The presentation of possible selves in everyday life: the management of identity among transitioning professional athletes

Abstract

In contrast to research, which privileges the notion of an exclusive athletic identity, we argue that the identity management of professional athletes is influenced by the expectations of audiences and the motivational weight of 'possible selves' in explaining career transitions from 'sports work'. Qualitative vignette interviews were conducted with 10 male participants (ages 18-26 years) on three separate occasions (30 interviews). All interviewees had experienced a career transition from Premier League football in the UK. By integrating Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical analogy and Markus and Nurius's (1986) concept of possible selves we illustrate the way athletes manage their identities in order to explain how understandings of career transitions are linked to social audiences and whether they dramatically realise and legitimise future possible selves.

Introduction

There is well-founded sociological agreement that identities are not fixed, but have multiple aspects and are being ceaselessly reworked or renegotiated (Jenkins 2014). Even though sociologists document fragmented and fragile identities and individuals involved in intense work on their identities (Lawler, 2008), nevertheless they maintain that the management of identity is undertaken in pursuit of coherence – people work towards a sense of self that is clear and consistent – or assume that contradictory identities are utilised to enable individuals to cope effectively with ambiguous challenges. Over a multiplicity of spaces and time frames, some people, for instance individuals employed in precarious forms of work, claim an identity over which they have an unstable grasp. While for many such contingent workers, like professional athletes, the place and time of paid work are singular and fixed, the spaces and times of identity management are complex and fluid. In spite of the depth of research on the manner in which multiple identities impact on each other, and are lived out relationally and collectively (Jenkins, 2014; Lawler, 2008), it is surprising that the notion of an exclusive athletic identity has been employed as the principal explanatory concept among empirical investigations of sporting careers (Mitchell et al, 2014; Wylleman et al, 2004), de-selection (Brown and Potrac, 2009), injury (Sparkes, 2000), retirement (Lally, 2007), ageing (Butt and Molnar, 2009) and career transitions (Lavallee et al, 1997; Park et al. 2013). This body of research is underpinned by a discourse that prioritises the necessity for a narrow, truncated self-

identity focused on the pursuit of excellence as a natural element of the athletic role. Research of this kind characterises high-level athletes in one-dimensional terms: as solely a *sports person* at the expense of other social roles, evoking an equally all-consuming commitment to sustaining a professional status. Empiricist sports psychology studies have failed in important senses either to acknowledge athletes' identities as social selves, that is as collectively agreed and validated, or privilege the potential analytical facility and nuances of faltering, insecure, and critical identity work. In the case of transitioning athletes for example proponents of this rigid, monadic conceptualisation argue that individuals experience a variety of adjustment difficulties as an outcome of their embodied attachment to a *single identity* (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007).

Although a 'decrease' in athletic identity among former athletes has been conveyed in some studies as a process of identity shift (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008), in this article we offer alternative theorising in relation to how the process of career transitioning among professional footballers in the UK is experienced by emphasising the way athlete subjectivities are dynamic and relational, and giving recognition to the 'work' athletes do on their identities over time and space and not solely as they exit their careers. Building on psychological approaches that lay primary emphasis on athletes as fixed entities with *closed personalities*, arguments that foreground individuals' 'inner' selves that stand apart from external influencing factors, we argue in contrast that the management of identity is better understood through the working theoretical partnership of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor and Markus and Nurius's (1986) notion of possible selves[i]. Key to this conceptualisation is the basic sociological idea that interdependent individuals hold multiple identities, which are unavoidably in a state of flux, deemed legitimate or illegitimate by the audiences to which they are portrayed, and socially authenticated in the cultural environments in which they exist. Employing vignettes as a distinctive methodological approach to examine this 'sensitive' topic, which previously has proven difficult to research in rigorous and substantive empirical ways, has enabled more innovative theorising about how research participants – Premier League footballers in the UK – have regularly engaged with and present diverse identities prior to, during and after their career transition.

The objects of this article therefore are twofold: (i) to explain how participants' workplace identities are influenced by dynamic interdependent relations between the presence and expectations of social audiences and their own 'possible selves' – that is, recognising the importance of, rather than relegating, the noticeable effects of friendship and family relations on various aspects of work relations – and (ii) to offer

a methodological and epistemological approach that stands in contrast to much existing (career) transitions research to explore the management of identity in high-level sport environments.

The Presentation of Possible Selves

In *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman (1959) employs his dramaturgical or theatrical metaphor as a means of describing the organisation of face-to-face interaction. Goffman's focus is on self-presentation, or the notion that people as social actors endeavour to engineer a particular conceptualisation of themselves before others. Through the dramaturgical metaphor Goffman develops a view of everyday social life as something like a staged drama in which social actors, on the basis of their appearance and manner, attempt to form favourable self-impressions before audiences. Goffman (1959) perceived the self, not as a possession of the actor, but rather as the product of the dramatic interaction between actor and audience. Goffman's notion of 'dramatic realisation' suggests that while in the presence of others – *front* of stage – the individual infuses their activity with signs that dramatically portray confirmatory acts, which might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. Goffman explained the idea of 'performance' as all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion that serves to influence interacting participants in any way. Performances are not only dramatically realised, they are also 'idealised': put in the best possible light and shown to be fully compatible with a culture's general norms and values. There is more at stake therefore than solely the self in on-going interaction; there is an *interaction order*. Goffman's account of skilled social performances, and of the image of self as situated performer, has received critical attention, not least in relation to how his framework narrows the scope of interactional processes (Lawler, 2008). To address such critique, we turn here to notions of *possible selves* (Markus and Nurius, 1986), a conceptual approach that illuminates how the visions individuals hold of themselves in the future have a direct impact on how they act in the present.

Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the concept of *possible selves* in an attempt to compliment conceptions of self-knowledge and explain that they represent specific, individually significant hopes, fears and fantasies. These typical illustrations of possible selves are individualised and personalised but, more importantly, they are *social.* Many possible selves are the direct result of previous social comparisons in which an individual's own thoughts, feelings, characteristics and behaviours have been contrasted to those of significant others: 'What others are now, I could become'

(Markus and Nurius, 1986, p.954). According to Markus and Nurius (1986, p.958), an individual is

> free to create any variety of possible selves, yet the pool of possible selves derives from the categories made salient by an individual's particular socio-cultural and historical context and from the models, images, and symbols provided by the media and by an individual's immediate social experiences. Possible selves have the potential to reveal the inventive and constructive nature of the self, but they also reflect the extent to which this self is socially determined and constrained.

Osyerman and Markus (1990, p. 113) explain possible selves 'serve as incentives for future behaviour: they are selves to be approached or avoided'. Hoped-for possible selves provide an individual with futures to dream about. Individuals may not view all possible selves as truly attainable and will not feel a great loss if they are not achieved. When positive possible selves are viewed as attainable and when specific scripts, plans and behavioural control strategies are attached to them, they become expected selves. Osyerman and Markus (1990) suggest while many expected possible selves are desirable ones that individuals are *working* to maintain, others can be negative. Often the negative expected selves are those that are currently self descriptive and that seem inevitable. Feared selves are those individuals want to avoid although, as in the case for expected selves, feared selves can also include those selves an individual wishes to avoid yet views as inevitable.

In any particular instance of behaviour, a variety of possible selves may be implicated. Osyerman and Markus (1990, p.113) propose that any given possible self will have

> maximal motivational effectiveness when it is off-set or balanced by a countervailing possible self. Thus a feared possible self will be most effective as a motivational resource when it is balanced with a self-relevant positive possible self that provides the outlines of what one might do to avoid the feared state.

Equally, positive expected selves will be stronger motivational resources, and most effective, when they are tied to feared representations of what could happen if the preferred state is not accomplished. This implies, for example, that an athlete's image of themselves not having their employing club offer a new work contract – and

therefore being 'released' – is unlikely to have any systematic effect on behaviour unless a legitimate representation of a long-term and successful career with that sport can be recruited to challenge these feared selves.

Possible selves may influence the regulation of an individual's behaviour (Erikson, 2007). Moreover, past achievement and other behavioural outcomes associated with possible selves may also become potential self-representations stored in long-term memory ready to be activated at another time and in another setting. As such, according to Hamman et al (2010), possible selves are dynamic and their origins and longevity influence and are influenced by personal goals, interactions, and outcomes that occur within a relevant environment. Placing the concept of possible selves more thoroughly in the realm of the *social*, Osyerman, Ager and Grant (1995, p. 1216) explain how 'socially constructed selves' rely on the encouragement of significant *others* in their social environment 'as purveyors of messages about which characteristics of the self are valued and, as resources, providing experiences of success and competence in roles relevant to adult statuses and attainment'. These *others* according to Oyserman and Marcus (1993) provide models for emulation and feedback about the kind of self an individual might become, and here similarities to Goffman's (1959) emphasis on *audience* and *dramaturgical idealisation* are evident, which are key aspects of his dramaturgical analogy. The social environment of a professional sports training ground or club changing room are also the contexts in which athletes are provided with educational, economic and other resources, sometimes termed cultural capital, which will enable them to learn the skills and characteristics necessary to become the kind of individual valued in their socio-cultural field. In this article we go beyond the cultural context of immediate sporting environments, while acknowledging their substantial significance, and we stress the significance of social others beyond the workplace. The influence of the families of participants and time spent with non-workplace friends are all considered interconnected social environments where athletes receive education and feedback: models of emulation of *dramatically realised* identities outside and away from sporting realms.

The work of Markus and Nurius (1986) and their notion of individuals' possible selves influences the 'social front' performed by people in their everyday lives. Similar to the manner in which possible selves regulate an individual's current behaviour, within dramaturgical thinking, so too do the expectations of audiences and different social environments influence an individual's presentation of their own appropriate self (Goffman, 1959). The nature of the front stage performance of individuals can be determined not only by the expectation of differing social

audiences but by the motivational function of possible selves. Hamman et al (2010) explain that the addition of the 'possible' to the self-concept provides a lens for examining self-views that encompass a future orientation. The advantage in considering an athlete's identity and self-presentation in terms of possible selves, in the context of developmental and contextual questions surrounding the on-going management of their identities, lies in the construction of an approach that shapes the idea of the *presentation of possible selves in everyday life.* In other words, the identity and performances offered by professional athletes are not only influenced by the expectations of their audiences but by the motivational weight of their many possible selves.

Research Design, Methods & Methodology

It is our contention that recent empirical evidence offered in qualitative research on the career transitions of athletes fails to capture effectively taken-for-granted and largely unarticulated understandings, which reflect accurately the experiences of professional athletes (Park et al, 2013). Qualitative research should apprehend faux self-presentations ideally to explore social relations that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of the common sense approach of individuals: in this case UK professional footballers. Encouraged by Sparkes and Smith (2013) use of vignettes while researching issues that were highly sensitive to their participants, in this article on the identity management of footballers following an early or unplanned career transition from their professional clubs, the purpose of employing vignettes as a methodological devise was to enable the exploration of perceptions of personal and public successes, accomplishments, failures and disappointments.

Offering vignettes as a platform for extended discussion in the context of semi-structured interviews provided a strategy to lessen participants' feelings of vulnerability, which enabled them to engage with the topic and explore their own feelings about these events without initially being an 'open book'. Respondents were invited to imagine, drawing on their own experiences, how the central characters in each vignette might behave. In the light of the closed nature of the profession of football, utilising vignettes offered a research method that proved sensitive to the experiences of participants and helpful in eliciting data.

The Sample

The construction of a sample for this study was challenging principally for two reasons: firstly, players are sensitive to the research topic, and secondly, Premier League football clubs are notoriously sceptical of academic research and largely

operate a closed door approach to outsiders. Academics that gain access are typically fed a *'party line'* – a partial or clichéd but superficial representation – with regard to players' experiences within this workplace. 20 Premier League clubs were contacted initially of which six clubs responded and two extended an invitation to meet players. Additionally, players who had been released from Premier League clubs were contacted independently. A purposive sample of ten participants was finally generated however this sample type was not randomly selected and should not be considered representative of a broader population of footballers. Rather, it more closely resembles a panel of expert informants, which results in a body of coherent testimony.

This purposive sampling method, which has been widely used in qualitative sociological research, generated ten former Premier League players-as-research participants who were met three times, with each meeting ranging from 1 - 2.5 hours. In total 30 interviews were conducted for the project. Criteria for selection required *all* participants to have been released from Premier League clubs and to have experienced a career transition away from the club or football for no longer than seven years in order to minimize recall bias (Kadlcik and Flemr, 2008). A total of six out of ten participants were within a year of their release from Premier League employment. All participants were male, ranged in age from 18-33 years, and experienced their release from Premier League clubs between the ages of 18-26. Further demographic data has been omitted in order to protect and ensure participant anonymity.

Constructing Vignettes

Internal validity or plausibility is a crucial factor to consider in constructing vignettes. The appropriateness of the vignette to the research topic, the kinds of participants involved, and the interest, relevance, realism and timing of the vignettes in the research encounter must all be considered. Scenarios that are viewed by participants as plausible are likely to produce rich data about how actors interpret lived-experiences (Hughes, 1998; Jenkins et al, 2010). Semi-structured interviews were undertaken initially with five former professional players – who are not part of the study's sample – who had experienced career transition, each of whom was recruited via personal contacts. These five interviewees agreed to form an authoritative panel to help co-construct three vignettes and verify plausibility. In interview, each of the five participants were guided to discuss their career transition away from football and also

- Their experiences of professional football and daily life at the club.
- The experience of being told, and how they reacted to, news of their 'release'.
- How they acted post release in front of friends, family and (former) teammates.
- How they thought about themselves, their futures and how that motivated their behaviour at the time.

From the experiences shared by these participants, three vignettes were developed, each one the owner of a particular narrative that reflects the work of Frank (1995). A singular vignette was devoted to a Restitution Narrative, a Quest Narrative and a Chaos Narrative, and the narratives of each vignette informed the actions and emotions of its fictional protagonist accordingly. Smith and Sparkes (2004) suggest that the *restitution narrative* has similarities with the restored self and the entrenched self as described by Charmaz (1983), which locks individuals into past self-relationships and ways of being in the world with the hope that they will return to this state. The *quest narrative* offers an outline of how protagonists meet challenges head on, with the characters accepting challenge and opposition, seeking to use them as motivation and catalysts for change (Smith and Sparkes, 2004). The *chaos narrative* is the inverse of restitution narratives, since here the plot imagines life never getting better: the individual is entrapped in confusion and sadness.

The mechanics of each vignette contained sequentially four types of components:

1. The protagonist's story provided respondents with material (e.g., life as a professional footballer) with which they could relate in order to promote plausibility.
2. The event of the protagonist's release; how they felt and how they acted.
3. How the protagonist saw themselves in the face of others, such as family, former teammates and friends.
4. How the player saw themselves in the future, and their feeling towards this future self.

After the first component, the three remaining ordered elements related to the theoretical framework employed to examine notions of identity management, including specifically Goffman's dramaturgical metaphor (1959), Markus and Nurius's (1986) notion of possible selves, and the idea of the release from a club as transitional episodes.

Participants were met individually three times with one meeting devoted to each vignette. Players were presented with a physical copy of the vignette and listened to a recording of the vignette via headphones. They were asked

subsequently for their feelings on each. Key points raised by participants were explored and as this conversation advanced the interview developed from the participants providing informed comments about events within each vignette to sharing personal reflections and experiences of their respective career transition. Data generated from this vignette-based research offer a constructed reality, based on the co-constructed meanings people attach to their own intentions, motives and actions and those of others (Smith, 1989). This interpretive-orientated methodological approach is alternatively positioned to countless empiricist counterparts in relation to the subject matter of identify management and career transitions.

Data Analysis

The analysis of data was influenced by the direction offered by Chapman (2009) who describes data analysis as a tripartite structure with movement between whole-parts-whole. In accordance with this method and using the qualitative software programme NVivo 8 to aid associated analysis tasks, data were examined so as to become familiar with the whole text, and as a way of uncovering overall themes. Next the essential meaning units of the experiences participants shared in interview were subject to examination and reflection. Following this, the meaning units were arranged into meaning clusters; clusters with similar meaning were then linked together. Chapman (2009) describes how this holistic and dynamic process allows for change within the configuration of meaning clusters as relations between participants and the individuals within their differing social networks were identified and developed. Finally the text was treated as a whole with the aim of revealing the essential structure of issues being investigated. Throughout this period the central theoretical ideas – dramatic realisation and possible selves – sensitized the process of analysis, which informed the creation of meaning units and clusters of meanings. Issues of gender, class and ethnicity are not addressed. In initial conversation with expert panel members few depictions integrated elements of gender, class and ethnicity explicitly. The purposive sample comprised ten players from differing social class and ethnic backgrounds but this investigation did not have appropriate foundation to offer informed observations on such structural issues. The clear advantage of this methodological approach was that it offered an innovative way to elicit conversation on potentially sensitive life experiences from a hard to reach sample. It is hoped that such a process can be offered to future researchers as means of approaching data collection (particularly but not exclusively to sensitive

research topics), and is proposed as an addition to the strategies in which vignettes have been employed in the past.

The presentation of Possible Selves in Everyday Life

The data collected shed light on the experiences of interviewees of career transitions from Premier League football and demonstrate the practicality of a conceptual framework that combines dramaturgy and possible selves approaches as an organising structure, and how such a conceptual integration provides a working hypothesis of identities in flux. To assist in building our argument and making sense of the data, and in order to capture important, but routine features of identity management for these professional athletes, the following discussion presents the on-going efforts of footballers-as-research participants to (i) maintain (re)constructed footballing identities, (ii) engage with non-footballing identities, and (iii) experience the influence of (non)supportive audiences, as they transition from this work. We contend that the notion of the management of identities in flux offers a credible and empirically-grounded alternative and offers a paradigm that articulates work-based activities and relations with non-work activities and relations.

i) Reconstructing and maintaining football identities

In first considering how the notion of possible selves could be better employed to understand the identity management of players, research participants spoke of picturing themselves in the future throughout their professional careers. The following sentiments highlight how players envisage their trajectory during the course of their working lives prior to their career transitions and demonstrate how such notions of possible selves provide a perspective from which to seek and understand such discourses:

> The dream was to make it. And then the fear was of being released. It motivated you every day at the club. What do I need to do? How do I need to play? (James)

> The whole time you are there as a player, you picture yourself there training … and pushing for games. You have to have that idea in your head otherwise it will never become a reality. I thought about that everyday I was pro. (Ian)

> It's on your mind all the time when you are in there [the football club]. You

> hope, am I going to make it? And you worry, are they going to send me home? (Ed)

> I had like this picture of me mam and like me kinda letting her down or disappointing her and me Dad ... depends on how I was playing but it was definitely there in the back of my head. (Dave)

The goals and ambitions (*possible* hopes and fears) of participants can be considered 'roadmaps' to which in time they may move toward or away, but which help inform and guide their judgments and behaviour.

     In his description of his move from the Premier League Harry's comments below depict two very clear possible selves fulfilling their role in the management of his footballing identity: a hoped-for possible self influenced and legitimised by others employed in football who have experienced a similar 'downward' career transition and a feared possible self of being judged a footballing failure by a wider social audience. As part of his transition, Harry's future-oriented selves represent what he would like to become (hoped-for selves) and what he wants to avoid (feared selves) (Hamman et al, 2010). Harry's possible selves operate as a behavioural 'blueprint':

> I knew [footballer] from his time in the Premier League and now he was in lower League Football. He was … earning competitive money as a pro … and people respected him. So I aimed to get to where he was. I was still a footballer and that mattered to me … I didn't want people to think I 'just gave up' or that I 'was never good enough from the start'. I wanted to show people that I had what it took … and I got a lot respect for that. (Harry)

Similarly Ian conveyed that he was often motivated by a sense of wanting to avoid 'that picture of not amounting to something' and an ambition to 'make it' as a footballer. Following his release, his perception was that the attitude with which he approached his time on trial with clubs conveyed to new audiences his desire to continue to play professionally via performances that were expected within the cultural environment of professional football. The possible selves evident in his statement exert a motivational influence such that his present line of action is preserved. As an outcome of his previous experience within the Premier League, Ian held the vision of what he wanted to become, thus persevering with his aspiration to 'make it':

The managers want to hear that you want to be back up again [in the Premier League] because they know then you are motivated to really push yourself and work hard. I would show in training that I meant business, then in the meeting I told them that I am the type of player who wanted to make it back up and just try and *show* how bad I really wanted it. (Ian)

Pairing his feared and hoped for possible selves as motivation for current behaviour while on loan to new clubs, Ian's future becomes his 'primary motivational space' (Nuttin, 1984, p.54) to achieve his goals of 'making it' and avoid undesirable outcomes. The data presented indicate strongly that the possible selves of participants played a crucial role in managing 'front stage' performances offered to audiences within the footballing workplace in terms of whether they were judged culturally legitimate or illegitimate. Motivated and influenced by their different possible selves, both Ian and Harry's attempts to maintain their footballing identities offered performances that were judged as legitimate by their footballing peers acting as their respective social audiences, and are anticipated within the cultural environment of professional football.

ii) Engagement with non-footballing identities

The idea that athletes are sociologically comprehensible in relation to an exclusive athletic identity is a prevalent explanatory theme of athletic career transition research (Park et al, 2013). An approach of this kind however is not consistent with sentiments expressed by research interviewees here. Contesting existing literature we argue instead that the social selves of athletes are more accurately understood as a combination of multiple and overlapping identities. Although essentially erased from previous career transition theorising, our point is that, upon entering their respective clubs as places of employment, research participants discussed their identities as 'footballers', but they also spoke in interview of being a son, brother, friend, and student. In other words, the possible selves and performances attached to their respective non-footballing identities did not simply disappear, rather these identities played a less prominent role within identity management strategies while subsequent performances and possible selves belonging to their identities within the footballing environment came prominently to the fore. Harry sums up this idea simply when he quite directly states, 'you have to be able to leave football at football and home at home'.

Commenting on the significance of non-football identities and the importance of the manner in which individuals re-engage, manage and construct such identities as part of their career transition, perhaps one of the most powerful comments from all participants was articulated by James. When discussing the event of his release, James admitted that even though he knew it was coming, his official departure from the club was a fateful event he found both socially difficult (within the environment of his club) and emotionally tough. James outlined his experiences of returning home however, as the research encounter progressed, at one point the interviewer inaccurately anticipates the manner with which James found his subsequent interactions with friends and family:

Interviewer: With being released and moving out of big time football, was it difficult to be around your friends and family?
James: Ha-ha. No mate!
Interviewer: Oh sorry. Is it all right to ask why not?
James: I have been around the lads and my family my whole life. I don't mean to be short but like I have known my family longer and some of my good mates longer than I was with [names club]. What I have with them goes way beyond anything I was doing with my football.

James emphasises the identities of *son* and *friend* in this response, yet they may not have been portrayed as readily in the past as they are now. The obvious confidence of his performances when faced with familiar audiences, and his readiness to present himself in this fashion following his release, speaks to a secure sense of self away from football.

While concurrently acknowledging its substantial significance, we stress the importance of a conceptual approach that reaches beyond the cultural context of professional football. In short, the data represented here indicate strongly the importance of social others outside immediate football domains. The influence of the families of participants and time spent with friends are all interconnected social environments where participants received education, feedback, and models of emulation of dramatically realised identities. For Dave and Ed, for example, their football identities were concurrently wrapped up in alternative ideas of attending university and learning a trade. Similar to notions offered by Stronach and Adair (2010) highlighting the social importance of athletes' families, both interviewees expressed how audiences such as family members offered their own respective

performances signifying their dramatic realisation of these pre-existing, non-footballing identities:

> I'd got the chance to play football with a great club and obviously took it and it didn't work out...But the whole time I was at the club (playing and training), my dad would pick me up from training and drive me to college where I did classes in the evening...I wanted to have my A levels to just have the option of some day going to uni [University]. To my family I wasn't just a footballer. [Football] was important to me but I was also the little brother and son studying in the evening and trying to make a go of football all at the same [time]. It just seemed natural then when things didn't work out to apply for uni and everyone in the family was like 'well obviously' - ha-ha. Reaching that goal of getting into university has been great. (Dave)

> Even when I was playing like I could see myself doing this [working in a trade]. Like I was upset [after being released], things didn't work out on trial and I just wasn't enjoying my football any more. My uncles worked as a bricky and a joiner. During the summers I always worked with them on site even when I was playing. I really enjoyed the joinery side of it, like working with the wood and all. I always made sure I worked hard for them, they're me uncles like so *they'd go through you* like [be angry if you didn't do a good job]. They never treated us any different cause I was signed to here or there. They just saw me as their hard working nephew. (Ed)

Ed and Dave engaged with elements of their self not bound to their footballing identities and respective performances within such an environment. Contrary to existing ideas of exclusive athletic identities and identity foreclosure (e.g. Brown and Potrac, 2009; Marcia et al 1993; Mitchell et al, 2014; Ogilvie and Taylor, 1993; Petitpas, 1978), both of the above extracts illustrate how participants' social self possessed multiple identities, both footballing and non-footballing, that were influenced by possible selves held by participants and social others within non-footballing audiences.

Dave explains how his family did not consider him as 'just a footballer'. This seems to make his transition away from being a footballer an easier one as his performance of a student with a possible self of attending university is one that has

long been established and dramatically realised by family members. Ed explains that even while playing he held the possible self of working as a joiner and how his uncles never considered him narrowly as 'their nephew the footballer'. Ed had worked on site with his uncles for years so his identity as 'their nephew the tradesman' was one that was already legitimised. As part of his career transition Ed describes how his uncles did not view him as having failed, rather they recognised him as their nephew and legitimised his identity as someone who wanted to learn a specific craft and enter the construction industry. The above data illustrate how, influenced by possible selves, the greater the extent to which performances pertaining to non-footballing identities were dramatically realised, developed, and legitimised by social audiences, the greater the chances participants stood of experiencing smoother career transitions.

iii) Non-supportive audiences

Existing research exposes the hardships individuals experience during the process of sporting career transition (Kadlcik & Flemr, 2008; Lavallee & Robinson, 2007), yet offers little in terms of explanations of these fateful transitioning events as *social* – as opposed to entirely *individualised* – discourses. Even so, the interviewee data here evidence indisputably that the turbulent career transitions of players were closely linked to social audiences failing to dramatically realise and legitimise their possible selves and their subsequent management of identity. For instance, in his efforts to negotiate the process of his identity management it is clear that Gary was influenced by the performances of his friends outside football, and how this impacted and continues to impact on his aspirations for the future:

> To be honest I didn't really know what to do next, my family were dead behind me still. I was thinking of going back to college. My mates all outside of football put us off that quite a bit actually. They took the piss massively. They gave us banter … saying I was 'stupid and one of these creepy *mature students* at college'. Looking at it … it's a big reason I didn't go (back) to college. Not having their support was tough. (Gary)

The dilemma faced by Gary is clear. He mentions the support of his family, however it is interaction with close non-workplace friends that offers an insight into the influence of a non-supportive audience and the development of a feared possible self. While Gary held a possible self that involved him returning to college, this possible alternative student identity was met with 'banter' – on-going passive-

aggressive joking – and this particular audience conveyed to him that this new identity would not be dramatically realised. Gary's *student* possible self, subsequent performance and identity were deemed illegitimate. In describing his career transition such discourses contributed to 'making it harder to move on to something that has direction and purpose … it's been tough'.

In contrast, Paul's efforts to maintain his footballing identity were disallowed by coaches who did not feel he warranted an employment contract extension. Sentiments expressed by Paul suggest that even when players have been or know they are going to be released, there continues to be a critical need for them to enact displays of professionalism to avoid the potential for negative reputational 'gossip'. Many interviewees acknowledge that as a player you accept your place, at least in 'front regions'. Players – like Paul quoted below – who knew they were not going to have their contracts renewed and would be released at the end of the season were treated at times as a 'training mule ... you just have to fill in wherever you're told and in the drills, some days you just have to stand around cause the training isn't geared towards you specifically'. He went on to make the following point:

> Puttin' a challenge in [an aggressive tackle] is a huge part of my football. But then they wanted you to stop…and just play and train the way they want you to…nice and soft like…it was frustrating. I still could see myself getting picked up by someone else [another team] and they obviously thought I didn't have what it took. I couldn't take it any more and just lost it with [coach] and we had a massive row and falling out. (Paul)

Paul's attempts to maintain his footballing identity fail to be dramatically realised. Although he acknowledged that he understood the process by which his footballing identity would have to be reconstructed and the type of performances that accompanied this reformulation of identity, Paul failed to offer a performance deemed appropriate to his new position and identity in the club. His own coaches refuse to dramatically realise his hard, challenging on-field training style and thus his efforts to negotiate his new football identity were not legitimised by his audience. Motivated by a similar pairing of hoped for and negative possible selves (as exemplified by Ian and Harry), Paul explained how he 'came to blows' with coaching staff because the performance he was expected to offer his audience conflicted with the hoped for possible self that motivated his efforts to maintain his footballing identity. The possible selves shown in the comments of Ian, Harry and Paul are like self-schemata that are influenced by intra-personal goals and inter-personal activity. Supporting the

work of Erikson (2007), Harry, Ian and Paul's efforts to maintain and (re)construct their footballing identities provide clear evidence that demonstrates how their possible selves influenced the regulation of their behaviour and correspondingly their identity management.

When reflecting on his career transition, Shane discussed the process of moving back home. Motivated by the possible self of signing for a new club and returning to the professional game, he continued to train, often by himself, in order to maintain his athletic competency and footballing ability. Even though his status as a footballer is threatened post release, maintaining fitness and training can be considered a strategy by which Shane attempted to shore up his now vulnerable identity. Like Gary, Shane's comments deal with the issue of non-supportive audiences outside of football following his return home:

> I would say people, one or two real friends, really get behind me. Like recently I was at a party and some people be saying shit about us. They just are hating. They don't know me. I know I have what it takes. But when people be talking shit man it gets us crazy…But they see me not playing [for a club] right now or I'm in the gym at home and they can give chat like, 'you aint a real player anymore cause if you were you wouldn't be in here'. I know I just gotta not let it effect me and my plans … I use it as motivation. I just store it up and use it as fuel. (Shane)

Shane's positive possible self of returning to professional football is formed through a combination of his past experiences of playing for a Premier League club, his hopes for the future, and his performances portraying an identity associated and influenced by such a possible self being dramatically realised and legitimised by some close friends. His feared possible self of failing to make it as a professional footballer is formed through a combination of his experience of being released from a Premier League club, his fears for the future, and Shane dramatically realising the performances of his wider social audience that convey their failure to recognise and legitimise his attempts to maintain his footballing identity. It is in the social context of these challenging perspectives and their dual presence in his everyday life – the dynamic interaction between paired positive and negative possible selves – that Shane undertakes the process of developing and managing a footballing identity as part of his career transition.

Discussion and conclusion

It has been our consistent argument that professional athletes are not theoretically reducible to a solitary identity and contend here that, by mechanically regurgitating the idea of an exclusive athletic identity as the principle conceptual means by which to explain processes of identity work, the body of career transitions literature has tended to impoverish the fragmented and diverse nature of the self-identities of elite and professional athletes. This monadic approach treats them as self-contained beings whose social bonds are not primary, but rather are of secondary importance in their existence (Burkitt, 2008). A good illustration of this is summarized in relation to the idea that athletes have limited opportunities to engage meaningfully in the exploration of life 'outside' sport (Lavallee and Robinson, 2007). Rather than being treated as a factor which somehow impinges on an athlete's life – often discussed in terms of social support as a coping resource (North and Lavallee, 2004) – we explain that athletes present social selves in their everyday lives in accordance with the ways in which their social contexts come to have meaning for them. Individuality is socially-based and the emotions, consciousness, needs and strivings of athletes are socially interconnected: it is through connectivities at all levels that identities are forged (Lawler, 2008). Theorising an apparent separation between sporting and other social realms in athletes' lives obscures the important interdependence between the social relations in each sphere and the lifetime consequences of these.

This article has sought to illustrate empirically how meaningful identity management struggles often arose when athletes' presentation of possible selves – their social performances – ran counter to that expected of individuals in their (new) marginal sporting roles and were deemed illegitimate and not dramatically realised by critical social others. Interviewee data indicate that it is on these occasions that the career transitions of athletes and their subsequent identity management proved to be the most discordant. Considering the notions of performance, the influence of an audience, and supported by selected research data this article provides a clear demonstration of a development of *the presentation of possible selves in everyday life*: this approach slices the reality of involuntary exit from professional sport in a fashion, which directs attention to diverse linkages, blurring the boundaries between work and non work relations and their interface in the overall transitional process. Thus, pairing Goffman's dramaturgical analogy and Markus and Nurius's notion of possible selves offers a chance to acquire a more identity-sensitive understanding of what is really happening to many individual professional athletes as they transition from sport. In other words, performances and the roles played are influenced by a combination of the many possibilities an individual sees in their future, whether desired or not, the presence of an audience, how such an audience engages with the

on-going performance, and how such a performance becomes dramatically realised. We remain faithful to Goffman's (1959) idea that to be a person is to *perform* being a person. Even so, we need also to be sensitive to the distinction between performances that are convincing and those that are unconvincing, those performances that work and those that do not in athletes' immediate social realms. We are not suggesting that, motivated to avoid a feared possible self or driven to attain a desired one, athletes consciously manipulate or attempt to fraud those around them. We consider instead the assumption that the performances of an identity are an inevitable and on-going social process and, to this end, we avoid reducing the theorising of identity management in relation to static notions of exclusivity or foreclosure. The self-identity, its construction and management, with regard to the footballers-as-research participants of this study can be understood as a social product in following three senses:

First, self-identity is a product of the performances that individuals put on in social situations: for example their reactions when it is first confirmed that they are going to be released, the manner in which they present themselves subsequently when around family and friends, and how they take part in activities in new clubs or at their original club in the hope of impressing coaches who may use their 'footballing capital' to help find new work. It is our sociological understanding that there is no essential core 'inside' the players waiting to be given expression in social situations, which underpin performances. Rather, the sense of self of individuals arises as a result of publicly validated performance.

Second, even though participants perform an active role in fashioning these self-indicating performances, they are generally constrained to images of themselves that can be socially supported in the context of a given status hierarchy. Thus, the selves of individuals are a social product in the sense that they depend upon validation awarded and withheld in accordance with the normative stances of critical social audiences.

Third, the development of a framework for understanding the construction and management of the self-identities of individuals, who they are and how they present themselves, is influenced by the dual motivational effects of a feared possible self matched with a hoped for possible self. The data presented in this article indicate that, following their release, for example, if former players can still fathom or conceive of themselves to be professional footballers – as possible selves – they have the ability to engage with their social audience as one. In order though for such a future self to have a behavioural impact it must be paired equally with a future self that is feared. This feared self may not be a player unable to play for a

football club, it may be the individual unable to earn an income that befits their perception of their worth, or being judged a failure by social others. Possible selves though must always be rooted in social experiences. The performances of participants influenced by these possible selves and supported by their social context strengthen their chances to have their identities dramatically realised by their differing but interdependent audiences.

This framework provides a foundation from which to offer an alternative and more authentic understanding of the identity management of individuals experiencing their career transition from professional sport. With six research participants experiencing their career transition at the same time as they took part in the study, the majority of the sample was interviewed three times whilst experiencing their transitions away from Premier League football. Their identities could not be considered static – as essential selves – but are the outcome of the configuring of personal events, which include not only what has been but also 'anticipations of what will be' (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.150). As creative and dynamic social processes, an individual's multiplicity of social selves contain a temporal dimension, not only images of current selves but also images that are placed in the future as possible selves and possible identities (Markus and Nurius, 1987). As Goffman (1959, p.245) indicates: 'The self, then as a performed character, is not an organic thing, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, and to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented, and the characteristic issue, the crucial concern, is whether it will be credited or discredited'. This conceptualisation of self is empirically underpinned in this article by the idea that different identities come to the fore dependent on a combination of varying audiences, social contexts and possible selves. Osyermann, Ager and Grant (1995) explain how identities are constructed from the scaffolding of an individual's social contexts and are represented and reproduced in relationships with others.

Drawer and Fuller (2002) recommended that the soccer industry should further develop long-term strategies for managing the needs of players who are released from their clubs. We have argued here that, when players experience social environments where their audiences legitimised possible selves, generally these were uncertain periods when individuals' career transitions proved to be smoother. We contend therefore that the identities players bring to football should be enabled and legitimised from entry points into the profession, moving them away from the felt constraint to present only narrow athletic identities to critical audiences and consider (perhaps regret) only subsequently the psycho-social implications of these as they depart. There is a need to re-conceptualise career transition as social processes in

this employment context rather than treating such passages of vulnerability as isolated personal experiences, and to encourage players to engage with the potential possible selves available to them. Through the promotion and dramatic realisation of possible selves outside footballing environments, we believe club personnel – for example, youth coaches and educational and welfare officers – can play an important role in *cooling out* players experiencing career transitions. This process is not carried out for the benefit of clubs but, rather, in order to help (former) players-as-employees and in turn assist them in their identity management and reconstruction.

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[i] By employing the idea of possible selves developed by Markus and Nurius (1986) we recognize that we draw heavily on a social psychological approach, which is based on the cognitive understandings a person maintains about who they are now and in the future. Our argument thus melds this social psychological approach into our sociological one to help shine an innovative light on how identities are managed and may transform as an outcome of exposure to alternative social contexts and structures.