). The applicability of social theories of aging to the athlete in transition, who will continue into a postsporting career, has also been questioned in the literature (e.g., Curtis & Ennis, 1988; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Indeed, it is difficult to compare retirement from the work force with the sports career transition that biologically and chronologically occurs at a much younger age (S. M. Murphy, 1995). Perhaps the biggest shortcoming of the analogy between athletic retirement and social gerontological models, however, is the presumption that the career transition process is an inherently negative event, requiring considerable adjustment. Although this assumption may be useful in drawing a parallel between successful retirement from sport and occupational retirement from the labor force, social gerontological theories have been unable to adequately capture the nature and dynamics of the career transition process.

## **Thanatological Models**

Thanatology is the study of the process of death and dying. This area of research, which was introduced by Park (1912) in an outline of the biomedical causes of death, has evolved into a multidisciplinary science (Kastenbaum & Kastenbaum, 1989). Academic disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, sociology, and theology have all made significant contributions to the thanatological literature, and a total of 62 different sets of variables have been identified in the extant literature to influence the dying individual (Rando, 1986). In addition, 29 separate sets of psychological, social, and physical factors

appear to influence a person's response during postdeath grief and mourning (Rando, 1984). As Feifel (1990) has suggested, thanatology is such a diverse area that the very mention of it as a field of study is a limitation. However, the sport-scientific community has suggested that several thanatological theories have implications for the career transition process, including models of social death, social awareness, and stages of death.

### **Social Death**

Of the numerous parallels that have been drawn between career transitions in sport and models of thanatology, the majority have been examined from social points of view. For example, Kalish's (1966) concept of social death has frequently been employed as a literary device describing the psychodynamics of athletic retirement (e.g., S. Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1984). This analogy, which refers to the condition of being treated as if one were dead even though still biologically alive, describes the loss of social functioning, isolation, and ostracism that may accompany athletic career termination. Whereas numerous fictitious examples of social death have been used to explain this phenomenon in sport, the nonfictional works are undoubtedly the most compelling depictions of social death (S. Lerch, 1984).

### **Social Awareness**

Theorists have also proposed that awareness contexts have application for athletes retiring from sport (S. Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1984). This perspective refers to the individuals who know about a terminal hospital patient's inevitable death. The research of Glaser and Strauss (1965) suggests that, depending upon whom knows what during this process, there are observable and predictable patterns of interaction between dying patients, family members and friends, and the medical staff. As these individuals interact over time, it is suggested that the following awareness contexts develop: closed awareness, suspected awareness, mutual pretense, and open awareness.

In closed awareness, terminal patients are not aware of the fact that they are going to die, even though other people are. Various factors may contribute to the closed awareness context, including a doctor's reluctance to tell the patient, the family's decision to not inform the dying individual, and/or the general collusion of hospital staff to avoid discussing a patient's illness with them specifically (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). Terminal hospital patients who remain in this context until they die have little chance to make future plans. When applied to sport, this context is between the retiring athlete, teammates, coaches, and management. Just as a hospital staff may prefer this context in that they do not have to discuss the inevitability of death, this could apply in situations

where elite athletes are unaware of management's plan to release or trade them (Gordon, 1995; S. Lerch, 1984)

The suspected awareness context exists when the dying patient suspects the inevitable death that others know about and tries to confirm or negate that suspicion. These individuals normally try to obtain realistic information about their situation from family, friends, and the hospital staff. Factors that contribute to this awareness context, such as the patient's recognition of changing physical symptoms, may be compared to the experiences of retiring athletes. For example, suspicions of being released from a team may be aroused by the tone of coaches and/or teammates (Gordon, 1995). As in closed awareness, the possible consequences are that terminal hospital patients, as well as athletes, do not have the opportunity to express their feelings and emotions because the later awareness contexts (*viz.*, mutual pretense and open) are never realized (S. Lerch, 1984).

In the mutual pretense context, the patient, family members and friends, and hospital staff all are aware that the patient is dying. What occurs in this context, however, is that all the people involved behave as if the inevitable death is not going to occur. In terms of athletic career transition, the individual's career termination would not be discussed among coaches and teammates. Although one of the consequences of this context is that patients may have some dignity in dying, it is possible that isolation and loneliness may occur (Glaser & Strauss, 1965).

The context of open awareness exists when all people openly acknowledge that the patient is dying. This awareness gives everyone involved a chance to discuss their feelings and, thus, gives patients a greater sense of control (Glaser & Strauss, 1965). In terms of athletic retirement, many individuals may have difficulty in accepting the knowledge of their impending career termination (Gordon, 1995). On the other hand, athletes can begin to plan their postathletic career in this context. As Rosenberg (1984) has stated, however, it is more likely to find relations between athletes and coaches to be characterized by closed and/or suspicion awareness.

## **Stages of Death**

In describing retirement from sport, the series of stages experienced when facing death has been suggested. These psychological reactions, as outlined by Kübler-Ross (1969), grew out of a study with terminal hospital patients. The stages of dying, as applied to retirement from sport, include the following: denial and isolation, in which athletes initially refuse to acknowledge their inevitable career termination; anger, in which retiring athletes become disturbed at the overall situation; bargaining, in which individuals try to negotiate for a

lengthened career in sport; depression, in which athletes experience a distress reaction to retirement; and acceptance, in which individuals eventually come to accept their career transition.

The application of the stages of death theory in sport settings has become a topic of interest in recent years. For example, a number of theorists have employed this particular model to describe the psychological pattern experienced by athletes during rehabilitation from injury (e.g., Wiese-Bjornstal & Smith, 1993). This theoretical perspective has also been supported by research with physiotherapists consulting with injured athletes who have noted that many postinjury behavioral reactions resembled the stages of the grief response (e.g., Gordon, Milios, & Grove, 1991). Although a number of theorists have used the stage theory of dying to describe the process of retirement from sport (e.g., S. Lerch, 1984; Rosenberg, 1984), only E. Blinde and Stratta (1992) have systematically documented the stages of death with a sample of retired athletes who experienced involuntary and unanticipated career terminations.

The stages of death and dying represent a descriptive rather than normative look at the stages of the terminally ill and, therefore, may not be the same as those experienced by athletes in transition. Because not every person goes through every stage in the exact sequence and at a predictable pace, it has been agreed in the literature that dying is an individualistic experience (Feigenberg, 1980; Kalish, 1966). As Kastenbaum and Weisman (1972) have demonstrated via the psychological autopsy (i.e., a methodological technique providing insight into why a patient died, how the patient died, and the psychological state of the patient before death), most individuals do not progress through the stages of death in the same manner. Nevertheless, if used in a flexible way, the stages of dying and other thanatological models can provide a useful guide in understanding the different phases that retiring athletes may go through (Baillie, 1993).

Overall, models of thanatology have been criticized as being inadequate when applied to athletic retirement. Although Baillie (1993) suggests that these models can be valuable tools in understanding the career transition process, the clinical utility of thanatological models has been criticized because they were developed with nonsport populations (Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985). A number of theorists have also questioned whether thanatological models are a generalizable disposition of what happens to the vast majority of athletes (e.g., Gordon, 1995; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1998). Indeed, there are enough anecdotal examples showing that the career transition process can be very distressful for many athletes. As with social gerontological models, however, models of thanatology provide a limited perspective by not focusing on the life-span development of athletes.

Because models of social gerontology and thanatology are unable to adequately account for the complex nature of career transition in sport, it has been suggested that alternative perspectives are needed to achieve an empirical-theoretical balance (Crook & Robertson, 1991). As such, theorists have suggested that athletic career termination may serve as an opportunity for social rebirth rather than a form of social death (Coakley, 1983), and thus, have also viewed it as a transition.

## **Transition Models**

Whereas social gerontological models and thanatological models view retirement as a singular event, transition models characterize retirement as a process. A transition has been defined by Schlossberg (1981) 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). As such, a number of transition frameworks have been employed to examine the interaction of the retiring athlete and the environment, including Sussman’s (1972) analytic model and Schlossberg’s (1981) model of human adaptation to transition.

Although McPherson (1980) was perhaps the first to refer to the phenomenon of athletic career termination as a transition in the literature, Hill and Lowe (1974) initially suggested that Sussman’s (1972) analytic model of retirement from the workforce may be useful in explaining retirement from sport as a process. In this article, Hill and Lowe asserted that the retirement process is a multidimensional conceptualization. However, because athletes are aware of the brevity of their sport careers, and thus can prepare for the transition, this particular process model does not apply to athletic retirement.

The most frequently employed theory of transition that has been outlined in the sport literature has been the model of human adaptation to transition as proposed by Schlossberg and colleagues (Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). In this model, three major sets of factors interact during a transition, including the characteristics of the individual experiencing the transition, the perception of the particular transition, and the characteristics of the pretransition and posttransition environments. Although it appears that these three components interact to produce a successful or unsuccessful adaptation to transition, each factor will be described individually.

The variables that characterize the individual include such attributes as psychosocial competence, sex, age, state of health, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, value orientation, and previous experience with a transition of a similar nature (Schlossberg, 1981). These variables may show considerable differences across the population of athletes facing retirement from sport,

and Coakley (1983) asserts that a diversity of factors influencing the athlete in transition must be acknowledged in order to understand the overall adjustment process.

Regarding the perception of a particular transition, Charner and Schlossberg (1986) have suggested that the role change, affect, source, onset, duration, and degree of stress are all important factors to consider. This aspect of the model emphasizes the phenomenological nature of transitions, in that it is not only the transition itself that is of primary importance, but also the variables that have different salience depending on the transition (Schlossberg, 1981). For retiring athletes, Sinclair and Orlick (1993) have acknowledged this position by suggesting that every career transition has the potential to be a crisis, relief, or combination of both, depending on the athlete's perception of the situation.

In consideration of the characteristics of the pre- and posttransition environments, Schlossberg (1981) has noted the importance to the evaluation of internal support systems, institutional support, and physical settings. Although several researchers have examined social support networks among injured athletes (e.g., Ford & Gordon, 1999), little research has been conducted in this area with retired athletes. A number of theorists have outlined the obligations of coaches and sport associations in preparing athletes for retirement from high-level competition (e.g., Parker, 1994; Thomas & Ermler, 1988). Once again, however, few empirical investigations have been made in this area of athletic career termination.

In an attempt to understand the career transition process of athletes, several researchers have utilized the transition models outlined by Schlossberg and her associates (e.g., Charner & Schlossberg, 1986; Schlossberg, 1981, 1984). Swain (1991), for example, has provided empirical support for Schlossberg's model in terms of the characteristics of the retiring athlete, the perception of the career transition, and the characteristics of the environments. Further evidence in support of this theoretical perspective has been documented in Parker's (1994) study with retired football players, as well as Baillie's (1992) study of former elite-amateur and professional athletes. Sinclair and Orlick (1994) have also modified the transition model of Charner and Schlossberg by reassigning specific characteristics to alternate categories. Although this perspective provides a conceptual overview of career transition in sport, it has been suggested that transition models do not provide a flexible, multidimensional approach that is needed to adequately study athletic retirement (Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994). However, Sinclair and Orlick's model of career transitions in sport appears to be helpful in assessing athletic retirement processes because it incorporates the various factors related to adjustment. Thus, sport