Post Athlete Career Development: A Conceptual Model of Psychosocial Development of Athletic Career Transition

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Athletes’ retirement is an extreme event not only for any athletes in all levels, but also many other constituents such as community, media, and corporate sponsors. It is particularly true for elite athletes. There have been attempts to develop conceptual frameworks to explain the process of sport career termination in the sport literature (Ceci Erpić, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004). Previous studies identified that there are differential influences of the reasons or situations of the athletes’ retirement on their adjustment to the reality of retirement or post career life satisfaction (e.g., Alfermann, 2000). However, there is a lack of theoretical understanding of athletes’ psychosocial adaptation process to post athlete life. Therefore, the researcher proposed the psychosocial developmental model of athletic career transition based on the Erik Erikson’s (1950) Theory of Human Development. Theoretical understanding of successful athletic career transition and satisfaction will provide effective strategies in planning post athlete career for both agents and athletes.

According to Erikson’s Theory of Human Development (1950), every person must pass through a series of eight interrelated stages over the entire life cycle. Each life stage is determined based on the individual’s actual age or life event which is characterized by psychosocial crisis stage and basic virtues in the stage. Erikson’s eight stages include: (a) Early infancy - Basic Trust vs. Mistrust crisis – driven by Hope and Drive; (b) Later infancy - Autonomy vs. Shame – driven by Willpower and Self-Control; (c) Early childhood - Initiative vs. Guilt - driven by Purpose and Direction; (d) Middle childhood - Industry vs. Inferiority - driven by Competence and Method; (e) Adolescent - Identity vs. Identity Diffusion - driven by Fidelity and Devotion; (f) Early adulthood - Intimacy vs. Isolation - driven by Love and Affiliation; (g) Middle adulthood - Generativity vs. Self-absorption - driven by Care and Production; and (h) Older adulthood - Integrity vs. Despair - driven by Wisdom and Renunciation. The eight stages explain individual’s whole life span from birth to death. However, recent studies applied this model to explain a certain event in one’s life. For example, Studer (2006) applied only psychosocial crisis stage to determine school counselor’s professional identity. Recently, Vogel-Sebilia, McNulty, Baxter, Miller, Dine, and Frese (2009) applied the the psychosocial stages to explain the mental illness recovery process. As can be seen in these cases, Erikson’s psychosocial stages are applicable not only to entire human life, but to certain life events. It is particularly true when people mentally adjust to new situation and environment. Athlete career transition is not so different from these cases.

In the sport literature, Cecic´ Erpić (2000) developed The Sports Career Termination Questionnaire (SCTQ) based on athletes’ perceived difficulties in sports career termination at the psychological (e.g., frequent feelings of anger, anxiety, and depression), psychosocial (e.g., lack of self-confidence, decreased level of self-respect, self-esteem and self-control), and occupational level (e.g., lack of professional qualification, less suitable professional career choices, and a decline in financial income). Although this questionnaire is an excellent tool to measure athletes’ post career perceptions, the authors did not consider differential stages of the perceived difficulties. In the current study, the author developed a psychosocial developmental model of athletic career transition by applying not only the Erikson’s eight life stages and psychosocial crisis stages, but also Cecic´ Erpić’s (2000) athletes’ perceived difficulties in sport career termination. This study also identifies the significant life event in each career transition stage and detailed characteristics (i.e., virtue in Erickson’s model) and recommended career support uniquely prepared for each stage.

The psychosocial developmental model of athletic career transition consists of the following six stages:

Stage one: Just retired and before starting the job hunting period - Trust vs. mistrust: In this stage, the athletes experience insecurity, uncertainty, and anxiety. Athletes need to have hope, feel calm, and have a feeling that everything will be okay to enable trust in themselves, others and the new environment.

Stage two: Between job hunting and starting a new career - Autonomy vs. self-doubt: In this stage, athletes may experience self-doubt and self-worthless in finding a new job. They need to have autonomy and a feeling of self choice in getting a job to be responsible for the new occupation and encourage self-determination, self-belief, and self-reliance.

Stage three: Beginning to early stage in the new career - Purpose vs. incompetence: In this stage, athletes start developing clearer goals in their new career. They start enjoying acquiring new skills and occupations. At the same time, they experience unresolved feelings of inadequacy and inferiority among their peers. If not appropriately treated, they may have serious problems in terms of
lack of competence and self-esteem.

Stage four: Maturity stage in new career - Identity vs. Identity Diffusion: In this stage, the athletes need to establish their own identity in their new career. They find their role in a society and self-image under peer (social) pressure and social interaction. Until this stage, they have struggled with their athletic identity, however in this stage; they finally find their new identity and role in their career.

Stage five: Later stage in new career - Generativity vs. Self-absorption: In this stage, the athletes start feeling satisfaction and confidence in producing and contributing to their organization and society.

Stage six: Post retirement from the new career - Integrity vs. Despair: In this stage, the athletes start reviewing their life accomplishments and focusing on the passing of knowledge and experiences to others. They seek calmness, tolerance, and acceptance of inevitably departing.

Although all athletes eventually cease their athletic career, the impact of their retirement and their post career transition have not been fully examined. In consideration of the significant influence of their retirement within business community and the changes the athlete's experiences, more systematic research warrants better understanding of these issues and help prepare their post athletic career. In this study, the authors proposed a comprehensive psychosocial developmental model in athletic career transition by extending existing theoretical frameworks and relevant literature. We expect that our model helps further our understanding of athlete career and better prepare their post athlete career. The successful career transition through effective career planning will eventually bring positive outcomes in the society and business community. For example, numerous college athletes who choose non-athlete career should receive benefits from this study. From the athlete agent perspective, understanding the relationship between Psychosocial Crisis Stage in developing post career identity and process of adaption to the post career life is very important in developing effective athlete supporting system. In this presentation, we will discuss theoretical and practical implications in more details.