Athlete experiences of mental health disclosure and help seeking behaviour in amateur and professional basketball

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This study addressed mental health disclosure and help seeking behavior from the perspective of athletes who have transitioned from amateur to professional basketball. Adopting a constructivist approach, six male professional basketball players (range 22-34 years) were interviewed utilizing a semi structured approach. Results showed that all of the athletes struggled with their mental health at different stages throughout their career. All athletes reported that stigma around mental health is still prevalent in sport. Barriers to seeking support emerged as a result of trust issues associated with a pernicious coach-athlete power differential, a lack of support during career transitions and a reluctance to confide in support staff from a different ethnicity. Implications are forwarded for coaches in the creation of psychologically safe environments and the way that individuals are supported throughout their athletic career.

KEY WORDS: Mental Health, Stigma, Interpersonal Relationships.

Introduction

Although the concept of mental health is framed by the values and culture of a particular country some universal truths transcend that speak to the significance of this marker of well-being on a global scale (Galderisi, Heinz et al., 2015). The World Health Organization (WHO) define mental health (MH) as "a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (World Health Organization, 2022). Good mental health contributes to enhanced resilience and goal directed, motivated behavior (Smith, Ntoumanis et al., 2011) with poor mental health linked to disruptions in decision making, reduced pro-

ductivity, and overall reductions in wellbeing (Watson, 2005). With reference to the athletic domain and team sport settings, over a twelve month period 37% of professional male footballers (Gouttebarge, Aoki et al., 2017) and 28% of professional male rugby players (Gouttebarge, Hopley et al., 2018) reported elevated anxiety/depression with sleep disturbance (19% and 12% respectively) and alcohol misuse (14% and 22% respectively) also featuring as symptoms of common mental health disorders. Significantly, at the U.S. collegiate level basketball (male and female) returned the highest rate of clinically relevant depressive symptoms when compared against other team sports (Wolanin, Hong et al., 2016). Research has shown that mental health in high performing athletes is worse (Nixdorf, Frank et al., 2013) or similar to non-athletic samples (Bar & Markser, 2013).

Stigmatization of mental health in sport endures with mental health and mental toughness being conflated (Poucher, Tamminen et al., 2021). Such confusion or lack of mental health literacy has led to athlete concerns around appearing 'weak' leading to anxiety around the ramifications this has for team selection, recruitment and career progression (Bauman, 2016). In this light it has been shown that college athletes perceive greater levels of public stigma and prejudice towards mental ill health than is found in the wider population (Davis & Cromer, 2015). This is particularly the case in males who, compared to females, report lower stigma-related intentions to socialize with individuals who are living with a mental health condition (Breslin, Shannon et al., 2019). Overall athletes have been shown to be less likely to seek support for mental health issues (Watson, 2005b), more likely to conceal their illness (Gucciardi, 2017) and cite stigma as the most significant barrier to seeking support for a mental health condition (Gulliver, Griffiths et al., 2010). Student-athletes in the U.S. have recently reported an awareness of mental health support services in their respective colleges (69%) however only 48% of athletes feel comfortable seeking support with this figure dropping to 42% in the case of Black athletes (NCAA, 2022). In response, experienced clinicians have reported that by way of coping, athletes often embrace a culture of "non-disclosure" which is reflected throughout an athlete's amateur and professional career in a tendency to avoid seeking help (Hill, MacNamara et al., 2015).

With 21% of the eligible male draft picks in 2019 progressing to play professional basketball (878 players, NCAA, 2020) it is evident that a significant number of players transition from amateur to professional basketball. Furthermore, the intersection of gender with ethnicity positions Black, male athletes at greatest risk of experiencing a mental health condition and more likely to actively avoid disclosure. Greater insight around factors leading to poor mental health and barriers to disclosure in basketball would mean that coaches, administrators

and support staff would be better able to fulfil their duty of care for all athletes as they either progress through, or transition out of the sport.

Methods

STUDY DESIGN

This study adopted a constructivist approach whereby the goal was not to find a single truth, but explore all truths, meaning that truth is relative to the individual and constructed by a combination of the individual and society (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008). The interview methods and analysis necessitated a double hermeneutic whereby the researcher and participant join to explore and interpret lived experience. The adoption of a convenience, stratified sampling approach meant that the interviewer was known to the participants, had a similar competitive level to the athletes being interviewed and had also transitioned from the U.S. collegiate system into professional basketball. It was felt that shared experience coupled with established rapport and trust would create a safe space for the participant to voice their authentic self and promote depth of introspection.

PARTICIPANTS

Six male professional basketball players (range 22 to 34 years old), two identifying as white, three as black and one as mixed heritage, were recruited for the study. All participants were presented with an outline of the requirements of the study prior to providing informed consent. An a priori judgement was made that the semi structured nature of data collection, informed by an interview script, meant that a small sample size would be sufficient to elucidate the aims of the study (Patton, 2015). The sample size was continuously evaluated during the research process with the eventual results displaying sufficient "information power" (Malterud, Siersma, et al., 2016). A combination of a narrow study aim, participants holding characteristics highly specific to the study, an established literature base, strong patterns of dialogue and results that sought depth rather than reaching for cross case analysis all led to a decision to employ a small but information rich sample of participants.

The participants had all played four years of college basketball in the United States at Division 1 or Division 2 level prior to turning professional. Post-graduation the participants had played in the top professional league in a range of countries: Australia (1 year), UK (4 years), Israel (8 years), Cyprus (1 year), Ireland (3 years), Germany (5 years), Brazil (3 years), France (1 year), Portugal (1 year) with an average of 5.4 years playing professional basketball. At the time of interviewing all the participants were still active at a professional level. The study received ethical approval from the lead author's institution.

Procedure

The participants engaged in a semi-structured interview (Mean Time = 55.84 minutes, SD = 12.25) with the interview narrative being co-created

by the participant and interviewer who journeyed alongside each other in a collaborative exploration of lived experience. This positionality was adopted because it was felt that the sensitive nature of the content being discussed necessitated a purposeful lessening of any perceived power imbalance that might be present in a more traditional interviewer-participant dyad (Kvale, 2006). Following a semi-structured approach each interview explored the broad concept of mental health as experienced in three distinct areas: 1) experiences in college, professional basketball, and the transitions within and between these stages of career, 2) barriers to disclosure of MH conditions and 3) good practice experienced in support for, and reduction of, conditions linked to negative MH. Questions included, for example, "reflecting on the first few weeks of term (with the new professional team) can you describe any experiences that served to either help you settle in or alternatively made life a little harder for you at that time?" and "what were your experiences of the informal or formal support available around the team and was this easily accessible?". The interviews were recorded and stored securely online in a password protected location. The interviews were completed in a private room to ensure confidentiality. Participant information and pseudonyms were stored in a separate location to the interview files and coding of interview transcripts ensured anonymity was maintained throughout data analysis and presentation of the results. At the end of the interview the participants were thanked for their involvement and offered the opportunity to contact the second author who is a British Association of Sport and Exercise Sciences accredited practitioner if they wished to discuss anything that had been covered during the interview.

Data Analysis

The data was subjected to a thematic narrative analysis from the perspective of a storyanalyst (Smith, 2016). This approach was informed by participant accounts that followed a chronological order tracking progression through College and in to professional sport, coupled with meaningful data that was understood by the participants with reference to place, time and culture (Fasting & Sand, 2015). Analysis followed Smith's (2016) guidelines which involved: 1) transcription immediately after each interview, 2) immersion through reading of the interview transcripts coupled with the formation of notes, 3) identifying themes and relationships that run through the accounts, and 4) describing and interpreting the theme enriched by insights from other research. The interviews yielded 106 pages of transcribed data.

It was hoped that this story based approach would promote a connection between the participants and the reader enabling the reader to better immerse themselves in the athlete's lived experience (Strean, 1998). Rigor was enhanced through the implementation of Smith and McGannon's (2018) recommendations around the use of member reflections and the deployment of a critical friend. More specifically, once transcribed and analysed the researcher and participant explored the data together with the intention of identifying gaps in understanding and addressing misinterpretation. These "member reflections" (Smith and McGannon, 2018; p.108) occurred two days after each interview which reduced the potential for memory decay and extended data capture rather than operating solely as a process to check the truthfulness of the data. The second author served as a critical friend challenging the lead author's interpretation of the participant's experience and probing for alternative explanations. The intention was not to arrive at consensus but promote a deeper level of self-reflection on the part of the interviewer. This enhanced consideration of one's own positionality promotes separation of the interviewer from the data whilst acknowledging that total abstraction is never truly possible.

Results

Based on the emergent themes the athlete accounts have been structured under four headings: stressors, stigma, career progression and ethnicity.

STRESSORS

All the athletes spoke about the unique stressors they experienced throughout their career. Sean spoke about personal and emotional stressors, including a lack of friends early in a career transition, loneliness, and a profound sense of culture shock when moving to a professional team. All of the athletes expressed how stressors experienced during the transition from high school to college and college to professional sport took a toll on their mental health. Sean reflected on his transition to a professional team:

> *I'm very mentally strong, but I don't think I was prepared, I don't think I was ready for such a big shift to, like, take yourself all the way out of your element […] and I don't speak Portuguese, nobody spoke English really, huge language barrier […] I got to experience all the politics [overseas]. And that weighs heavy on you, especially when you don't have someone to talk to or explain it to […]*

For Sean a combination of deteriorating mental health and a language barrier caused an inability to build relationships;

"[…] I really didn't want to hang out. I didn't want to go get food after practice. I didn't want to like be around anyone […] I finally started to get adjusted but honestly it was not getting better".

In referring to both his College and professional career Denzel spoke about *"basketball politics"* which captured a perceived lack of playtime, inconsistent coaching decisions and favoritism of certain team members. Inconsistencies in coach behaviour and the lack of a coherent coaching philosophy was perceived by all athletes to result in a dysfunctional and maladaptive team culture. Focusing specifically on their career post College, all the participants spoke about how tough it is being a rookie playing professionally overseas. Loneliness, lack of familiarity, problems relating to teammates, coaches and your surroundings, being far from home and difficulties with settling in were reported. Dijon spoke about his experience being a rookie in a country that he was not familiar with;

When we used to go out as a team a lot of the time the security outside the bars or clubs or whatever would refuse to let the Black athletes in […] even in groups where there was clearly people from there [from that country] with us they just wouldn't let anyone in. It was something we just got used to […].

Sean and Adam both spoke about how they struggled in the beginning due to loneliness. Difficulties with social integration were compounded by fears of jeopardizing relationships the athletes had not yet built leading to a general lack of trust and inability to live as one's authentic self. This was a source of stress connected to the athlete's wellbeing and career progression. In Adams case this was felt in his relationship with the coach; *"if you go to your coach and say you have confidence issues he probably won't want to play you in the crunch time of a game"*. Denzel had a similar experience only his was with the assistant coach:

I remember in college I went in and spoke with an assistant coach briefly expressing play time concerns and how it was stressing me out, it was starting to affect my mental health […] I had been there [school] for three years, I put in the time, paid my dues or whatever and now it was my turn to be rewarded, but they kind of recruited over me […] over the next few weeks I definitely felt I was being pushed out.

Brandon dedicated a substantial amount of time to reflecting on the environment and the team's culture. Brandon spoke about how his school was very *"fake"*, where relationships had no substance, and any problems were responded to with toxic positivity and excessive and ineffective optimism*:*

"I had to kind of uphold this positive demeanor throughout my entire years in college. And really, I was angry a lot of the time". In order to cope Brandon adopted a persona that was not authentic, causing emotional labor which over time affected his mental health.

Taken together these accounts highlight a range of stressors that emanate from difficulties establishing and managing interpersonal relationships and these concerns were seen to cut across the athletes experiences in college and professional sport.

STIGMA

All six athletes admitted to struggling with their mental health throughout their careers. Three athletes in particular spoke in detail about their struggles however they all hesitated when it came to reaching out for help. None of the athletes interviewed reached out for support during their professional careers, even though this is the time when they reported they were most in need of professional support, especially in the early stages of transitioning to the new team.

Although pathways of assistance were not highlighted to Denzel he said that even if they had been he would not have gone to speak to anyone;

> *I did not want people to think I was just whining or complaining…….Coach would say that open-door policy and you could go, but it is like going to talk to a politician, they are just going to say whatever to kind of make you feel good.*

Spanning their careers the participants reported that they felt they could not talk to the assistant coaches because their loyalty is to the head coach and not to the player. When asked why he hesitated to seek help, Denzel responded that he *"never felt comfortable talking to anyone affiliated with the team [...] at most I might have spoken with the team trainer"*. Sean commented that stigma within sport is a result of toxic masculinity. Dijon added,

> *the support was there, but you still have the stigma of being an athlete, especially a male athlete, having to have a certain sense of bravado, a certain sense of strength and toughness [...].*

In contrast to the other participants Brandon initially stated that *"there was no stigma within sport"*; however, when asked why he never reached out for support he responded, *"I would not personally reach out"* and then laughed before adding, *"Now I feel like a hypocrite."* Brandon mentioned a lack of awareness around pathways of assistance and that the school counseling services would not understand their situation as a student-athlete and the

stressors that are inherent in holding this status. Dontrell was one of three athletes who was aware of pathways of assistance although he felt that support was better signposted during his time in College than when he played in a professional team. Dontrell spoke about how all team members were required to attend mandatory lectures introducing sports psychologists and counselors. Considering this information Dontrell was asked why he never sought support for his mental health condition, *"I remember sitting there in the bleachers thinking, like, I would never go see this person like only a weak person would ever go see this person."* Dontrell further explained;

> *I did not know anyone else using the resources. I did not really talk to anyone about it. I just kind of held it all inside [...] It must have had something to do with the way I grew up, I did not know of anyone in my family going to therapy or anything or any of my friends doing anything like that.*

Dijon talked about how elite professional athletes, specifically NBA players speaking openly about their own experiences with mental health has helped decrease stigma. This was supported by Adam who said;

> *I think it has been more widely accepted recently over the last couple of years especially with our sport, basketball, Kevin Love, Metta World Peace, DeMar DeRozan, a few of those NBA guys coming forward and talking about their struggles with it.*

CAREER PROGRESSION

All six athletes felt that reaching out for support may influence the coach's/recruiter's behavior towards them in a negative way. Sean reported changes in a coach's behavior towards him e.g., becoming more aloof and ensuring fewer points of contact, when it emerged that he had visited a counsellor to discuss his mental health. Like Sean, Denzel spoke of a time when he reached out and as a result he felt that the coaching staff played him less, avoided communication, and demonstrated a clear disinterest in his progression. None of the athletes interviewed in the study reported having a close relationship with their College or professional coach. Athlete-coach boundaries prevented closeness and open communication.

Five of the athletes reported that the recruitment process made them stressed and anxious. Issues such as where you would go to school, if you would get a full scholarship, apprehensions about moving to certain countries, and indecision around whether you are making the right choice all heightened stress levels. The participants reported that although coaches were interested to hear about how players would adjust to College, to leaving home, and to playing at a professional level, they failed to refer to any pro-

fessional support that would be available whilst on the team or during the transition. The overriding impression of the participants was that coaches expected them to be mentally tough and this would inoculate the players to stressors that they would encounter when playing either College or professional basketball.

ETHNICITY

The participants spoke about their experiences as Black male athletes and the intersection of these identities. These accounts reflected the common theme of 'racism and microaggressions' which were experienced on campus at predominately White schools but also within organisations in their professional team set-ups. Dijon touched upon the stigma associated with being a Black male athlete, *"[you] always have a chip on your shoulder as if you must constantly prove you deserve to be here."* Denzel recounted a story about his hair and how his peers perceived it as flashy because he changed it every two weeks; *"They didn't want to see all that"*. Denzel said it was a *"daily fight with my inner being"* surviving in the sporting environment on top of other stressors. All the participants attributed varying levels of emotional discomfort to training and competing in hostile environments that spanned their career. The participants uniformly reported that 'minor' experiences over the course of their careers had a significant cumulative effect on their well-being. The White and Black athletes in this sample reported many similar experiences of stressors and barriers to disclosure however the White athletes did not report any of these to be linked to their ethnicity.

A key theme that was common across the four athletes of colour was the idea of relatedness. All four athletes spoke about gravitating towards coaches or trainers of color when they decided to reach out and speak to someone for support. These athletes spoke about a lack of relatability or familiarity with White coaching staff and counselors. Denzel commented:

> *"I don't know I just felt my White coaches wouldn't really relate to the experiences of a Black man. I think Black people are more conscious of how race affects their experiences so when looking for support or advice I feel like someone who also understands that would be better fit to help me… personally"*

The accounts of the four athletes of colour serve to support testimony in the wider literature about the role that microaggressions, 'othering' and a lack of belonging play in elevating stress on a daily basis. A preference to speak with Black support staff about mental health concerns provides support for the need to ensure diversity in the recruitment and deployment of

coaching and sports science support teams that work within Collegiate and professional basketball.

Discussion and Future Research

The accounts of the participants in this study highlight; a) athletes experience episodes of mental ill health during both their college and professional careers, b) athletes elect to not disclose their mental health status and c) factors impacting on mental health include negative coach-athlete relationships, feelings of isolation and the accumulation of microaggressions. The participants reported a stigmatization of mental health both within their professional sporting environment and across campus. This work lends support to the findings of the NCAA (2022) wellbeing study which highlighted a reluctance on the part of athletes to seek out help for their mental health conditions.

It has been well established that the athlete-coach relationship is key to determining the self-esteem, satisfaction, and well-being of the performer (Jowett & Meek, 2000). Related to this is the need to reduce the power distance between athlete and coach which is particularly pernicious in dyads that are still impacted by invisible rules with roots in masculine and colonial control (Schinke, Griffin et al., 2022). Pillars of effective relationships in sport include coaches demonstrating empathy, understanding, honesty, support, cooperation, caring, respect and positive regard (Jowett, 2005). This understanding is pivotal given that coaches have been shown to be key facilitators of athletes exhibiting help seeking behaviours (Gulliver, Griffiths et al., 2012) and are "critical for promoting a culture within elite athletes' environments that encourage athletes to seek treatment" (Gulliver, Griffiths et al (2012; p.707). This is particularly relevant for male athletes who have been seen to display traits that align with hegemonic views of masculinity (Andersen and Kian, 2012) leading to the adoption of norms predicated on strength, dominance, and toughness (Harrison, Harrison et al., 2002). It appears that coaches may benefit from a broader appreciation of the impact that their relationship with a performer has in contributing to a climate which promotes or undermines the importance of mental health and the value of seeking support in times of distress. Building on this point, coach education programmes should focus on the development of interpersonal skills with the goal of facilitating more supportive relationships which would include working to reduce the power distance between the coach and athlete. Furthermore, programmes need to consider routes to refer-

ral that start with a coach but incorporate parents or trusted parties outside of the immediate performance group (Hill, MacNamara et al., 2015).

Research has shown that African Americans are often highly race conscious meaning they are more aware of the affect their race has on their experiences than their White counterparts (Durant & Sparrow, 1997). Shared negative experiences of systemic racism means that the athletes of colour in this study understood and experienced mental health and help seeking as a racialized process (Tatum, 2021). These perceptions may have been reenforced by recent negative media framing for some high profile basketball players who have publicized their struggles with their own mental health (Cassilo, 2022). African American athletes such as DeMar DeRozen and Kevin Love have recently been framed as demonstrating strength of character for disclosing their mental health conditions which at face value appears to pave the way for other athletes to follow in being more open about their own mental health (Parrott, Billings, et al. 2021). Paradoxically, these accounts inadvertently pedestal athletes with others then potentially questioning if they possess the requisite personal qualities or supportive network that would enable them to follow suit. This suggests that coaches need to think carefully about how they use role models to support the creation of facilitative environments and if current approaches are deterring others from coming forward.

African American collegiate football players have previously reported a lack of communication, honesty, fairness, psychological support, and trust toward a White head coach (Anshel, 2001). African American citizens have reported feeling that they have more in common and share more experiences with other African Americans across socio-economic status than with White Americans of the same socio-economic status (Harrison, Harrison et al., 2002). Insights such as this should encourage athletic programme directors to seek out diverse coaching teams to reflect the needs of their athletes and reduce cultural barriers that may exist in acknowledging and seeking support for a mental health condition. It would also be advantageous for coaches to be mindful of creating anti-racist, trauma informed coaching environments that offer a supportive training and performance experience for all athletes.

Comprehending the intersections of ethnicity, athletic identity, mental health, stigma, and gender within a sporting domain will take time and there is much work to do. This study builds on the extant literature confirming the existence of mental health issues in a sample of professional basketball players. Furthermore, we contend that through the construction of their training environments coaches hold the key to positively influencing the athlete's all round psychological wellbeing.

Acknowledgements

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