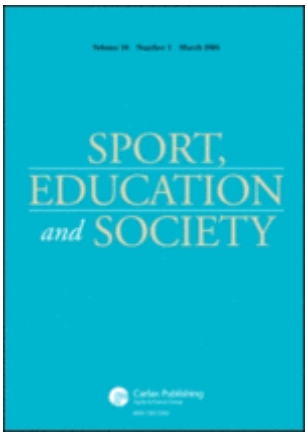

More Than Just a 'Pro': A Relational Analysis of Transition in Professional Football

Journal:	*Sport, Education and Society*
Manuscript ID	CSES-2019-0191.R1
Manuscript Type:	Original Article
Keywords:	transition, multiple identities, belonging, professional football, sports work

Abstract

This paper addresses the social and relational dimensions of player transitions in professional football. Data were generated through a total of 24 cyclical, in-depth interviews with three former players. The interview transcripts were subjected to emic and etic readings, with Bauman's metaphors of liquid modernity, hunters and pointillist time, May's theorization of belonging and Crossley's relational theorising providing the primary heuristic framework. Our analysis led to the construction of two interconnected themes. These were a) the paradox of feeling wanted by others during workplace transitions and, simultaneously, seeing these others as threats to their career longevity and b) the interplay between the participants' multiple identities, relations with others outside of the workplace, and their career choices. Importantly, our findings highlighted that player transitions were not tied to the personality traits or characteristics of the individual but rather to broader social and cultural factors. Indeed, the participants' experienced and interpreted their transitions through the reading of their respective social landscapes and their changing understandings of the multiple social networks that comprised them. Based on these findings, we believe there is much to gain from the exploration of multiple identities in sports work and how these play out and are experienced over time.

Key words: Transition, multiple identities, belonging, professional football, sports work

Introduction

During their careers, athletes experience a number of transitions. These include moving from junior to senior playing status, injury, transferring between clubs and retirement (Jones & Denison, 2017; Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2013; Roderick, 2006a). Previous research has, for example, explored athletes' entry into sport (e.g. Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008), within-career transitions (e.g. Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012; Roderick, 2006a, 2013; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and de-selection and retirement (e.g. Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017) in a variety of sports. In addition to professional football, these have included tennis (e.g. Stier, 2007), golf (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009), rugby (e.g. McKenna & Thomas, 2007), gymnastics (e.g. Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), Australian Football League (Hickey & Kelley, 2008) and fencing (Debois et al., 2012). Importantly, such inquiry has recognised how these various career transitions can involve significant personal challenges for male and female athletes. These can include experiencing a complex and powerful range of emotions, shifts in professional and private identities, as well as changes in social relationships and networks (Brown, Webb, Robinson & Cotgreave, 2018; Park et al., 2013). Combined, such inquiry has significantly enhanced our understanding of the challenges that male and female athletes can encounter during, as well as after, their sporting careers.

To date, psychological theorising has been at the forefront of much athlete transition research (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Here, for example, the readiness for retirement has been found to contain various psychological components, including cognitive, motivational, and affective changes (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004; Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012). Indeed, Park et al. (2012) mapped athletes' retirement to the pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance stages of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) and found that self-confidence and decisional balance (the pros and cons) affected the athletes' exit from sport. Similarly, Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004)

developmental model focused on the normative transitions faced by athletes (i.e. initiation, developmental, mastery and discontinuation) as they progressed through their careers. While these researchers gave consideration to the athletic, psychological, psycho-social and academic level of athletes, the model provided insufficient information and placed athletes definitively in a developmental stage (Debois et al., 2012; Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008). For example, while it was suggested that athletes' relationships with others (e.g., coaches, families, peers, among others) were important forms of social support during athletes careers and career transitions, there has been little detailed consideration of how these various relationships play out during an athlete's career; both inside and outside of sport.

Although psychological interpretations may provide a useful analysis of how athletes cognitively navigate transitions, they focus heavily on the personality traits or characteristics of the individual at the expense of broader relational and socio-cultural factors (Jones, 2014; Jones & Denison, 2017). This has led to a number of calls for more sociological understandings of career transition in elite level sport specifically (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017), as well as sports work more generally (e.g. Gale, Ives, Potrac & Nelson, in press; Roderick, Smith & Potrac, 2017). Previously, Jones and Denison (2017) considered the culturally prescribed sporting experiences and relationships that professional football allowed their participants, where players found it difficult to switch off from the 'close-knit', 'bubble' environment; something that had a negative impact on their eventual retirement. These researchers suggested that players became docile, conforming bodies throughout their entire careers; whereby "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). In a complementary manner, Hickey and Roderick (2017) highlighted the way in which athletes manage their identities to explain how understandings of career transitions are linked to social audiences and whether athletes' dramatically realize and legitimize future possible selves.

Despite the welcome advances provided by Jones and Denison (2017) and Hickey and Roderick (2017), there is much to be gained from exploring how athletes manage their multiple identities (and relations with others) during and after their sporting careers. For example, while the athletes in Hickey and Roderick's (2017) study referred to multiple identities in relation to different social audiences, the focus of their study was on participants that had experienced a career transition away from a club or from football. Arguably, greater consideration could be given to how these identities (e.g. being a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, or a friend) and relationships with others play out during multiple in-career transitions. Such inquiry could facilitate more detailed and nuanced understandings of the ways in which sports work is both socially constructed and relational in nature (Blustein, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Schultheiss, Watts, Sterland & O'Neill, 2011). Conceptualizing sports work or employment as a relational act signifies that every interaction, experience and decision is interpreted, influenced and shaped by relationships whereby they "are not simply the expression of individual agency, but are rooted in interactions with a broad array of external influences" (Blustein, 2011, p. 1). Indeed, while it is the athlete who experiences these transitions, it would be folly to suggest that they experience them as an individual; instead they are experienced and interpreted by social agents who are embedded within an intricate web of social networks (Crossley, 2011). Unfortunately, despite some exceptions (e.g. Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2013; Roderick, 2014; Potrac, Mallett, Greenough, & Nelson, 2017), there remains a dearth of literature that specifically explores career transition in sport from a relational perspective (Jones & Denison, 2017; Roderick, 2006b).

In this study, cyclical, in-depth interviews were used to explore the participants' understandings of a) how their cultural understanding of the professional football environment and employment trends affected how they approached their careers and b) how social relations in their personal lives influenced their career decisions and associated transitions in

professional football. As such, this study sought to contribute new knowledge to the sociology of sport work which a) illuminates some of the paradoxes between self-interest and feeling connected to others and b) charts how transitions tied to professional and personal lives may influence career trajectories. We believe that this approach has much to offer the sociology of sports work, especially in terms of understanding how identities have multiple aspects that are ceaselessly reworked and negotiated in and through social interaction (Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Jenkins, 2014; Roderick, 2006b).

Methodology

Sampling

Criterion-based and network sampling techniques were used for the study (Patton, 2002; Small, 2009). Individuals were deemed eligible to participate if they a) had played professional football for a period longer than five years, and b) were no longer involved in the professional game. For the purposes of this study, a professional footballer was defined as somebody who had played the sport in a 'full-time' capacity and received a salary for doing so. The three participants identified for the study were previous teammates of the principal author. Discussions were held with each participant regarding the nature of the study, their prospective participation and the ethical implications of their involvement. Following institutional ethical approval, each participant was informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Similarly, each participant agreed to the interviews being audio-taped, assured that his identity would remain only known to the authors and that access to the interview tapes would be restricted to him and the research team (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Purdy, 2014). A background of each participant is presented below under respective pseudonyms.

At the time of the study, Adam was a 40-year old, former professional footballer who had previously played in all four divisions of the Football League. While Adam played overseas briefly, the majority of his career was spent in the English Football League where he transferred

between clubs on ten occasions. Adam described himself as a company director and his working life coalesced around his two self-employed businesses. Having been through ill-tempered divorce proceedings, Adam had no contact with his two sons from the marriage and currently lived with his fiancée. Jay was a 31-year old, former professional footballer who started his career as a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) scholar in League One and, following a total of eight transfers, finished his playing career in semi-professional (part-time) football. As a successful businessman and company director, Jay had recently married and was expecting his first child at the time of the final interview. Finally, Joe was a 39-year old, who had spent the majority of his career playing in League One, despite also playing in the Championship. Throughout his career, Joe transferred between clubs on seven occasions and, towards the end of his career, made the move into semi-professional football. As a married father of three daughters, Joe was also employed at a local supermarket.

Procedure and Method

The principal author conducted a total of 24 interviews; seven with Jay, eight with Joe and nine with Adam. Each interview ranged between 60 and 120 minutes (mean length of 93 minutes) and totalled 37 hours of audible data. Data collection depended upon a number of factors, including the time that each participant had available, the progress made during each interview and the ability to obtain and pursue greater understandings of their transitional experiences (Merriam, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interviews were held at times and locations that suited the participants and were conducted in a comfortable and relaxed environment (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These interviews were based around a) the participants' career timeline, b) the reasons for transferring between clubs, c) key career/life events and d) their networks of social relations inside and outside of each club setting. This provided a suitable framework to co-construct meaning that we attributed to the participants' transitional experiences (Howell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

While semi-structured interviews were employed as the method of data collection, these were guided by a combination of generative (Tracy, 2013) and directive (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013) questions and arguably occupied varying positions on a continuum between 'relatively-structured' and 'relatively-unstructured' semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). Generative questions were non-directive, non-threatening queries that developed rather than dictated the course of the interview (Tracy, 2013). These included tour questions (e.g. "what did transferring between clubs mean to you?"), timeline questions (e.g. "what events led to your departure from the club?") and behavioural questions (e.g. "how did you feel/react?"). In contrast, close-ended, directive questions structured and directed the interview, such as "did the manager make the decision to release you from your contract?" and "is that what you wanted to happen?" A number of probes were also used throughout the interview process to elicit richer insights (Seale, 2018). These included clarification probes (Patton, 2015), elaboration probes (Merriam, 2014) and detailed oriented probes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Clarification probes, such as "would you just describe that again for me?" were utilised to check our understanding of the participants' stories and to further explain anything that was unclear. Elaboration probes were used to further expand responses, such as requesting an example of a particular experience or questioning why something had happened (Merriam, 2014). Finally, detailed oriented probes enabled us to focus questions around the people involved or the time that events occurred (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Throughout the interviews, the principal author shared some of his own transitional experiences in an attempt to foster a trusting environment while eliciting rich and meaningful data (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). He also engaged in active listening to promote depth and complexity to the participants' stories (Josselson, 2013). In acknowledging the relational dimensions of data generation perspective, he sought to *move with* the participants in the metaphoric resemblance of a dance (Josselson, 2013). While earlier interviews necessitated

more questioning to eliminate any awkward silences, the free-flowing nature of the latter interviews suggested that the participants had developed their own trust and rapport and felt at ease in their surroundings (Purdy, 2014). Similarly, the participants' responses in the latter interviews evidenced an increased relational understanding through their links to multiple social networks and how each affected, and was affected by, the other(s) without being prompted. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure a complete record of the data.

Iterative Analysis

Analysis, interpretation and representation of the data were a continuous part of the research process itself and not distinct or separate entities (e.g. Sparkes, 2002; Taylor, 2014). Both the data collection and data analysis phases of the study were mutually recursive and dynamic processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An iterative approach to data collection and analysis enabled the moving back and forth between data and theory in order to raise further questions or gain an enhanced understanding (Taylor, 2014). This approach provided an emic or emerging reading of the data while also considering existing explanations and theories to make sense of the data from an etic perspective (Tracy, 2013). In keeping with Tracy's (2013) illustration of iterative analysis, two cycles of analysis ran simultaneously. Firstly, each interview transcript was 'coded' to identify any emerging themes; where the use of highlighter pens enabled categories to be developed that were both meaningful and that would help to answer the research questions (Merriam, 2014; Taylor, 2014). These categories then became the focus of subsequent interviews, where additional questions and probing elicited a greater insight into participants' transitional experiences. Concurrently, the use of 'analytical memos' enabled tentative links to be established between the meaningful segments of data that had been previously categorised and various theoretical concepts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This etic analysis of the data was guided by our reading of existing social theory and also allowed us to raise further theoretically driven questions in subsequent interviews. However, it should be

noted that we entered the research process without any pre-conceived theoretical frameworks. While the writings of Bauman, Crossley and May were utilised to provide a robust analytical framework, we recognise that any data set is open to further interpretation by the reader (Huggan, Nelson & Potrac, 2015; Taylor, 2014).

Theoretical Sense-Making

The participants' transitional experiences were principally understood in relation to the theorizing of Bauman (2007, 2012, 2013), May (2011, 2013) and Crossley (2011, 2013). Through his unique social commentary of life in a neoliberal world, Bauman regarded social reality as too large, complex and various to be interpreted through rigid theoretical frameworks. Instead, he utilised a number of metaphors to 'defamiliarize the familiar' and present an alternative perspective of contemporary living (Jacobsen & Poder, 2012). Here, Bauman's sociological hermeneutics demands that the meaning of human thoughts or actions are only intelligible within their socially shaped conditions (Jacobsen & Tester, 2007). Under the umbrella metaphor of *liquid modernity*, Bauman (2012) depicted a world of uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity, where individuals are both 'in' and 'on' the market. From this perspective, individuals are not only able to consume but are regarded as a product to be consumed; a commodity (Bauman, 2012). The term 'liquid' reflects the ever-changing neoliberal backdrop, whereby, "liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape" (Bauman, 2012, p. 2). As a result, Bauman notes how the effects of globalization and, in a world obsessed with consumption and instant gratification, employees and employers should be prepared to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret in pursuit of more favourable opportunities. This metaphor provided us with a useful heuristic device to make sense of the working world of professional football, and indeed wider context of contemporary social life.

The work of May (2011, 2013) was used to make sense of the participants' place in their respective surroundings. More specifically, May's (2013) concept of *belonging* was used

to make sense of the ways the participants connected (and disconnected) to other people, relationships, places and environments. Here, May (2013) viewed the self as relational, whereby the self and society are interdependent and permeable, each being affected by the other. That is, the self "emerges in relationships with and in relation to other people" (May, 2013, p. 4). Broadly speaking, May (2013, p. 3) defined *belonging* as "the process of creating a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects" where "significant changes in our surroundings are reflected in a fluctuation in our sense of belonging". May (2013) also proposed the term '*belonging*' in opposition to 'identity'; where instead of beginning with the autonomous individual, the focus switched to the connection of individuals to one another. This interpretation enabled us to make theoretical sense of the participants' 'settling in' processes and to further understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it (Andrews, 2012). Although May (2013) connected people to places, environments and surroundings, these connections could also mirror Bauman's (2012) consideration of *liquid* surroundings given their constant fluctuation and potential for change.

The aforementioned liquid surroundings were regarded as an individualizing force, one where precariousness seemingly encouraged individual survival in the style of "everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost" (Bauman, 2007, p. 14). Here, Bauman (2007) utilised metaphors of the *gamekeeper* (i.e. to defend and preserve the 'natural' order), the *gardener* (i.e. constant care and attention of wanted/unwanted plants) and the *hunter* (i.e. not worried about the overall balance of things) to describe the world's changing priorities. Indeed, Bauman (2007, p. 100) suggested that, "we are all hunters now…and called or compelled to act as hunters do" whereby "the sole task hunters pursue is another 'kill', big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity". In keeping with the musings of a liquid modern world, we regarded hunting and, more specifically survival as "the ultimate proof of fitness" (Bauman, 2003, p.

88). The *hunter* metaphor provided us with an insightful lens to analyse the participants' thought processes and decision-making strategies and enabled us to make sense of self-interest from a sociological perspective. Rather than focusing on psychological tendencies of greed or narcissism, we believe that *hunting* provided greater emphasis on the participants' behaviours in relation to their interpretations of the demands and realities of their social networks.

The work of Bauman (2007, 2012) and May (2011, 2013) was supplemented with Crossley's (2011, 2013) *relational sociology* to make sense of the participants' multiple identities and associated social networks. This analysis enabled us to explore how the participants' transitional decisions, experiences and sense–making processes were influenced by the actions, desires, intentions, and interpretations of significant others in their various networks of social relations. Where May (2013) replaced the term identity with *belonging*, Crossley (2011) argued that the forming and re-forming of identities occur through interaction. Indeed, we agreed with Crossley's (2013, p. 125) suggestion that "[t]he behaviour of the individual can only be rendered intelligible and explained, methodologically, if we remain alert to his or her location within a network of relations and interactions". Through his thought-provoking analysis of the social world, Crossley (2011, p. 2) argued that rather than being individual agents, we are always "agents-in-relation". Here, Crossley (2011, p.180) noted how social relations "enable and constrain action" in such a way that "roles and identities are not 'about' the individual but rather about their relations to others". Interestingly for us, then, this enabled our analysis of the participants' transitions to shift from themselves as individuals to their multiple social networks and account for the multitude of competing roles and identities that were mutually interdependent on relationships.

The final metaphor used to interpret the participants' narratives was the notion of *pointillist time* (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). Underpinning Bauman's *liquid modernity* is what he defined as "a renegotiation of the meaning of time" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 143).

This renegotiation of time reflected the world's obsession with speed and immediacy (Tomlinson, 2007) and suggested that, similar to a pointillist painting, time has now been "broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 143). *Pointillist time* supported Bauman's (2012, p. xvi) comparison of life in a liquid modern world to "walking in a minefield: everyone knows an explosion might happen at any moment and in any place, but no one knows when the moment will come and where the place will be". The *pointillist time* metaphor provided us with an alternative sociological interpretation of why career paths are rarely (if ever) linear in nature (Debois et al., 2012). More specifically, this metaphor enabled us to map the participants' career trajectories with 'explosions' that occurred in their personal lives and the knock-on effect these had on their professional lives and, indeed, vice-versa. Through our engagement with *pointillist time*, we were able to consider how different the participants' careers may have been and how their careers and personal lives were interdependent. From our perspective, transitions were not solely individual, cognitive or psychological experiences. Rather, they were experienced and understood in relation to the participants' multiple identities, the specific social networks in which they were embedded, and their understandings of the wider social and economic context in which these were grounded. Indeed, the combination of these complementary sense-making frameworks allowed us to locate and understand athlete transition better than anyone could alone.

Findings and Analysis

Our analysis of the interview data led to the construction of two interrelated themes. The first focused on the participants' understanding of their precarious working conditions. Here, the participants craved a sense of belonging and a need to feel part of the team environment. Paradoxically, the participants simultaneously recognised the need to think and act in particular

ways to survive and thrive as a professional footballer. Despite attempts to maintain or enhance their positions, the second theme addressed how the participants were not fully in control of events in both their personal and working lives. In this respect, their multiple networks of social relations affected, and was affected by their respective life-courses. A discussion of each topic is presented below.

Uncertain employment: The paradox of wanting to be accepted by one's competition

Throughout the interviews, Adam, Joe and Jay shared a collective understanding of what it meant to be a professional footballer. Seemingly inherent within the confines of professional football changing rooms was an underlying belief that the environment oozed insecurity and uncertainty (Roderick, 2006a; Roderick & Schumacker, 2017). The unpredictability of the job role became evident through repeated stories of injuries or managerial sackings alongside unexpected events that immediately changed the complexion of the players' careers (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012; Roderick, 2006b). The participants appeared to learn quickly about "the uncertainty of the marketplace, the limited tenure of average contracts…and the constant threat of workplace injury and ageing" (Roderick, 2006a, p. 334), as the following extracts demonstrated:

> I'd gone from being on the fringe of signing a new and much improved two-year deal for a manager and club that I loved to being offered a reduced contract and all because the club had gone into administration and the manager was sacked…but football is like that, everything is so unpredictable and uncertain. It was now going to be a month-to-month contract and knowing what football is like, I knew that inevitably there'd be a little knee injury around the corner and so I felt very vulnerable…I didn't know how long I'd stay fit and so I was sh***ing myself. (Jay)

> I was worried because out of the blue the collapse of ITV Digital meant that nobody had any money, clubs were going into administration and it seemed like a nightmare situation

for everyone involved. There was probably a list of 800 players in the same boat but it was like that every year…that was part and parcel of the job, I suppose. (Adam)

The participants' understanding of their precarious working conditions arguably reflects Bauman's (2012) discussion of *liquid modernity*. Despite being at different stages of their career, Jay's and Adam's examples suggested that whether a young professional or veteran in the game, the conditions were the same. The participants in this study regarded their employment as a series of short-term projects or episodes and pieced together what appeared 'patch work' careers that were developed with little more than a short-term view on their ever-changing positions in the professional football context (Bauman, 2005). While these may correspond to similar findings in the transition literature (e.g. Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b), the use of Bauman's (2012) *liquid modernity* has provided an alternative sociological perspective to make sense of the precariousness that pervaded participants' workplace contexts. Bauman's (2012) metaphor encourages us to 'defamiliarize the familiar' (Jacobsen & Poder, 2012), as we begin to visualise the inconsistency of liquid and how this helps to make sense of the professional footballing field. Consistent with Bauman's writings on the topic, the participants in this study recognised the inherent uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity associated with the workplace.

Based on their reading of insecure and uncertain working conditions, the participants stressed a need to feel worthy of their place in their respective team environments. This need accentuated when the participants transferred between clubs, where they hoped to 'settle in' (and be accepted) as quickly as possible. Each changing room of new teammates provided Adam, Jay and Joe with social challenges, as Jay and Adam reflected upon:

I learned very early on that the first week or so of anything new is daunting…you know, you're of your comfort zone because everything is new and you don't know anyone…but

> if you keep your head down, you know, speak when you're spoken to…eventually, you get to know everyone and you gradually get yourself bedded in. (Jay)
>
> I remember when I just signed for [name of club] and I had six hours on a bus to [name of club] when I didn't know anybody…I could see everyone whispering when they sat down, you know, 'who the f**ks that' kind of thing and it was just a strange way to meet your new teammates…the nerves come back, you wonder whether you've made the right decision and what they're all going to be like but I'd been through it before and it was just part of it [the transition]. I knew that I'd be having a laugh with 'em all the week after. (Adam)

While the participants were eager to settle into their new environments as quickly as possible, this did not always happen; these 'settling in' periods varied in length. The following examples demonstrated how Joe settled in to some environments easier than others. Interestingly, the first was during Jay's second year as a professional while the second was when he was regarded a more established professional. These examples highlighted that the settling in process was challenging regardless of the stage of career:

> I took my top off and hung it on a peg and I just remember [name of player], who was like the senior pro…he said 'f**k me, have you just come out of prison'…I've got a few tattoo's and I'm no male model so when he shouted that out it was great 'cos it broke the ice…all of the other lads were laughing and I just laughed along with 'em…to say I was relieved is an understatement…and that was it from then on…I was one of them. (Joe)
>
> I was busting my balls and was still 20 yards behind the last man…there was only one other player who was on my Richter-Scale and everyone else was just ridiculous…and I just thought, f***ing hell, this is a massive step up… at the end of that training session I began to question whether I was actually up to that level and doubted whether I was good

enough to be at a club like [name of club]…I never felt like part of the furniture really. (Joe)

This extract arguably reveals how Joe created a sense of identification with his prospective teammates and how he subsequently gauged his sense of *belonging* (May, 2013). In this respect, Joe did not experience his transitions as an autonomous individual but, rather, in relation to his respective team environments (May, 2013). Indeed, these contrasting transitions evidenced the significance of the team environment and the part played by others. Only through interaction with prospective teammates were the participants able to evaluate the success of their transitions and gauge the expectations associated with their role (Crossley, 2011). Here, Adam noted:

> …the first time I am in that dressing room, gulp! It was ridiculous….I was shaking, literally shaking…these were top, top, top players, stars everywhere you looked…it was kind of surreal and I had to pinch myself that it was happening. But then I spoke to [name of player] and [name of player] and before long it became second nature to share a changing room with guys like these. (Adam)
>
> A few of us would go out all of the time…but [name of player] was a first team regular and was out with us all the time…so it was like, if he can do it then why can't I? Girls were practically throwing themselves at us every time we went out so we carried on going out. And the other lads [teammates] just laughed and thought we were young and living our lives. (Adam)
>
> I was p*ssed off that they'd made their mind up about my weight straight away because I lost the weight and got a six-pack within six weeks but it was too late. I felt as if everyone agreed that I wasn't fit enough or good enough…you know, where everyone groans if I give the ball away in training as if to say I'm not at their level…and that was hard to get my head around. I felt like an imposter, I guess. (Adam)

The above excerpts evidence how Adam evaluated his position in relation to his interactions with team-mates and coaching staff. Interestingly, Adam described how he soon felt 'at ease' and gave little thought to what he was doing or how he was doing it in the first two examples (May, 2011) but then, equally, never felt 'at ease' in the third example. From our perspective, Adam, and indeed Jay and Joe perceived their sense of *belonging*, or *not belonging* as a determinant of their performances in training and matches. Although previous research has noted how teammates formed a safety net of belonging (e.g. Ronkainen, Harrison & Ryba, 2014; Ryba, Stambulova & Ronkainen, 2016), the use of May's (2013) work to make sense of these findings adds credence to Roderick's (2006a) suggestion that transformations of identity are always the outcome of interaction with others. From our participants' perspectives, transition was very much a relational endeavour, where decision-making and sense-making processes played out through their interactions with others.

Despite their need to *belong* to their respective teams, the participants also described their contrasting attitude towards their 'team-mates'. This paradox became evident when the thoughts and actions associated with 'settling in' were competing with an underpinning desire to both survive and thrive that emanated from the participants' reading of the arduous employment climate in the professional footballing world. For example, Joe's confession that his teammates were also his competition evidenced their collective understanding of the team environment where their personal survival was seemingly prioritised over the needs of others (Bauman, 2003). Indeed, it became increasingly apparent that 'others' were somewhat irrelevant, as Joe and Adam noted:

> At the end of the day, it's all about yourself and people can say what they want but deep down everybody knows it…managers know it and players know it…it's dog-eat-dog and if by somebody doing well that means you're not gonna be playing or not gonna be the main man then you don't want it to happen…it's as simple as that! We [Joe's team] could

> lose any game 7-1, but if I'd scored the one then I'd be going home happy…I'd rather finish bottom of the league but score 20 goals than win the league with 4 [goals]…without a doubt…I was always desperate to keep my name on the scorer's charts that come on Sky Sports News every ten minutes 'cos it would bring a smile to my face and I knew that I'd be alright. (Joe)
>
> My goal has always been to survive…if I'm playing [first team football] then I'll survive and my life will look after itself…I went to [name of club] for the money but I still had a burning desire to survive…it wasn't something that I was desperate to do, to play abroad or to play in a foreign league again but signing a three-year deal just meant I could survive for longer. I suppose it didn't matter who the club was, where the club was or who I was playing with as long as I was surviving. (Adam)

Given the participants' understanding of their precarious working climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that they adopted a ruthless approach to their careers that reflects Bauman's (2007) discussion of the *hunter*. Indeed, only through the participants' reading of their socio-cultural environment was *hunting* regarded as a necessity to survive and a better option than "relegation to the ranks of the game" (Bauman, 2007, p. 100).

These findings have illuminated the relational dimensions of career transition in professional football, where the decision-making and sense-making processes of the participants stemmed from their readings of their immediate interactions with others and their subcultural understanding of professional football. Here, the participants appeared to accept that transition would be a regular feature of their precarious working conditions and reflected the underpinning tenets of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012). In light of these readings, the paradox of their career transitions became evident through their need to establish a sense of *belonging* (May, 2013) whilst continuing to *hunt* (Bauman, 2007). In this respect, the teammates that helped the participants to 'settle in' were soon regarded as other *hunters*

(Bauman, 2007) who were equally striving to survive and thrive in the competitive professional football environment.

It's not all about Football!

The participants recognised that being a professional footballer was just one aspect of their lives. Alongside their occupation as professional footballer, the participants fulfilled multiple roles and responsibilities, including that of partner, son, brother, father or friend. These multiple identities located the participants within multiple social networks and provided a more complex understanding of their decision-making and sense-making processes. As the following examples demonstrate, the participants' decision-making and experiences were not only informed by their understanding of the workplace but also by their social networks and relationships outside of work:

> I was adamant that I had to capitalise on my good form and move but it was a difficult decision for [name of partner]. We had countless difficult discussions about moving and about leaving family and friends for the first time but in the end, our family and our futures came first. As it happened, the move to [name of club] was a nightmare because I never played and [name of partner] hated being by herself with the little one so we weren't there long. (Adam)

> Signing for [name of club] was an easy decision because my missus would be near her family and I could spend a bit of time with my mates again. But time had moved on…I suppose I was 28, I had a three-year old and a one year old and so my life was now training, kids and sleep…As it ended up, I wasn't particularly bothered about anything else to be honest. (Adam)

> If I was younger and single, I would definitely have signed for [name of club] or jumped straight in and signed for [name of club] but I suppose because I was with [name of

> partner] we wanted to make the right decision together…not only that but by moving to [name of club], I was able to start my degree at [name of University]. (Jay)
>
> I was feeling sorry for myself and couldn't believe they'd (uncle and great uncle) gone. Going to the funerals and meeting up with everybody kind of highlighted the fact that football is important but not as important as my family and so when the opportunity came up to sign for [name of club] it was a no brainer. There was definitely part of me, and a big part that liked the sound of being there for them after their loss, if you like. (Jay)

These examples illuminate how the participants' decisions were not solely based around their working identity but rather their multiple identities and respective social networks that were subjected to change. In this respect, decisions were tied to multiple identities that were not solely *about* the participants but *about* their (changing) relations to others (Crossley, 2011). These changes highlighted to us how the participants existed in "historically specific circumstances…in 'positions' within networks of relations to other human beings, with the various identities, interests, interdependencies and practical engagements that such positions entail" (Crossley, 2011, p. 15). Indeed, Adam, Jay and Joe were positioned within various family, friendship and team networks throughout the duration of their careers and, subsequently, engaged in multiple social relationships that affected and were affected by each other. Although the participants' social networks appeared to change over time, there were aspects of their lives that remained fairly constant. For example, an important aspect of Joe's life was the bond that he developed with three brothers who he grew up with. These brothers provided Joe with useful advice about any footballing situation but, arguably more importantly for Joe, kept him in professional football. In his own words:

> …it's been great to have the three brothers around to take the p**s out of me all of the time and bring me back down to earth…you know, I can let my hair down when I'm with 'em kind of thing. To be a pro [professional footballer] I was living like a monk and it

> would have killed me…I needed an escape button [from football] every now and again or I'd have quit. But then when I'd had my night out I'd be back watching everything I ate or everything I did…but it was great to be able to go out with friends from school and keep in contact with 'em 'cos I didn't wanna be in some football bubble. But then I loved having a professional attitude and working mi' b*****ks off to impress the manager wherever I was at…it just depended which environment I was in I suppose. (Joe)

Joe also experienced family issues towards the end of his career. While his footballing prowess earned him several contracts that brought an element of both financial and geographical stability to his life, his priorities, and indeed career, changed when his Mum was unexpectedly diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. As Joe provided much of the intense care and support that his Mum required, he simultaneously questioned his role as a professional footballer and considered an escape from the daily scrutiny. In his own words:

> I was cut up about my Mum being ill but the intensity of training wasn't giving me the escape that I needed…I wanted to train with a smile on my face and forget about everything for a bit but instead I was worrying about making a mistake or getting bollocked. You know what football's like where they want you in on afternoons and if you lose you're in on your day off…I'd tell the kids that I'd take 'em swimming on a Wednesday but I couldn't 'cos we'd lost on the Tuesday night so I was getting p***ed off 'cos I was obviously getting no time with my Mum or Dad either…that's when I started to think full-time football was too big a commitment for me and I needed an easier life. (Joe)

Eventually, the intensity became too much for Joe and he chose to complete the remainder of his playing career in the relatively less time and emotionally demanding context of semi-professional football. Interestingly, Joe was able to take an important career decision in relation to his reading of the changing opportunities, challenges and dilemmas associated with his

family. Throughout the early stages of his career, Joe was predominantly driven by his own desire to play at the highest level and to earn as much money as he could that would simultaneously benefit his then girlfriend. In contrast, this decision between continuing as a player earning a significant wage in the second tier of English football or entering the realm of non-league football was predicated by his identities as a son and father instead of that as a footballer. Here, we would again argue that this decision was not about Joe but rather about his relations with others (Crossley, 2011). Furthermore, Joe's decision to exit full-time football may only be rendered intelligible if we remain alert to his location within multiple social networks of interaction (Crossley, 2013). Indeed, Joe poignantly described:

> …it [entering part-time football] was nothing to do with the football, it was nothing to do with money even though I still had to pay the bills and whatever else 'cos I wasn't gonna give up an 18-month contract just for nothing, but basically it was the situation I was in…I just wanted to see as much of my Mum as I could as well as helping my Dad out with everything…they'd been there for me all the way through my life and it was now my turn to be there for them. (Joe)

Joe's example also demonstrates how the participants experienced the explosions tied to walking in the minefield that is *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012). Although the unpredictability of professional football has been well documented through examples of injury, managerial sackings and changes (e.g. Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a), this study highlighted how unpredictability also extended beyond the football environment and into the participants' personal lives. Despite being unrelated to football per se, these unexpected events changed the course of the participants' playing careers. Jay transferred clubs to be nearer his aunt when his uncle and great uncle died. Joe transitioned into semi-professional football so that he could spend more time with, and care for, his mother. Consideration of *pointillist* careers may provide a more fitting representation of actual, lived careers to the transition literature.

Here, the participants' career trajectories could be understood by Bauman and Donskis' (2013 p. 143) map of *pointillist life,* inclusive of "imaginary or unfulfilled possibilities". Indeed, Adam's, Jay's and Joe's lives could each have taken countless alternative turns along the way.

Consistent with Bauman's (2007) writings, it could also be argued that the participants continued to *hunt* both inside and outside of the professional footballing nexus and in relation to their multiple social networks. While contracts and playing first team football were the participants' main *hunts* within football, the above examples arguably reflect a range of goals (read 'kills') that the participants *hunted* in their personal (read relational) lives. In line with Bauman's (2007) metaphorical analysis, we would argue that the above examples illuminate how Adam's 'game-bag' included his 'ex-missus'' happiness; Jay's 'game-bag' included being there for his aunty and great aunty and Joe's 'game-bag' included free time to spend with his children and parents. These *hunts* were based around their collective ensemble of identities that included that of father, son, partner, nephew and great nephew and not solely around their performance identity (Carless & Douglas, 2009). Importantly for us, these identities were equally, if not more, important than their identities as professional footballers and each affected, and was affected by, the other(s). It is our belief that this relational interpretation provides an alternative understanding of how transitions inside and outside of the sporting domain impact upon an athlete over time and lends support to previous suggestions that the path to excellence is rarely (if ever) a linear path (e.g. Debois et al., 2012). For us, transition is not solely about the transitioning athlete but also their relations with others within multiple social networks. These networks provide a mechanism for helping athletes to interpret their respective situations and ultimately make decisions and take actions connected to their various identities.

Conclusion

In seeking to contribute to the evolving sociological literature base investigating transition in sport (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017; Roderick, 2006b, 2013, 2014), this paper sought to explore the relational and sociocultural challenges of transition in professional football. The participants recognised that they were operating in precarious working conditions where 'anything could happen'. This understanding reflected Bauman's (2012) discussion of *liquid modernity* and mirrored the uncertain, unpredictable and insecure foundations of a neoliberal society. In recognition of their precarious working conditions, the participants were eager to establish a sense of identification with their new teammates and desired a social connection as quickly as possible. Their sense of *belonging* (May, 2013) went some way to determining the relative success of their transitions, as the participants understood their decision-making and sense-making processes in relation to their teammates and respective team environments. Paradoxically, the participants adopted selfish attitudes to their working life. Here, the participants' approach was understood in relation to Bauman's (2007) writings of the *hunter*. Unconcerned by the overall balance of things (Bauman, 2007), as *hunters*, the participants sourced more favourable working conditions including extended contracts and playing first team games. Furthermore, the results have shown how the participants established a sense of *belonging* (or not *belonging*) to both personal and professional environments. For example, Joe developed a strong sense of *belonging* to the three brothers who he grew up with and his new teammates (following the 'banter' surrounding his tattoos) yet never felt part of the club where his performances and attributes as a player appeared inferior to the rest of his new team.

Importantly, the participants in this study also recognised that they were more than just a professional footballer and occupied various roles and positions, including that of son, friend, husband and father. The working and non-working identities of the participants were

interconnected; each affected and was affected by the other. Here, Crossley's (2011) *relational sociology* provided us with an alternative reading of the participants' multiple identities through their connections to others. This relational interpretation suggested that the roles and identities of the participants were not *about* them, but *about* their relationships with others and their ever-changing positions in various networks of social relations. Indeed, we suggested that Joe's decision to exit professional football was only rendered intelligible when he was located in his multiple networks of interaction (Crossley, 2013). While a growing body of research has considered transition as a relational process (e.g. Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2014; Ryba et al., 2015), these findings have advanced existing understanding by interpreting multiple identities using sociological theorizing.

Bauman and Donskis' (2013) writing on *pointillist time* also enabled us to interpret the unexpected events that occurred in the various social networks of the participants' lives. Alongside instances of injury, managerial sackings and administration, the participants' career trajectories were equally affected by family deaths and illness. These events changed the direction of the participants' career's and suggests that significant others may play prominent roles in the participants pursuit of possible future selves (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Here, it was argued that the participants engaged in *hunting* (Bauman, 2007) both inside and outside of the professional lives. It was suggested that Adam's 'game-bag' included his family's happiness, Jay's 'game-bag' included emotional support and Joe's 'game-bag' included free time and that each of these were unrelated to their professional/career identity (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

This work has made a significant contribution to the sociological understanding of sports work by providing important insights into the complex, sociocultural and relational challenges associated with transition in professional sport (Roderick et al., 2017). Specifically, this work has illustrated how transition affects or is affected by the various identities of

professional sportspeople and how transitional success may be tied to more than a sporting identity. We believe that if coaches (and players) were to remain aware of the multiple challenges facing outgoing and incoming players, then their interactions could be tailored to promote and enhance their sense of *belonging* (May, 2013). Sharing stories such as Adam's, Jay's and Joe's as narrative resources within the professional footballing and coaching community may encourage people (i.e. coaches, players, and staff) to live in more socially sensitive ways. In turn, this may positively affect a person's performances, or, at least, reduce the pressure tied to a changing network of relationships within a period of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012).

It is also hoped that these findings can encourage further study into the relational and emotional dynamics of transition. For example, future inquiry could document and help us understand how networks and the bonds between social actors change, strengthen or weaken over time and inform how an athlete interprets and acts during a transitional period (Crossley, 2011). In addition, we believe that exploration into the transitional experiences of male and female managers/coaches and other stakeholders working in professional sport (e.g. physiotherapists, performance analysts, sport psychologists and strength and conditioners) would further our understanding of transition in sport more widely. That is, our focus should be on more than the athlete. We also invite researchers to consider the interconnections between embodied experience and the management of specific emotions during career transition. This has potentially much to offer in terms of better understanding the interdependence between multiple selves during transition and would respond to similar recent calls for a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions of the relationally lived experiences of sports workers (Gale et al., in press; Potrac, Smith & Nelson, 2017; Roderick et al., 2017). Here, in-depth, cyclical interviews may again be a useful approach to explore the embodied and emotional dimensions of multiple sports workers' transitions over time. Similarly, the auto-

ethnographic approach may also provide valuable insights by better capturing the embodied nature of specific emotions and how these are both understood and managed in relation to significant others and to society more generally (Gearity, 2014).

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Response to Reviewer(s)' Comments:

Reviewer: 1

Comments to the Author
I enjoyed reading this paper. I thought it was very well written and presented. Several features of the paper are commendable, but there are some issues that the authors need to address before this paper is acceptable for publication. While the number of interviewees identified was limited (three in total), I loved the fact that the authors engaged in a number of repeated interviews. For this reason my anticipation of greater emotional depth and insight – in concert with a deeper level of analysis and understanding – was very (perhaps too) high. I thought as readers we might have been treated to rare stories and personal comprehensions, which integrated players' wider networks of interdependencies: sadly, I feel that my hopes were a little dashed in this respect.

Thank you for your comments. The points raised above have helped us to reflect on the original draft and make amendments that we feel have further enhanced our paper.

So my main issues are as follows:

1. Even though I feel there has been dedicated empirical research undertaken, I did not feel the data segments selected offered an insight we have not already read in other cited sources. In the light of the extent of research undertaken with individual interviewees, I felt the data segments included should have offered something more original, or demonstrated a more sophisticated / profound depth of insight. I wonder whether this is an outcome of the nature of the repeated interviews undertaken. While the description of the questioning was sound, I would like to know more about the way (or if) the questions posed changed over fieldwork time – with familiarity and a growing trust. Presumably, the approach taken for the first couple of interviews compare differently with the latter interviews. If this is true, what types of issues and insights were discussed latterly that contrasted to initial interviews? How did a relational approach to this project support the process of data collection?

Having agreed with your comment, we have tried to evidence how trust was developed with the participants and how the questions and conversation changed over time. From Page 7 line 20 to Page 8 line 6, an attempt has been made to provide a more detailed insight into how we attempted to develop trust. The relational nature of the interviews has also been considered using the work of Josselson (2013) as well as how the questions and discussions contrasted over time.

2. I have no idea how the paper's current title ' People, Paradox and Me' relates to the abstract and paper. As it stands this title is confusing and is not obviously related to the paper presented. Could / should this be revised?

We agree with this comment and have changed the title accordingly. Please see change of title

3. I think the authors exaggerate their theoretical claims. For example, the authors state, "this relational interpretation provides a more sophisticated understanding of how multiple transitions inside and outside of the sporting domain impact upon an athlete over time".

In agreement with your comments, this statement has now been removed.

While the authors offer up an outline of three principle perspectives (without really explaining how the three approaches will be 'amalgamated'), I do not feel they are employed rigorously to help organize and interpret the data set in a fashion that offers analytical originality: in short a relational analysis and understanding feels absent. So, the authors might consider the following points:

(i) I do not feel I have an understanding of how these data reflect a relational comprehension. I would like the analysis to better reflect the sense of the wider networks of interdependencies and how the enabling and constraining features of these networks change over time (a point I shall come back to).

When we returned to our manuscript, we agreed that the relational nature of our findings and associated analyses could have been clearer. However, we believe that the three frameworks are not only complementary but also necessary to understand their experiences; a point that we make on page 12 lines 18-20. We have also attempted to make our interpretations of a relational analysis more explicit by making regular reference to the nature of decision-making and sense-making processes and how these were tied to networks of interaction. For example, on page 12 lines 15-18, page 17 lines 10-12, page 18 lines 17-20 and page 23 lines 19-23, attempts are made to highlight what we consider a relational understanding to be. Similarly, on Page 21 line 24-page 22 line 9 – an addition has been made that considers decision-making and sense-making processes as relational endeavours. Finally, on page 30 lines 9-14, we have stated that this is not a definitive relational analysis but rather an attempt to promote further discussion.

(ii) I do not feel the data segments reflect 'multiple transitions inside and outside the domain'. Empirical examples of these work transitions, and how they contrast, needs to be pointed out to readers more explicitly in the narrative.

In agreement with this comment, we have tried to improve the narrative of our results by pointing out stages of career and associated social networks. Some examples of these include: page 14 lines 4-6 (consideration of stage of career) Page 15 lines 12-15 (additions made in relation to stage of career), Page 16 lines 6 to 7 – addition made to contrasting transitions; page 20 lines 8-11 (inclusion of 'subjected to change' and changing relations); page 21 line 24 to page 22 line 9 (consideration of Joe's changing circumstances)

(iii) I do not feel that these data reflect a sense of time and change. I think the authors should reflect on these points and better substantiate these conceptual points, or alternatively jettison those ideas that are less well supported by data.

Again, we agreed with these comments and have attempted to reflect the sense of time and change in the examples provided above (section ii). In addition, the change to data segments on page 19-20 is an attempt to show how the participants' dependencies changed over time and how their personal situations had changed.

4. A key issue for me is that, from reading this paper, I do not feel I understand sufficiently well what the distinguishing features of a relation analysis are. Is an understanding of wider networks of social relations, and the dependencies bound up in this, achievable when you are only interviewing from the perspective of players (i.e., approaching career transitioning from a single point of view)? Surely there is more to a relation approach than asking players to talk about their family and friends?

For us, a relational analysis is not about getting more people's perspective of an athlete's transitions but, rather, is an attempt to move away from the cognitive, psychological understanding/theorising of much previous research by focusing on broader relational and socio-cultural factors. In this respect, we feel that transitions were not experienced or interpreted from within but rather in relation to the participants' readings of their socio-cultural environments and their respective locations within multiple social networks; a point we have attempted to make more explicitly in the abstract and at the end of the Theoretical Sense-Making section. Further relational analyses might give greater credence to the network analysis of players, coaches, etc, careers and associated transitions inside and outside of work – something that we suggest in the conclusion section of the paper. In this regard, we acknowledge that this paper presents an initial step towards the development of a relational understanding of this topic area.

5. Would it be fair to argue that the authors have attempted to employ too many theoretical / conceptual approaches? Bauman and Donkis' pointillist time is mention only sparingly and I am not at all clear what this notion adds to understanding of transitions. A similar point might also be made in relation to May and the idea of 'belonging'. It would be worth the authors reflecting on what the sum total of their conceptual ideas add to a relational understanding of player transitions. Again, I am relatively familiar with the work cited here, and I am not clear what distinguishes a relational approach or how this has led to a level of understanding of transitions not previously achieved.

Similar to the points made above, we feel that our start and end point has been away from the athlete and towards their interactions and relationships with their multiple social networks and socio-cultural environments. Each of the sense-making frameworks enable us to offer a different but complimenting (relational) interpretation of the data. Pointillist time provides an alternative perspective to the transition literature, where multiple transitions (inside and outside of athletic careers) are possible at any one time. Similarly, May's 'belonging' shifts away from more psychological terms, such as self-esteem or self-confidence and towards more social and relational interpretations. Again, as stated on page 12 lines 18-20, we believe that the combination provides a more detailed interpretation than one would alone.

6. Finally, is this subject matter relevant for this pedagogically-oriented academic journal? Of course the editors have the final word here but there is no attempt by the authors to link this topic to an aspect of education, sport and society.

We feel the article is correctly placed and have tried to include more transition papers that have previously been published in this journal. While we feel there was already a good link between our analyses and sport and society, we have also amended our conclusion to make a stronger link to what our findings may mean for future players/coaches (Page 26)

Reviewer: 2

Comments to the Author
Thank you for your submission and hard work on this paper. Overall, it is well-written and provides a clear rationale for how this study advanced the field's understanding of athletic transitions in sport. I have a few instances of minor feedback that are rather direct, and a few points that are more to stimulate the authors' reflections on how they might edit the paper based on my reading. There is one substantial point about the presentation of "themes"

which comes off as not capturing the richness of the participants' lived experiences or addressing the research questions.

Firstly, thank you very much for your kind comments and suggestions which have certainly been useful in trying to improve our manuscript.

First few pages and then on p. 4 line 1-3—all of the introduction and specifically this passage has been gender neutral and here male-centered. I think most of the research cited thus far too has focused on men's experiences. Could you at least mention something about gender (and other socially constructed identities), which would strengthen the sociocultural argument?

In light of your comments, we agreed with this and have made a few attempts to correct this. For example, on Page 2 lines 8-13 and line 16 – additions have been made in relation to sports and gender. Similarly, on Page 4 line 7 – mother, wife and daughter have been added added. The conclusion also tries to encourage further research into both male and female athletes on page 26 lines 14.

About pages 7-9: Can you say a little more about the etic perspective and the interpretation that was both emic and etic? A bit more clarity or transparency of what was done and how the researchers negotiated sense making of the data in itself and/or used the multiple theorists to make sense of the day. Maybe just a sentence or few.

This was very much a dialogue between the research team where we collectively identified and discussed the possible utility of various theoretical concepts. Page 8 line 23 to page 9 line 1– an addition has been made in relation to our etic perspective

p. 9 In describing May's work, words like place, surroundings, and environment are mentioned, and then on line 22 you mention "liquid surroundings." I find myself wondering what the difference is between these terms and if greater specificity or precision would help.

Page 10 line 12-15 – an addition has been made to link May to Bauman

p. 9 line 22 I think a comma, not a semicolon, is called for after "force" because that latter part is not a standalone sentence.

Page 10 line 16 – semicolon has been replaced by a comma

p. 10 In relation to the hunter metaphor, it might be worthwhile to mention how this provides a greater emphasis on the sociocultural than say narcissism, greed, or selfishness as we might find in psychology.

We agree with this comment. On Page 11 lines 3-5 – addition made to relational perspective

p. 10 You draw upon Crossley for "identity" but just said May eschewed identity. Should you reconcile this difference?

This is a good point and something that we have tried to address on Page 11 line 11-12 where an addition has been made to recognise the different approaches

p. 11 line 17 sentence starting, “We believe the…” The sentence is fine, albeit too obvious, but if you could state this with the plausible benefits named it would be stronger. In other words, of course you believe this and I don’t disagree, but state it such so that you name what it offers. You could also delete the sentence because as-is it doesn’t add much.

Page 12 line 17-19 – “We believe the….” has been deleted and replaced with stronger rationale

p. 11 When I read the abstract and the two themes listed there, I thought that it was a bit vague and more like the research questions were restated. On lines 22-23, I find that the themes of sense of belonging or need to feel part of the team to be the “answer” to the research questions, and then there is more explained here. My point—I don’t think abstract captures the richness of your data and interpretation. Then you say that a discussion of each topic will follow, but the headings don’t match the themes per se. So, I encourage you to revisit naming the themes, the abstract, and the connection to what’s presented in the findings.

We agreed with this comment and have amended the abstract to better reflect the richness of the data/interpretation

Page 13 line 6 a change has been made to the sub-heading to better reflect the theme

Bold font for the names of participants in the findings seems unwarranted.

Names changed to normal font throughout the findings

p. 13 line 12-18 Instead of just naming that a different theoretical lens led to a different interpretation, could you say what the difference is and specifically why we should care about this new interpretation through Bauman?

Taking this comment on board, we have highlighted why Bauman is different on Page 14 lines 13-15.

p. 16 Oh, this is interesting here now with the first mention of the “selfish self.” I’m thinking back to my earlier point about narcissism in neoliberal times and not psychologizing your data. This gets taken up a bit in the discussion, but you may want to consider the whole of this issue—the connection of the social and individual—when you edit.

Thank you for this comment, as it has encouraged us to consider our choice of wording to reflect a social more than psychological analysis (e.g. Page 17 lines 17- 21 has had a rewording of the section to reflect social more than psychological). Another example is on page 18 lines 17-20 where an addition has been made about relational dimensions.

p. 22 line 22 I suggest not italicizing “lived” because it’s not a theoretical concept like pointillist, so it’s a bit confusing to read. If you want to emphasize how this interpretation resonates with the reality of a lived experience, then I think it does that fine or you could edit slightly to make your point more obvious.

Page 22 line 25 – removed the italics for “lived"

p. 25 line 14-18 First two sentences are obvious and have already been stated. I suggest deleting and begin with “This work has…” which states the affirmation or positive of what you’ve done.

Page 25 line 22 onwards – deleted and amended.

Abstract

This paper addresses the ~~relational~~ social and relational dimensions of player transitions in professional football. Data were generated through a total of 24 cyclical, in-depth interviews with three former players. The interview transcripts were subjected to emic and etic readings, with Bauman's metaphors of liquid modernity, hunters and ~~,~~ pointillist time, May's theorization of belonging and Crossley's relational ~~sociology~~ theorising providing the primary heuristic framework. Our analysis led to the ~~generation~~ construction of two interconnected themes. These were a) the paradox ~~between~~of feeling~~ing~~ wanted by others during workplace transitions and, simultaneously, ~~the desire to survive and thrive how the participants interpreted and subsequently acted in their working conditions and and~~seeing these others as threats to their career longevity and b) ~~the~~ the interplay between the participants' multiple identities, relations with others outside of the workplace, and ~~and how these changed over time~~their career choices ~~how events in their professional and personal lives affected their career trajectories~~. Importantly, our findings highlighted that~~From our relational perspectiv~~player ~~e,~~ transitions were not tied to the personality traits or characteristics of the individual but rather to broader ~~relational~~social and ~~socio-~~cultural factors. Indeed, ~~mportantly,~~ the ~~this study revealed how the~~ participants' experienced and interpreted their transitions through the reading of their respective ~~sociocultural environments~~social landscapes and their changing ~~location in~~understandings of the multiple social networks that comprised them~~.precarious working conditions created a paradox between feeling wanted and adopting a selfish and highly individualised outlook to their respective careers~~. ~~This study also highlights how the participants' respective transitions were tied to multiple identities (e.g. son, father, partner) and respective social networks.~~ Based on these findings, we believe there is much to gain from the exploration of multiple identities in sports work and how these play out and are experienced over time.

Key words: Transition, multiple identities, belonging, professional football, sports work

Introduction

During their careers, athletes experience a number of transitions. These ~~relate to~~include moving from junior to senior playing status, injury, transferring between clubs and~~d d, indeed,~~ retirement (Jones & Denison, 2017; Park, Lavallee & Tod, 2013; Roderick, 2006a). Previous research has, for example, explored athletes' entry into sport (e.g. Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008), within-career transitions (e.g. Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012; Roderick, 2006a, 2013; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and de-selection and retirement (e.g. Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017) in a variety of sports. In addition to professional football, these have included tennis (e.g. Stier, 2007), golf (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009), rugby (e.g. McKenna & Thomas, 2007), gymnastics (e.g. Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), Australian Football League (Hickey & Kelley, 2008) and fencing (Debois et al., 2012). Importantly, such inquiry has recognised how these various career ~~These~~ transitions can involve significant personal challenges for male and female athletes. These can include experiencing a complex and powerful range of emotions, ~~a complex range of emotions, a~~ shift~~sing~~ in professional and private identities~~y~~, as well as ~~and a~~ changes in social relationships and networks ~~orks that may~~

provide significant personal challenges (Brown, Webb, Robinson & Cotgreave, 2018; Park et al., 2013). Previous research has explored the entry into sport (e.g. Bruner, Munroe-Chandler & Spink, 2008), within-career transitions (e.g. Debois, Ledon, Argiolas & Rosnet, 2012; Roderick, 2006a, 2013; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004) and de-selection, or retirement (e.g. Brown & Potrac, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017). Similarly, studies have investigated a range of sports, including tennis (e.g. Stier, 2007), golf (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009), rugby (e.g. McKenna & Thomas, 2007), gymnastics (e.g. Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), Australian Football League (Hickey & Kelley, 2008) and fencing (Debois et al., 2012)Combined, such inquiry has significantly - in an attempt to enhanced our understanding of the sociocultural challenges that both male and female athletes face can encounter during, as well as after, their sporting careers. That said, although it is the athlete who experiences these transitions, it would be folly to suggest that they experience them as an individual but, rather, as somebody embedded within an intricate web of social networks (Crossley, 2011).

To date, pPsychological theorising has been at the forefront of the explanations of much previous athlete transition research (Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Here, for example, the readiness for retirement has been found to contain various psychological components, including cognitive, motivational, and affective changes (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004; Park, Tod & Lavallee, 2012). IndeedFor example, Park et al. (2012) mapped athletes' retirement to the pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance stages of the transtheoretical model (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984) and found that self-confidence and decisional balance (the pros and cons) affected the athletes' exit from sport. Similarly, Wylleman and Lavallee's (2004) developmental model focused on the normative transitions faced by athletes (i.e. initiation, developmental, mastery and discontinuation) as they progressed through their careers. While these researchers gave consideration to the athletic, psychological, psycho-social and academic level of athletes, the

model provided insufficient information and placed athletes definitively in a developmental stage (Debois et al., 2012; Pummell, Harwood & Lavallee, 2008). ~~Here~~For example, while it was suggested that athletes' relationships with others (e.g., coaches, families, peers, among others) were important forms of social support deuring athletes careers and career transitions, there has been little detailed consideration ~~parents, siblings, peers and coaches were the most important support for young athletes, while partners, families and coaches play more important roles as an athlete progresses through the latter stages of their career. From a relational perspective, it would be useful to understand~~of how these various relationships play out during an athlete's ~~sporting~~ career; ~~,~~ both inside and outside of sport.

Although psychological interpretations may provide a useful analysis of how athletes cognitively navigate transitions, they focus heavily on the personality traits or characteristics of the individual at the expense of broader relational and socio-cultural factors (Jones, 2014; Jones & Denison, 2017). This has led to a number of calls for more sociological understandings of career transition in elite level sport specifically (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009; Jones & Denison, 2017), as well as sports work more generally (e.g. Gale, Ives, Potrac & Nelson, in press; Roderick, Smith & Potrac, 2017). Previously, Jones and Denison (2017) considered the culturally prescribed sporting experiences and relationships that professional football allowed their participants, where players found it difficult to switch off from the 'close-knit' 'bubble' environment; something that had a negative impact on their eventual retirement. These researchers suggested that players became docile, conforming bodies throughout their entire careers; whereby "a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved" (Foucault, 1991, p. 136). In a complementary manner, Hickey and Roderick ~~'s~~ (2017) highlighted the way which athletes manage their identities to explain how understandings of career transitions are linked to social audiences and whether they dramatically realize and legitimize future possible selves.

~~In~~Despite the welcome advances provided by Jones and Denison (2017) and Hickey and Roderick (2017), ~~moving our understanding forward,~~ there is ~~still~~ much to be gained from exploring how ~~professional footballers~~athletes manage their multiple identities (and relations with others) ~~throughout~~ during and after their sporting careers~~s and how these are interconnected~~. For example, while~~W hile~~ the athletes in Hickey and Roderick's (2017) study referred to multiple identities in relation to different social audiences, the focus of the~~ir~~is~~ study was on participants that had experienced a career transition away from a club or from football. Arguably, ~~there could be more~~greater consideration could be given to how these identities (e.g.~~,~~ being a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, or a friend) and relationships with others play out during multiple in-career transitions. ~~Being a father, a mother, a husband, a wife, a son, a daughter, or a friend may all impact a professional footballing career and, subsequently, could be further investigated to enhance our understanding of the interdependence of these identities during careers and career transition.~~

~~Although the work of and Jones and Denison (2017) and Hickey and Roderick (2017) provided some useful insights into transition from a social perspective, it could be argued that there remains a paucity of inquiry addressing how athletes navigate their way through their careers in relation to significant others. Indeed,~~Such inquiry could facilitate more detailed and nuanced understandings of the ways in which sports work is both ~~employment and work-based experiences are both~~ socially constructed and relational in nature (Blustein, 2011; Gergen, 2009; Schultheiss, Watts, Sterland & O'Neill, 2011). Conceptualizing sports work or employment as a relational act signifies that every interaction, experience and decision is interpreted, influenced and shaped by relationships whereby they "are not simply the expression of individual agency, but are rooted in interactions with a broad array of external influences" (Blustein, 2011, p. 1). Indeed, while it is the athlete who experiences these transitions, it would be folly to suggest that they experience them as an individual; instead they

are experienced and interpreted by social agents who are embedded within an intricate web of social networks (Crossley, 2011). Unfortunately, despite some exceptions ~~While the relational and emotional dimensions of sports work characterized by short-term contracts has been subject to some initial inquiry~~ (e.g. Potrac, Jones, Gilbourne & Nelson, 2013; Roderick, 2014; Potrac, Mallett, Greenough, & Nelson, 2017), ~~surprisingly,~~ there remains a dearth of literature that specifically explores career transition in sport from a relational perspective (Jones & Denison, 2017; Roderick, 2006b). ~~That said, although it is the athlete who experiences these transitions, it would be folly to suggest that they experience them as an individual but, rather, as somebody embedded within an intricate web of social networks (Crossley, 2011).~~

In this study, cyclical, in-depth interviews were used to explore the participants' understandings of a) how their cultural understanding of the professional football environment and employment trends affected how they approached their careers and b) how social relations in their personal lives influenced their career decisions and associated transitions in professional football. As such, t~~T~~his study sought to contribute new knowledge to the sociology of sport work which a) illuminates some of the paradoxes between self-interest and ~~being part of a team~~ feeling connected to others and b) charts how transitions tied to professional and personal lives may influence career trajectories. We believe that this approach has much to offer the sociology of sports work, especially in terms of understanding how ~~given that transformations of~~ identities have multiple aspects that are ceaselessly reworked and negotiated in and through social interaction ~~y are always the outcome of interaction with others~~ (Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Jenkins, 2014; Roderick, 2006b). ~~This may further our understanding of how identities have multiple aspects and are ceaselessly reworked and renegotiated (Jenkins, 2014).~~

Methodology

Sampling

Criterion-based and network sampling techniques were used for the study (Patton, 2002; Small, 2009). Individuals were deemed eligible to participate if they a) had played professional football for a period longer than five years, and b) were no longer involved in the professional game. For the purposes of this study, a professional footballer was defined as somebody who had played the sport in a 'full-time' capacity and received a salary for doing so. The three participants identified for the study were previous teammates of the principal author. Discussions were held with each participant regarding the nature of the study, their prospective participation and the ethical implications of their involvement. Following institutional ethical approval, each participant was informed that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Similarly, each participant agreed to the interviews being audio-taped, assured that his identity would remain only known to the authors and that access to the interview tapes would be restricted to him and the research team (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015; Purdy, 2014). A background of each participant is presented below under respective pseudonyms.

At the time of the study, Adam was a 40-year old, former professional footballer who had previously played in all four divisions of the Football League. While Adam gained ~~experience of foreign culture~~played overseas briefly, the majority of his career was spent in the English Football League where he transferred between clubs on ten occasions. Adam described himself as a company director and his working life coalesced around his two self-employed businesses. Having been through ill-tempered divorce proceedings, Adam had no contact with his two sons from the marriage and currently lived with his fiancée. Jay was a 31-year old, former professional footballer who started his career as a Youth Training Scheme (YTS) scholar in League One and, following a total of eight transfers, finished his playing career in semi-professional (part-time) football. As a successful businessman and company director, Jay

had recently married and was expecting his first child at the time of the final interview. Finally, Joe was a 39 year-old, who had spent the majority of his career playing in League One, despite also playing in the Championship. Throughout his career, Joe transferred between clubs on seven occasions and, towards the end of his career, made the move into semi-professional football. As a married father of three daughters, Joe was also employed at a local supermarket.

Procedure and Method

The principal author conducted a total of 24 interviews; seven with Jay, eight with Joe and nine with Adam. Each interview ranged between 60 and 120 minutes (mean length of 93 minutes) and totalled 37 hours of audible data. Data collection depended upon a number of factors, including the time that each participant had available, the progress made during each interview and the ability to obtain and pursue greater understandings of their transitional experiences (Merriam, 2014; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Interviews were held at times and locations that suited the participants and were conducted in a comfortable and relaxed environment (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). These interviews were based around a) the participants' career timeline, b) the reasons for transferring between clubs, c) key career/life events and d) their networks of social relations inside and outside of each club setting. This provided a suitable framework to co-construct meaning that we attributed to the participants' transitional experiences (Howell, 2013; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

While semi-structured interviews were employed as the method of data collection, these were guided by a combination of generative (Tracy, 2013) and directive (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011; Tracy, 2013) questions and arguably occupied varying positions on a continuum between 'relatively-structured' and 'relatively-unstructured' semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann, 2013). Generative questions were non-directive, non-threatening queries that developed rather than dictated the course of the interview (Tracy, 2013). These included tour questions (e.g. "what did transferring between clubs mean to you?"), timeline questions (e.g. "what events led

to your departure from the club?") and behavioural questions (e.g. "how did you feel/react?"). In contrast, close-ended, directive questions structured and directed the interview, such as "did the manager make the decision to release you from your contract?" and "is that what you wanted to happen?" A number of probes were also used throughout the interview process to elicit richer insights (Seale, 2018). These included clarification probes (Patton, 2015), elaboration probes (Merriam, 2014) and detailed oriented probes (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Clarification probes, such as "would you just describe that again for me?" were utilised to check our understanding of the participants' stories and to further explain anything that was unclear. Elaboration probes were used to further expand responses, such as requesting an example of a particular experience or questioning why something had happened (Merriam, 2014). Finally, detailed oriented probes enabled us to focus questions around the people involved or the time that events occurred (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

Throughout the interviews, the principal author shared some of his own transitional experiences in an attempt to foster a trusting environment while eliciting rich and meaningful data (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). ~~The principal author also~~He also ~~endeavoured to~~engaged in active ~~actively engage in~~ listening to promote depth and complexity to the participants' stories (Josselson, 2013). ~~From our relational~~In acknowledging the relational dimensions of data generation perspective, ~~we were~~he sort ~~hoping~~ to *move with* the participants in the metaphoric resemblance of a dance (Josselson, 2013). While earlier interviews necessitated more questioning to eliminate any awkward silences, the free-flowing nature of the latter interviews suggested that the participants had developed their own trust and rapport and felt at ease in their surroundings (Purdy, 2014). Similarly, the participants' responses in the latter interviews evidenced an increased relational understanding through their links to multiple social networks and how each affected, and was affected by, the other(s) without being prompted. The interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure a complete record of the data.

Iterative Analysis

Analysis, interpretation and representation of the data were a continuous part of the research process itself and not distinct or separate entities (e.g. Sparkes, 2002; Taylor, 2014). Both the data collection and data analysis phases of the study were mutually recursive and dynamic processes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An iterative approach to data collection and analysis enabled the moving back and forth between data and theory in order to raise further questions or gain an enhanced understanding (Taylor, 2014). This approach provided an emic or emerging reading of the data while also considering existing explanations and theories to make sense of the data from an etic perspective (Tracy, 2013). In keeping with Tracy's (2013) illustration of iterative analysis, two cycles of analysis ran simultaneously. Firstly, each interview transcript was 'coded' to identify any emerging themes; where the use of highlighter pens enabled categories to be developed that were both meaningful and that would help to answer the research questions (Merriam, 2014; Taylor, 2014). These categories then became the focus of subsequent interviews, where additional questions and probing elicited a greater insight into participants' transitional experiences. Concurrently, the use of 'analytical memos' enabled tentative links to be established between the meaningful segments of data that had been previously categorised and various theoretical concepts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). This etic analysis of ~~each interview transcript~~the data was guided by our reading of existing social theory and also allowed us to raise further theoretically driven questions ~~for~~in subsequent interviews ~~from a theoretical perspective~~. However, it should be noted that we entered the research process without any pre-conceived theoretical frameworks ~~for this study~~. While the writings of Bauman, Crossley and May were utilised to provide a robust analytical framework, we recognise that any data set is ~~these are equally~~ open to further interpretation by the reader (Huggan, Nelson & Potrac, 2015; Taylor, 2014).

Theoretical Sense-Making

The participants' transitional experiences were principally understood in relation to the theorizing of Bauman (2007, 2012, 2013), May (2011, 2013) and Crossley (2011, 2013). Through his unique social commentary of life in a neoliberal world, Bauman regarded social reality as too large, complex and various to be interpreted through rigid theoretical frameworks. Instead, he utilised a number of metaphors to 'defamiliarize the familiar' and present an alternative perspective of contemporary living (Jacobsen & Poder, 2012). Here, Bauman's sociological hermeneutics demands that the meaning of human thoughts or actions are only intelligible within their socially shaped conditions (Jacobsen & Tester, 2007). Under the umbrella metaphor of *liquid modernity*, Bauman (2012) depicted a world of uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity, where individuals are both 'in' and 'on' the market. From this perspective, individuals are not only able to consume but are regarded as a product to be consumed; a commodity (Bauman, 2012). The term 'liquid' reflects the ever-changing neoliberal backdrop, whereby, "liquids, unlike solids, cannot easily hold their shape" (Bauman, 2012, p. 2). As a result, Bauman notes how the effects of globalization and, in a world obsessed with consumption and instant gratification, employees and employers should be prepared to abandon commitments and loyalties without regret in pursuit of more favourable opportunities. This metaphor provided us with a useful heuristic device to make sense of the working world of professional football, and indeed wider context of contemporary social life.

The work of May (2011, 2013) was used to make sense of the participants' place in their respective surroundings. More specifically, May's (2013) concept of *belonging* was used to make sense of the ways the participants connected (and disconnected) to other people, relationships, places and environments. Here, May (2013) viewed the self as relational, whereby the self and society are interdependent and permeable, each being affected by the other. That is, the self "emerges in relationships with and in relation to other people" (May, 2013, p. 4). Broadly speaking, May (2013, p. 3) defined *belonging* as "the process of creating

a sense of identification with, or connection to, cultures, people, places and material objects" where "significant changes in our surroundings are reflected in a fluctuation in our sense of belonging". May (2013) also proposed the term '*belonging*' in opposition to 'identity'; where instead of beginning with the autonomous individual, the focus switched to the connection of individuals to one another. This interpretation enabled us to make theoretical sense of the participants' 'settling in' processes and to further understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it (Andrews, 2012). Although May (2013) connected people to places, environments and surroundings, these connections could also mirror Bauman's (2012) consideration of *liquid* surroundings given their constant fluctuation and potential for change.

The aforementioned liquid surroundings were regarded as an individualizing force, one where precariousness seemingly encouraged individual survival in the style of "everyone for himself, and the devil take the hindmost" (Bauman, 2007, p. 14). Here, Bauman (2007) utilised metaphors of the *gamekeeper* (i.e. to defend and preserve the 'natural' order), the *gardener* (i.e. constant care and attention of wanted/unwanted plants) and the *hunter* (i.e. not worried about the overall balance of things) to describe the world's changing priorities. Indeed, Bauman (2007, p. 100) suggested that, "we are all hunters now…and called or compelled to act as hunters do" whereby "the sole task hunters pursue is another 'kill', big enough to fill their game-bags to capacity". In keeping with the musings of a liquid modern world, we regarded hunting and, more specifically survival as "the ultimate proof of fitness" (Bauman, 2003, p. 88). The *hunter* metaphor provided us with an insightful lens to analyse the participants' thought processes and decision-making strategies and enabled us to make sense of self-interest from a sociological perspective. Rather than focusing on psychological tendencies of greed or narcissism, we believe that *hunting* provided greater emphasis on the participants' behaviours

in relation to their interpretations of the demands and realities of their social networks~~sociocultural environment~~.

The work of Bauman (2007, 2012) and May (2011, 2013) was supplemented with Crossley's (2011, 2013) *relational sociology* to make sense of the participants' multiple identities and associated social networks. This analysis enabled us to explore how the participants' transitional decisions, experiences and sense–making processes were influenced by the actions, desires, intentions, and interpretations of significant others in their various networks of social relations. Where May (2013) replaced the term identity with *belonging*, Crossley (2011) argued that the forming and re-forming of identities occur through interaction. Indeed, we agreed with Crossley's (2013, p. 125) suggestion that "[t]he behaviour of the individual can only be rendered intelligible and explained, methodologically, if we remain alert to his or her location within a network of relations and interactions". Through his thought-provoking analysis of the social world, Crossley (2011, p. 2) argued that rather than being individual agents, we are always "agents-in-relation". Here, Crossley (2011, p.180) noted how social relations "enable and constrain action" in such a way that "roles and identities are not 'about' the individual but rather about their relations to others". Interestingly for us, then, this enabled our analysis of the participants' transitions to shift from themselves as individuals to their multiple social networks and account for the multitude of competing roles and identities that were mutually interdependent on relationships.

The final metaphor used to interpret the participants' narratives was the notion of *pointillist time* (Bauman & Donskis, 2013). Underpinning Bauman's 'liquid modernity' is what he defined as "a renegotiation of the meaning of time" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 143). This renegotiation of time reflected the world's obsession with speed an immediacy (Tomlinson, 2007) and suggested that, similar to a pointillist painting, time has now been "broken up into a multitude of separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more

closely approximating its geometrical idealization of non-dimensionality" (Bauman & Donskis, 2013, p. 143). *Pointillist time* supported Bauman's (2012, p. xvi) comparison of life in a liquid modern world to "walking in a minefield: everyone knows an explosion might happen at any moment and in any place, but no one knows when the moment will come and where the place will be". The *pointillist time* metaphor provided us with an alternative sociological interpretation of why career paths are rarely (if ever) ~~a~~ linear in nature (Debois et al., 2012). More specifically, this metaphor enabled us to map the participants' career trajectories with 'explosions' that occurred in their personal lives and the knock-on effect these had on their professional lives and, indeed, vice-versa. Through our engagement with *pointillist time*, we were able to consider how different the participants' careers may have been and how their careers and personal lives were interdependent. ~~We believe the amalgamation of the sense-making frameworks outlined above has much to offer the critical exploration of transition in sport.~~ From our perspective, transitions were not solely individual, ~~and therefore~~ cognitive or psychological experiences. Rather, ~~transitions~~they were experienced and understood in relation to the participants' multiple identities, the specific social networks in which they were embedded, and their understandings of the wider social and economic context in which these were grounded~~eir respective sociocultural environments~~. Indeed, w~~W~~e believe the ~~that each of the~~combination of these complementary sense-making frameworks ~~outlined above help to further develop our understanding of transition by analysing different~~allowed us ~~aspects of our attempt~~ to locate and understand athlete transition better than anyone could alone. ~~the transiting athlete within their ever-changing locations in multiple social networks.~~

Findings and Analysis

Our analysis of the interview data led to the construction of two interrelated themes. The first focused on the participants' understanding of their precarious working conditions. Here, the participants craved a sense of belonging and a need to feel part of the team environment.

Paradoxically, the participants simultaneously recognised the need to think and act in particular ways to survive and thrive as a professional footballer. Despite attempts to maintain or enhance their positions, the second theme addressed how the participants were not fully in control of events in both their personal and working lives. In this respect, their multiple networks of social relations affected, and was affected by their respective life-courses. A discussion of each topic is presented below.

It's a Tough Call: To Belong ~~or to Survive…~~and be Sselfish. ~~Who Knows What's Going to Happen?~~

Throughout the interviews, Adam, Joe and Jay shared a collective understanding of what it meant to be a professional footballer. Seemingly inherent within the confines of professional football changing rooms was an underlying belief that the environment oozed insecurity ~~,~~ ~~unpredictability~~ and uncertainty (Roderick, 2006a; Roderick &~~and~~ Schumacker, 2017). The unpredictability of the job role became evident through repeated stories of injuries or managerial sackings alongside unexpected events that immediately changed the complexion of the players' careers (Nesti, Littlewood, O'Halloran, Eubank & Richardson, 2012; Roderick, 2006b). The participants appeared to learn quickly about "the uncertainty of the marketplace, the limited tenure of average contracts…and the constant threat of workplace injury and ageing" (Roderick, 2006a, p. 334), as the following extracts demonstrated:

> I'd gone from being on the fringe of signing a new and much improved two-year deal for a manager and club that I loved to being offered a reduced contract and all because the club had gone into administration and the manager was sacked…but football is like that, everything is so unpredictable and uncertain. It was now going to be a month-to-month contract and knowing what football is like, I knew that inevitably there'd be a little knee

injury around the corner and so I felt very vulnerable…I didn't know how long I'd stay fit and so I was sh***ing myself. (Jay)

I was worried because out of the blue the collapse of ITV Digital meant that nobody had any money, clubs were going into administration and it seemed like a nightmare situation for everyone involved. There was probably a list of 800 players in the same boat but it was like that every year…that was part and parcel of the job, I suppose. (Adam)

~~[name of club] were a massive club and I was buzzing…it was a three-year deal but knowing what football's like, anything can happen. Moving to [name of club] on a three-year deal didn't mean I were gonna be a Championship player for the rest o' mi' career…it just meant that if something unexpected did happen then I had a bit more security. (Joe)~~

The participants' understanding of their precarious working conditions arguably reflects Bauman's (2012) discussion of *liquid modernity*. Despite being at different stages of their career, Jay's and Adam's examples suggested that whether a young professional or veteran in the game, the conditions were the same. The participants in this study regarded their employment as a series of short-term projects or episodes and pieced together what appeared 'patch work' careers that were developed with little more than a short-term view on their ever-changing positions in the professional football context (Bauman, 2005). While these may correspond to similar findings in the transition literature (e.g. Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a, 2006b), the use of Bauman's (2012) *liquid modernity* has provided an alternative sociological perspective to make sense of the precariousness that pervaded participants' workplace contexts. Bauman's (2012) metaphor encourages us to 'defamiliarize the familiar' (Jacobsen & Poder, 2012), as we begin to visualise the inconsistency of liquid and how this helps to make sense of the professional footballing field. Consistent with Bauman's writings

on the topic, the participants in this study recognised the inherent uncertainty, unpredictability and insecurity associated with the workplace.

Based on their reading of insecure and uncertain working conditions, the participants stressed a need to feel worthy of their place in their respective team environments. This need accentuated when the participants transferred between clubs, where they hoped to 'settle in' (and be accepted) as quickly as possible. Each changing room of new teammates provided Adam, Jay and Joe with social challenges, as Jay and Adam reflected upon:

> I learned very early on that the first week or so of anything new is daunting…you know, you're of your comfort zone because everything is new and you don't know anyone…but if you keep your head down, you know, speak when you're spoken to…eventually, you get to know everyone and you gradually get yourself bedded in. (Jay)

> I remember when I just signed for [name of club] and I had six hours on a bus to [name of club] when I didn't know anybody…I could see everyone whispering when they sat down, you know, 'who the f**ks that' kind of thing and it was just a strange way to meet your new teammates…the nerves come back, you wonder whether you've made the right decision and what they're all going to be like but I'd been through it before and it was just part of it [the transition]. I knew that I'd be having a laugh with 'em all the week after. (Adam)

While the participants were eager to settle into their new environments as quickly as possible, this did not always happen; ~~. Although each of the participants predominantly bedded in on both a social and a physical level at their respective new clubs,~~ these 'settling in' periods varied in length. The following examples demonstrated how Joe settled in to some environments easier than others. Interestingly, the first was during Jay's second year as a professional while the second was when he was regarded a more established professional. These examples

highlighted that the settling in process was challenging regardless of the stage of career:~~and, arguably never settled into one at all:~~

> I took my top off and hung it on a peg and I just remember [name of player], who was like the senior pro…he said 'f**k me, have you just come out of prison'…I've got a few tattoo's and I'm no male model so when he shouted that out it was great 'cos it broke the ice…all of the other lads were laughing and I just laughed along with 'em…to say I was relieved is an understatement…and that was it from then on…I was one of them. (Joe)

~~It's hard to explain but in the early stages [name of club] there was definitely a wariness of me in the changing rooms…whether it was just a quietness I picked up on I don't know but I definitely felt as though the other players were a bit wary of me…as if I were a bit of a loose cannon. It took me a while to feel a part of that changing room but 'cos I wasn't playing either, I never felt like part of the furniture really. (Joe)~~

> I was busting my balls and was still 20 yards behind the last man…there was only one other player who was on my Richter-Scale and everyone else was just ridiculous…and I just thought, f***ing hell, this is a massive step up… at the end of that training session I began to question whether I was actually up to that level and doubted whether I was good enough to be at a club like [name of club]~~.~~…I never felt like part of the furniture really. (Joe)

These extracts arguably reveal how Joe created a sense of identification with his prospective teammates and how he subsequently gauged his sense of *belonging* (May, 2013). In this respect, Joe did not experience his transitions as an autonomous individual but, rather, in relation to his respective team environments (May, 2013). Indeed, these contrasting transitions evidenced the significance of the team environment and the part played by others. ~~Arguably,~~ Only through interaction with prospective teammates were ~~utilised by~~ the participants able to

to not only evaluate the success of their transitions andbut also to gauge the expectations associated with their role (Crossley, 2011).; Here,as Adam noted:

> …the first time I am in that dressing room, gulp! It was ridiculous….I was shaking, literally shaking…these were top, top, top players, stars everywhere you looked…it was kind of surreal and I had to pinch myself that it was happening. But then I spoke to [name of player] and [name of player] and before long it became second nature to share a changing room with guys like these. (Adam)
>
> A few of us would go out all of the time…but [name of player] was a first team regular and was out with us all the time…so it was like, if he can do it then why can't I? Girls were practically throwing themselves at us every time we went out so we carried on going out. And the other lads [teammates] just laughed and thought we were young and living our lives. (Adam)
>
> I was p*ssed off that they'd made their mind up about my weight straight away because I lost the weight and got a six-pack within six weeks but it was too late. I felt as if everyone agreed that I wasn't fit enough or good enough…you know, where everyone groans if I give the ball away in training as if to say I'm not at their level…and that was hard to get my head around. I felt like an imposter, I guess. (Adam)

The above excerpts evidence how Adam evaluated his position within the team changing roomin relation to his interactions with team-mates and coaching staff and how this evaluation was not only in relation to the stage of his career but also to physical and social aspects of the transition. Interestingly, Again, this was conveyed in relation to players he shared the dressing room with whereby Adam found himself identifying with players he labelled 'top' pedigree; albeit predominantly on a social level. We would argue that Adam described how he soon felt 'at ease' and gave little thought to what he was doing or how he was doing it in the first two examples (May, 2011) but then, equally, never felt 'at ease' in the third example. From our

perspective, Adam, and indeed Jay and Joe perceived their sense of *belonging*, or *not belonging* as a determinant of their ~~success~~performances in training and matches. Although previous research has noted how teammates formed a safety net of belonging (e.g. Ronkainen, Harrison & Ryba, 2014; Ryba, Stambulova & Ronkainen, 2016), the use of May's (2013) work to make sense of these findings adds credence to Roderick's (2006a) suggestion that transformations of identity are always the outcome of interaction with others. From our participants' perspectives, transition was very much a relational endeavour, where decision-making and sense-making processes played out through their interactions with others.

Despite their need to *belong* to their respective teams, the participants also described their contrasting ~~how they adopted selfish~~ attitude~~s~~ towards their careers. This paradox became evident when the thoughts and actions associated with 'settling in' were competing with ~~self-interest and~~ an underpinning desire to both survive and thrive that~~–~~ emanated from the participants' reading of~~in~~ the arduous employment climate in the professional footballing world. For example, Joe's confession that his teammates were also his competition evidenced their collective understanding of the team environment where their personal survival ~~the selfish self~~ was seemingly prioritised over the needs of others (Bauman, 2003). Indeed, it became increasingly apparent that 'others' were somewhat irrelevant, as Joe and Adam noted:

> At the end of the day, it's all about yourself and people can say what they want but deep down everybody knows it…managers know it and players know it…it's dog-eat-dog and if by somebody doing well that means you're not gonna be playing or not gonna be the main man then you don't want it to happen…it's as simple as that! We [Joe's team] could lose any game 7-1, but if I'd scored the one then I'd be going home happy…I'd rather finish bottom of the league but score 20 goals than win the league with 4 [goals]…without a doubt…I was always desperate to keep my name on the scorer's

charts that come on Sky Sports News every ten minutes 'cos it would bring a smile to my face and I knew that I'd be alright. (Joe)

~~I didn't even say goodbye to the lads at [name of club] and it didn't bother me. I failed the medical at [name of club] on the Friday and didn't go into the club again 'cos I signed for [name of club] on the Monday. Apart from playing against some of 'em in games, I haven't seen or spoke to any of 'em since that last Thursday in training but that's football. If I kept in touch with every player who I'd played with I'd never get anything done. (Joe)~~

My goal has always been to survive…if I'm playing [first team football] then I'll survive and my life will look after itself…I went to [name of club] for the money but I still had a burning desire to survive…it wasn't something that I was desperate to do, to play abroad or to play in a foreign league again but signing a three-year deal just meant I could survive for longer. I suppose it didn't matter who the club was, where the club was or who I was playing with as long as I was surviving. (Adam)

Given the participants' understanding of their precarious working climate, it is perhaps unsurprising that they adopted a ruthless approach to their careers that reflects Bauman's (2007) discussion of the *hunter*. Indeed, only through the participants' reading of their socio-cultural environment was *hunting* ~~was~~ regarded as a necessity to survive ~~in such a competitive environment whereby the participants recognised their~~ and a better ~~alternative~~ option than ~~of~~ "relegation to the ranks of the game" (Bauman, 2007, p. 100). ~~While it could be argued that Adam, Jay and Joe's desire to remain a professional footballer was itself their main 'prize', and indeed the focus of their 'survival', we would argue that, as '*hunters*', their main '*hunts*' were for contracts. That said, these contracts were, in essence, two-pronged '*hunts*' that consisted of a) securing the contract and b) making first team appearances while under contract. Making first team appearances was the weekly target and meant that the participants were in a greater~~

~~position than their non-playing teammates and, as a result, stood a better chance of earning new contracts or, better still, a move to a 'bigger' club (Roderick & Schumacker, 2017). Whether the contract was three years or one month, the participants placed a high premium on the need to play, as Adam and Jay commented:~~

~~I'm asking myself where I am in the pecking order?…you know, when you're not even on the bench and the team isn't even scoring. I just wanted to play [first team football], because, otherwise, I was basically running my contract down and I could write off any chance of getting another [contract]. Summer then becomes a free for all where clubs can cherry pick from the hundreds of players that are available which is not a nice position to be in. (Adam)~~

~~It's not nice sitting in the stands and watching your teammates play…you're effectively behind them in the pecking order for when it comes to contract time and that's horrible. If you're playing, it's different…you're the one that's in favour and in the driving seat, I suppose…you generally feel more positive about earning a new contract. (Jay)~~

These findings have illuminated the relational dimensions of career transition in professional football, where the decision-making and sense-making processes of the participants stemmed from their readings of their immediate ~~both the socio-cultural environment and their~~ interactions with others and their subcultural understanding of professional football. Here, the participants appeared to accept that transition would be a regular feature of their precarious working conditions and reflected the underpinning tenets of *liquid modernity* ~~within *liquid modernity*~~ (Bauman, 2012). In light of these readings, ~~T~~the paradox of their career transitions became evident through their need to establish a sense of *belonging* (May, 2013) whilst continuing to *hunt* (Bauman, 2007). In this respect, the teammates that helped the participants to 'settle in' were soon regarded as other *hunters* (Bauman, 2007) who were equally striving to survive and thrive in the competitive professional football environment.

It's not all about Football!

The participants recognised that being a professional footballer was just one aspect of their lives. Alongside their occupation as professional footballer, the participants fulfilled multiple roles and responsibilities, including that of partner, son, brother, father or friend. These multiple identities located the participants within multiple social networks and provided a more complex understanding of their decision-making and sense-making processes. As the following examples demonstrated, the participants' decision making and experiences were depended not only on the stage of the participants' careerinformed by their understanding of the workplace but also on their ever-changing social networks and howrelationships outside of work these played out over time:

> I was adamant that I had to capitalise on my good form and move but it was a difficult decision for [name of partner]. We had countless difficult discussions about moving and about leaving family and friends for the first time but in the end, our family and our futures came first. As it happened, the move to [name of club] was a nightmare because I never played and [name of partner] hated being by herself with the little one so we weren't there long. (Adam)
>
> Signing for [name of club] was an easy decision because my missus would be near her family and I could spend a bit of time with my mates again. But time had moved on…I suppose I was 28, I had a three-year old and a one year old and so my life was now training, kids and sleep…As it ended up, I wasn't particularly bothered about anything else to be honest. (Adam)
>
> If I was younger and single, I would definitely have signed for [name of club] or jumped straight in and signed for [name of club] but I suppose because I was with [name of partner] we wanted to make the right decision together…not only that but by moving to [name of club], I was able to start my degree at [name of University]. (Jay)

I was feeling sorry for myself and couldn't believe they'd (uncle and great uncle) gone. Going to the funerals and meeting up with everybody kind of highlighted the fact that football is important but not as important as my family and so when the opportunity came up to sign for [name of club] it was a no brainer. There was definitely part of me, and a big part that liked the sound of being there for them after their loss, if you like. (Jay)

~~Signing for, or remaining with a particular football club extended beyond the footballing element of the decision, as Adam and Jay highlighted:~~

~~I would have stayed at [name of club] purely for the money…I began to feel low all of the time and hated training with the under-21s but I would have put up with it to build up our bank balance. But my ex-missus hated it more than me, spending all day, every day with just the little one…she was tearing her hair out and couldn't take it any longer. She didn't know anybody else who had little ones and she had nobody to pop round and visit or catch up with for a coffee and so she was miserable all of the time which eventually became too much for us both. (Adam)~~

~~When my uncle and great uncle died in quick succession it was horrible. I can remember one game just floating around the pitch thinking to myself, 'what is happening here'? My head was all over the place and I was thinking about anything apart from the game…it was like an outer-body experience where I just couldn't focus on the game…I was feeling sorry for myself and couldn't believe they'd (uncle and great uncle) gone. Going to the funerals and meeting up with everybody kind of highlighted the fact that football is important to me but not as important as my family and so when the opportunity came up to sign for [name of club] it was a no brainer. There was definitely part of me, and a big part that liked the sound of being there for them after their loss, if you like. Not only that, but because I'd agreed to take a bit of a cut financially to go there [name of club], not having to pay a hefty mortgage or rent was a massive financial help for me. (Jay)~~

These examples illuminate~~d~~ how the participants' decisions were not solely based around their working identity but rather their multiple identities and respective social networks that were subjected to change ~~throughout their careers~~. ~~In this respect, ~~ . In this respect, decisions were tied to multiple identities that were not solely *about* the participants but *about* their (changing) relations to others (Crossley, 2011). These changes highlighted to us how the participants~~the participants~~ existed in "historically specific circumstances…in 'positions' within networks of relations to other human beings, with the various identities, interests, interdependencies and practical engagements that such positions entail" (Crossley, 2011, p. 15). Indeed, Adam, Jay and Joe were positioned within various family, friendship and team networks throughout the duration of their careers and, subsequently, engaged in multiple social relationships that affected and were affected by each other. ~~However, while ~~ Although the participants' social networks~~se~~ appeared to ~~mostly ~~ change over time, there were aspects of their lives that remained fairly constant. For example, an important aspect of Joe's life was the bond that he developed with three brothers who he grew up with. These brothers provided Joe with useful advice about any footballing situation but, arguably more importantly for Joe, kept him in professional football. In his own words:

> …it's been great to have the three brothers around to take the p**s out of me all of the time and bring me back down to earth…you know, I can let my hair down when I'm with 'em kind of thing. To be a pro [professional footballer] I was living like a monk and it would have killed me…I needed an escape button [from football] every now and again or I'd have quit. But then when I'd had my night out I'd be back watching everything I ate or everything I did…but it was great to be able to go out with friends from school and keep in contact with 'em 'cos I didn't wanna be in some football bubble. But then I loved having a professional attitude and working mi' b*****ks off to impress the manager wherever I was at…it just depended which environment I was in I suppose. (Joe)

Joe also experienced family issues towards the end of his career. While his footballing prowess earned him several contracts that brought an element of both financial and ~~logistical~~ geographical stability to his life, his priorities, and indeed career, changed when his Mum was unexpectedly diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. As Joe provided much of the intense care and support that his Mum required, he simultaneously questioned his role as a professional footballer and considered an escape from the daily scrutiny. In his own words:

> I was cut up about my Mum being ill but the intensity of training wasn't giving me the escape that I needed…I wanted to train with a smile on my face and forget about everything for a bit but instead I was worrying about making a mistake or getting bollocked. You know what football's like where they want you in on afternoons and if you lose you're in on your day off…I'd tell the kids that I'd take 'em swimming on a Wednesday but I couldn't 'cos we'd lost on the Tuesday night so I was getting p***ed off 'cos I was obviously getting no time with my Mum or Dad either…that's when I started to think full-time football was too big a commitment for me and I needed an easier life. (Joe)

Eventually, the intensity became too much for Joe and he chose to complete remainder of his playing career in the relatively less time and emotionally demanding context of semi-professional football. Interestingly, Joe was able to take an important ~~footballing~~ career decision ~~out of the footballing context and demonstrated how~~in relation to ~~-~~his reading of the changing opportunities, challenges and dilemmas associated with his family~~social networks had changed over time~~. Throughout the early stages of his career, Joe was predominantly driven by his own desire to play at the highest level and to earn as much money as he could that would simultaneously benefit his then girlfriend. In contrast, this decision between continuing as a player earning a significant wage in the second tier of English football or entering the realm of non-league football was predicated by his identities~~ty~~ as a son and f~~(and arguably as father)~~

rather than that as a footballer. Here, we would again argue that this decision was not about Joe but rather about his relations with others (Crossley, 2011). Furthermore, Joe's decision to exit full-time football may only be rendered intelligible if we remain alert to his location within multiple social networks of interaction (Crossley, 2013). Indeed, , as Joe poignantly described:

> …it [entering part-time football] was nothing to do with the football, it was nothing to do with money even though I still had to pay the bills and whatever else 'cos I wasn't gonna give up an 18-month contract just for nothing, but basically it was the situation I was in…I just wanted to see as much of my Mum as I could as well as helping my Dad out with everything…they'd been there for me all the way through my life and it was now my turn to be there for them. (Joe)

While this understanding of how multiple social networks played out can be interpreted using Crossley's (2011) *relational sociology*, we would also argue that Joe's example also demonstrates how the participants the participants experienced the explosions tied to walking in the minefield that is *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012). AlthoughWhile the unpredictability of professional football has been well documented through examples of injury and , managerial sackings and changes and administration (e.g. Nesti et al., 2012; Roderick, 2006a), these this study findings have highlighted how unpredictability also extended beyond the football environment and into the participants' personal lives. Despite being unrelated to football per se, these unexpected events changed the course of the participants' playing careers. Jay transferred clubs to be nearer his aunt when his uncle and great uncle died. Joe transitioned into semi-professional football so that he could spend more time with, and care for, his mother. Consideration of *pointillist* careers may provide a more fitting representation of actual, lived careers to the transition literature. Here, the participants' career trajectories could be understood by Bauman and Donskis' (2013 p. 143) map of *pointillist life,* inclusive of

"imaginary or unfulfilled possibilities". Indeed, Adam's, Jay's and Joe's lives could each have taken countless alternative turns along the way.

Consistent with Bauman's (2007) writings, it could also be argued that the participants continued to *hunt* both inside and outside of the professional footballing nexus and in relation to their multiple social networks. While contracts and playing first team football were the participants' main *hunts* within football, the above examples arguably reflect a range of goals (read 'kills') that the participants *hunted* in their personal (read relational) lives. In line with Bauman's (2007) metaphorical analysis, we would argue that the above examples illuminate how Adam's 'game-bag' included his 'ex-missus'' happiness; Jay's 'game-bag' included being there for his aunty and great aunty and Joe's 'game-bag' included free time to spend with his children and parents. These *hunts* were based around their collective ensemble of identities that included that of father, son, partner, nephew and great nephew and not solely around their performance identity (Carless & Douglas, 2009). Importantly for us, these identities were equally, if not more, important than their identities as professional footballers and each affected, and was affected by, the other(s). It is our belief that this relational interpretation provides an alternative ~~more sophisticated~~ understanding of how multiple transitions inside and outside of the sporting domain impact upon an athlete over time and lends support to previous suggestions that the path to excellence is rarely (if ever) a linear path (e.g. Debois et al., 2012). For us, transition is not solely about the transitioning athlete but also ~~about~~ their relations with others ~~ever-changing locations~~ within multiple social networks. These networks provide a mechanism for helping athletes to interpret their respective situations and ultimately make decisions and take actions connected to their various identities~~and make sense of both sporting and non-sporting transitions from a relational perspective~~.

Conclusion

In seeking to contribute to the evolving sociological literature base investigating transition in sport (e.g. Carless & Douglas, 2009; Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Jones & Denison, 2017; Roderick, 2006b, 2013, 2014) this paper sought to explore the relational and sociocultural challenges of transition in professional football. The participants recognised that they were operating in precarious working conditions where 'anything could happen'. This understanding reflected Bauman's (2012) discussion of *liquid modernity* and mirrored the uncertain, unpredictable and insecure foundations of a neoliberal society. In recognition of their precarious working conditions, the participants were eager to establish a sense of identification with their new teammates and desired a social connection as quickly as possible. Their sense of *belonging* (May, 2013) went some way to determining the relative success of their transitions, as the participants understood their decision-making and sense-making processes in relation to their teammates and respective team environments. Paradoxically, the participants adopted selfish attitudes to their working life. Here, the participants' approach was understood in relation to Bauman's (2007) writings of the *hunter*. Unconcerned by the overall balance of things (Bauman, 2007), as *hunters*, the participants sourced more favourable working conditions including extended contracts and playing first team games. Furthermore, the results have shown how the participants established a sense of *belonging* (or not *belonging*) to both personal and professional environments. For example, Joe developed a strong sense of *belonging* to the three brothers who he grew up with and his new teammates (following the 'banter' surrounding his tattoos) yet never felt part of the club where his ~~physical attributes~~performances and attributes as a player appeared inferior to the rest of his new team.

Importantly, t~~T~~he participants in this study also recognised that they were more than just a professional footballer and occupied various roles and positions, including that of son, friend, husband and father. The working and non-working identities of the participants ~~in this~~

~~study~~ were ~~both~~ interconnected~~;~~ ~~whereby~~ each affected, and was affected by the other. Here, Crossley's (2011) *relational sociology* provided us with an alternative reading of~~provided us with a useful framework to interpret~~ the participants' multiple ~~selves~~identities through~~and~~ their connections to others. This relational~~theoretical~~ interpretation suggested that the roles and identities of the participants were not *about* them, but *about* their relationships with others and their ever-changing positions in various networks of social relations. Indeed, we suggested that Joe's decision to exit professional football was only rendered intelligible when he was located in his multiple networks of interaction (Crossley, 2013). While a growing body of research has considered transition as a relational process (e.g. Hickey & Roderick, 2017; Ronkainen et al., 2014; Ryba et al., 2015), these findings have advanced existing understanding by interpreting multiple identities using sociological theorizing.

Bauman and Donskis' (2013) writing on *pointillist time* also enabled us to interpret the unexpected events that occurred in the various social networks of the participants' lives. Alongside instances of injury, managerial sackings and administration, the participants' career trajectories were equally affected by family deaths and illness. These events ~~deaths~~ changed the direction of the participants' career's and suggests that significant others ~~, and the associated social networks~~ may play prominent roles in the participants pursuit of possible future selves (Hickey & Roderick, 2017). Here, it was argued that the participants engaged in *hunting* (Bauman, 2007) both inside and outside of the professional lives. It was suggested that Adam's 'game-bag' included his family's happiness, Jay's 'game-bag' included emotional support and Joe's 'game-bag' included free time and that each of these were unrelated to their professional/career identity (Carless & Douglas, 2009).

~~By focusing our analyses on the multiple identities of the participants in this study, we hope to have~~This work has made a significant contribution to the sociological understanding of sports work ~~(Roderick et al., 2017). We believe that this paper has~~ by providinged important

insights into the complex, sociocultural and relational challenges associated with transition in professional sport (Roderick et al., 2017). Specifically, this work has illustrated how transition affects or is affected by the various identities of professional sportspeople and how transitional success may be tied to more than a sporting identity. We believe that if coaches (and players) were to remain aware of the multiple challenges facing outgoing and incoming players, then their interactions could be tailored to promote and enhance their sense of belonging (May, 2013). Sharing stories such as Adam's, Jay's and Joe's as narrative resources within the professional footballing and coaching community may encourage people (i.e. coaches, players, and staff) to live in more socially sensitive ways. In turn, this may positively affect a person's performances, or, at least, reduce the pressure tied to a changing network of relationships within a period of *liquid modernity* (Bauman, 2012).

It is also hoped that these findings can encourage further study into the relational and emotional dynamics of transition. For example, future inquiry could document and help us understand how networks and the bonds between social actors change, strengthen or weaken over time and inform how an athlete interprets and acts during a transitional period (Crossley, 2011). In addition, ~~While this investigation is from the perspective of the players,~~ we believe that exploration into the transitional experiences of managers/coaches and other stakeholders working in professional sport (e.g. physiotherapists, performance analysts, sport psychologists and strength and conditioners) would further our understanding of transition in sport more widely. That is, our focus should be on more than the athlete. We also invite researchers to consider the interconnections between embodied experience and the management of specific emotions during career transition. This has potentially much to offer in terms of better understanding the interdependence between multiple selves during transition and would respond to similar recent calls for a more nuanced understanding of the emotional dimensions of the relationally lived experiences of sports workers (Gale et al., in press; Potrac, Smith &

Nelson, 2017; Roderick et al., 2017). Here, in-depth, cyclical interviews may again be a useful approach to explore the embodied and emotional dimensions of multiple sports workers' transitions over time. Similarly, the auto-ethnographic approach may also provide valuable insights by better capturing the embodied nature of specific emotions and how these are both understood and managed in relation to significant others and to ~~culture~~society more generally (Gearity, 2014).

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