Research on the Social Support of Athletes' Career Transition in China: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Being an athlete is not a lifelong career. 40% of Retired Athletes are facing difficulties with career transition each year in China. International studies have shown that despite the differences in the way each athlete responds to a career change, the success of career transition is often associated with the social support they received. Although the retirement often makes the social support system for athletes to be broken or be disappeared, re-linking or developing a new social support system affect the effective mobility of athletes' old skills. Social support influences the adaptation process of the athletes' career change. Most people advocate sharpening focus on the availability of social support, breaking through the influence of cultural traditions and promoting positive empowerment orientation of social support. Relatively speaking, the domestic research on social support mainly focus on the vulnerable groups, such as the special study of the elderly, women, children, migrant workers, college students and laid-off workers. What's more, the research on the social support for employment of vulnerable groups is beginning to increase. In the domestic and foreign researches on the retirement and reemployment of athletes, the discourse of social support for athletes started to appear. But the research is mainly limited to the 'physical education authority that lacks of discussions on the action mechanism of social support for athlete career transition, takes static actions, and considers no cooperation and mutual assistance between relevant social support subjects or the dynamic mechanism of athletes. This article analyzes domestic and overseas social support theories, summarizes and analyzes the literature on the social support for career transition of Chinese athletes, and argues that the social support system built and improved can help athletes achieve a successful career transition, which is both related to the athletes' reemployment quality and the cultivation and reserve of Chinese sports talents; the social support system for athlete career transition is a complex system, and diversified social supports require the use of government and market forces to break trade barriers and the empowerment to build and improve the social support system for athlete career transition.

Key words: Athletes; Career transition; Social support; Retirement; Reemployment

INTRODUCTION

Athlete is not a lifelong career (Li & Zhou, 2011, p. 176). Retirement is a turning point for almost every athlete, and often occurs before the age of 30. With the development of market economy and the change in the labor and employment mode, the policy-based arrangement under the traditional planned economy system is unsustainable, and the difficulty of re-employment of athletes increases. There are about 23,000 elite athletes in training in China, 3,000-6,000 professional athletes retire every year, and 40% of the retired athletes are difficult to achieve successful career transition. Solving the problem of athlete career transition is both related to the athlete's own

development and the sustainable development of China's competitive sports. The General Office of the State Council forwarded the Notice on Guiding Opinions to Further Strengthen Cultural Education and Safeguards of Athletes by the General Administration of Sport and other departments and the state's Twelfth Five-year Plan of Sport Development, which both clearly proposed to build and improve the social support system to help athletes achieve a successful career transition. The pilot work of athlete career transition has been started in Jiangsu, Shandong, etc. Seen from the current domestic research status, the research on social support for the retired athletes is relatively weak, but the social support theory and research on the employment (or reemployment) of related vulnerable populations provide theoretical guidance and related practices for the establishment of the social support system for athlete career transition. Based on the literature search, this article took the social support theory as the theoretical framework and focused on the social support for career transition of retired athletes in China to conduct a literature review so as to provide a theoretical foundation for the further study and the construction of the social support system for career transition of Chinese athletes.

1. DOMESTIC AND OVERSEAS RESEARCH STATUS OF SOCIAL SUPPORT

1.1 Connotation of Social Support

Since the 1970s, when psychiatry began to introduce the term, sociology, psychology, medicine and other disciplines have begun the study of social support. However, various disciplines have never been unified in the connotation of social support, and even within a single discipline, scholars explain the connotation of social support from different perspectives and focuses.

Broadly speaking, social support relates to the support and maintenance in and out the family, and involves a variety of formal and informal support and help. The social support system is defined as a complex social relationship between individuals (Popenoe, 1999, p. 67). Social support is not just a one-way care or assistance, which in most cases is a kind of social exchange (Uehara, 1990, p. 522). Barrea pointed out that social support in the broad sense has six forms, including material assistance such as money, material and other tangible assistance, behavioral support such as labor sharing, intimate interaction behavior such as listening, respect, care and understanding, guidance such as advice, information or instruction, feedback on behavior, thoughts and feelings, and active social interaction, some of which are tangible and others are intangible (Barrera, 1983, p. 133). Thoits (1994) argued that social support is a help function

provided to an individual by important persons such as families, friends, colleagues, relatives and neighbors.

Domestic research on social support began in the 1990s. He (2011), from the perspective of social networks, pointed out that an individual's social support network is the social network that can provide a variety of resources (money, emotion, friendship, etc.). Through social support network, people can solve problems and crises and maintain the normal operation of daily life. Social support in the broad sense has three levels, national support (the subject is the state), economic support (the subject is the enterprise) and social support in the narrow sense (the subject is the community and individual) (Zheng, 1996, p. 319). Therefore, the researchers describe and define the concept of social support from different perspectives. This indicates that social support is a concept that has a pluralistic structure, including both environmental factors and the individual's internal cognitive factors, which directly reflects the interaction between the individual and others. No matter from what perspectives, the common factor of these concepts of social support is that it is available external resource related to a variety of social relations. Therefore, this paper argues that social support is tangible and intangible help and social relation provided by relevant organizations and individuals to the relevant person or organization. This article agrees the view of Barrera (1983) on the social support in the broad sense that has formal, informal, subjective and objective types.

1.2 Main Elements of Social Support

The social support system is a complex multidimensional system, which generally consists of several major elements such as subject, object, content and means.

The social support subject is a social support provider. Most scholars believe that the social support subject includes a variety of formal and informal relation networks. With the advancement of research, most scholars believe that social support providers include government departments, institutions, grass-roots communities, social associations, family, relatives and friends and so on.

The social support object is a social support recipient. Scholars have two views on who they are exactly. Some argue that social support is universal social behavior, namely the so-called generalized social groups, and each individual in the daily life is likely to be the social support object (Matt & Vanderpool, 1994). Foreign scholars mostly agree this view and argue that social support networks should cover all individuals or groups that need support, a few domestic scholars agree it (Cai, 1997; He, 2001; Li, 1998). Other scholars believe that the social support object is selective, mainly referring to vulnerable groups. Zhang Qian and Zhang Jianming pointed out that social support is not universal, and the objects are not all members of society but only limited to vulnerable groups.

The social support object is an individual that has

consciousness. The role of the subject is both decided by the diversification of subjects as well as the quantity and quality of support resources provided by them, and affected by the dynamic role of the objects, namely social support recipients. Social support is not just a one-way care or assistance, which in most cases is a kind of social exchange (Uehara, 1990, p. 522), that is, the resource exchange between provider and recipient as well as the interaction between subject and object.

Scholars have different understandings of the type of social support, but from the perspective of the nature, there are two main types. In terms of the subject, it can be divided into formal and informal social support. Formal social support includes those provided by government, organizations (agencies) and market, and informal social support includes those provided by family, neighbors, relatives, friends and non-profit organizations. According to the form, social support can be divided into formal objective visible support and subjective support. Objective support includes material support and network support (stable social relations such as marriage, colleagues and friends, and unstable social ties such as informal groups). This social support will not transfer due to the feeling of individuals, for it is objective reality. Subjective support includes the emotional support to and the satisfaction of individuals in social life such as respect and consideration. Such support is closely related to the individual's subjective feelings. The content and means of social support are called by some scholars as social support media (Chen, 2000), which are ties between subjects and objects. In general, the content and means of social support are intrinsically unified, and in a certain sense, the content determines the means, that is, the means corresponds to the content.

1.3 The Current Situation of Researches on Social Support for Relevant Groups at Home and Abroad

International social support is relatively broad, which involves not only the research on general population but also the researches on social vulnerable groups. Furthermore, Hayi developed some measuring tools to do special analyses and measurements. The measuring tools include social support questionnaire (SSQ), interview schedule for social interaction (ISSI) and social support questionnaire for transactions (SSQT). Social support has the functions like prevention, relief and treatment in dealing with crisis and changes including life pressure, unemployment etc. (Wellman, 1988). Moreover, social support meets the requirement of solving the main issues in life like job hunting (Walker, 1994).

The research on social support at home dates from 1990s. Most scholars think that social support includes formal and informal supports (He, 2001), and they define the object of social support as social vulnerable groups including the elderly, women (especially the left-

behind women in rural area), children (especially the left-behind children in rural area, orphans and disabled children), migrant workers, college students (especially impoverished college students), unemployed people etc. (Ruan, 2002; Zhang, 2006; Yin, 2006; Li, 2008; Zhao, 2000; Chen, 2002; Q, 2002; Tu & Wu, 2002; Chuan, 2002). As for the researches on social support, the ones discuss about the employment social support for relevant groups increase gradually. Some center on the employment social support for migrant workers; some research on the influence of social support on the re-employment of migrant workers (Ma, 2014); some aim at the social support system of migrant workers in their integration into the city (Wang, 2004; He, 2007; Li, 2007; Dong, 2014); some are researches on the social support for female employment group (Lai, 2003; Jang, 2007), some focus on the social support network of the employment of graduate (Deng, 2006; Bai; Long, 2011; Zhu, 2010), some are researches on the social support for the employment of the disabled (Zhang, 2014; Liu, 2014), while others are researches on the social support of the employment of cadre who choose profession independently (Yin, 2006). These researches on employment social support include the discussion on the functions of social support in employment, the studies on the influence of social support on employment, the analysis of the current situation and issues of social support in employment and job hunting and the discussion of the establishment of employment social support system. I have found that perfect social support system has positive influence on the promotion of employment in all kinds of population being studied on. In China, a country which is in the rapid transition of economic and social development, to reconstruct and to further improve the employment social support system of social vulnerable groups on margins of society, who are disadvantaged in economy and human resource is urgent and important, which is also a significant research Issue for academia to propel social vulnerable groups to realize relatively full employment. Moreover, in terms of measuring tool, many people in China reform and develop some social support scales, for example the typical ones like Hou Zhijin's social support scale of undergraduate's career (Hou, Bai, & Yao, 2010), Jiang Ganjin's perceived social support scale (PSSS), Ye and Dai's (2008) college student social support scale and Xiao's (1994) social support rating scale. Especially the last one, which divides social support into three factors: objective support, subjective support and support utilization, has been widely used in multidisciplinary social support measurement.

It is observed that the researches on social support for social vulnerable groups in China are different from western normal form. In China, especially most scholars in the relevant fields like sociology and demography define the object of social support as social vulnerable groups, and analyze the content of the social support for social vulnerable groups systematically.

1.4 The Current Situation of Researches on Social Support for Retired Athletes at Home and Abroad

The researches on athlete's transitions in life like career transition date from 1980s. With development, the theoretical concepts of athlete's career transition have developed from the original opinion of handling it as a career termination event to investigating it in their sports career. Retirement is not a single affair but a process (Schlossherg, 1981; Danish, 1992); sports career is a continuous development system, which is not only affected by the functions of sport factors, meanwhile affected by non-sports factors. The retired athletes may become pessimistic, inimical and want to escape due to weak career transition before and after retirement (Schlossherg, 1981; Danish, 1992). Although every athlete uses different ways to response to career transition, successful ones always relate to the required social support (Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Richard (1990) made a research on the lose in the career transition of athlete by retirement transition theory; he proposed to provide transitional couching intervention in the aspects like emotion, cognition and action to athletes in their career transition; The research of Grove (1997) showed that acceptance, positive redefinition, planning, positive response, spiritual peace and looking for social support contribute to career transition; Alfermane (2000) found out that the athletes who were forced to retire usually adopted defensive mechanisms, reactive strategies and looked for social support; while the ones who retired of their own accord were willing to adopt positive strategies; Other researches proposed to change from traditional treatment to the positive response to the spiritual harm experience brought by the termination of sports career, abs to provide complete education and support including living skill training (Wylleman, 2004); Stambulova (2007) thoughts that success depended on athlete's previous cognition of retirement and effective adaptation to the new environment through the research on successful retired athletes; he also suggested athletes to take full advantage of effective social resources and to overcome their own disadvantaged conditions.

Based on empirical research, some scholars found that comparing to other occupational groups, retirement always broke or took away athlete's original social support; whether they can re-link or develop new social support system was the main factor affected the effective transition of original skills (Danish, 1992). However, it was difficult for individual itself to continue the original social support, to establish and develop new social support system (McLaughlin, 1981). Both theory cycle and practice circle found: social support has influence on the adaptive process of athletes to career transition (Schlossherg, 1981; Lavallee, 2006). Therefore, international academia proposed to strengthen athlete's attention to the availability of social support in

their vocational training (Murphy, 1995; Grove, 1997; Alfermann, 2000; Alfermann, 2004)

In practice, relevant countries and organizations put forward some mentoring plans (programs) of athlete's career transition, for example, Australian Athletes Career and Education Training (ACE), Athlete's Living Skill Plan (Sport L EAP), British BALANCE, Golden Starting Point, American CAPA, the Implementation of leap-over plan, Olympics Job Opportunity Plan (OJOP), New York Women Sports Fund (WSF), Dutch RA, Canadian Olympian Career Center. Most of them intervened and treated in the perspective of the establishment of perfect athlete career transition social support system, and had good result. Furthermore, the researches' emphasis at abroad have begun to focus on the composition of athlete career transition social support system and how social support system affects the effective transition of athlete's original skills; they proposed to break the traditional influence of culture, advocated positive, active and empowered social support tendency, and developed a kind of social support system which fits into social culture.

By contrast, the research on athlete career transition in China was relatively late; however, since the Olympic Game held by Beijing and the establishment of athlete career transition system in 2008, the researches on the reemployment of retired athletes and career transition increased gradually. According to the retrieval of Tsinghua Tongfang knowledge network-China National Academic Magazine Data-Base, in recent years, the number of research documents in this field increased. However, the core documents themed "athlete+ career transition" were relatively less (only 9). Researches mainly focused on the following aspects: firstly, research on athlete settlement policy and security system (Chen, 2004; Cai, 2004; Xue, 2004; Liu, 2008); secondly, research on athlete vocational training and education (Yao, 2006); thirdly, research on the human capital appraisal and the career of athlete etc. (Yin, 2005; Liu, 2007; Li, 2008). In the aspects of research method and research perspective, the horizon of the research at home also began to broaden. Based on retirement process theory, in the investigation of 789 athletes in China, Wang (2006) found: positive coping strategy can improve retire athletes' self-assessment and life satisfaction, can reduce the anxiety in life, the feeling of loneliness etc. Combining qualitative analysis method and quantitative analysis method, Hu et al. (2010) made an investigation in 42 retired athletes who had successful career transition, and they proposed a smooth transition concept of adapting to the new situation in a short period, having high life satisfaction and positive psychological experience, which can help athletes better adapt to the new life after retirement, to enter into new society and to act a new professional role much smoothly. Wang (2008) adopted qualitative analysis method and found that there were different characteristics between the athlete who successfully retired and the one not in six aspects

including psychological states, retirement cognition, retirement plan, self-adjustment, social support and life satisfaction. There were also investigations on the athletes in part of local sport events (Li et al., 2014; Yu et al., 2012). A good point is that in the researches on the retirement and reemployment of retire athletes in China, some statements about athlete social support appeared, for example, the social support for retired athletes had many kinds of form like family, friend, relative, coach, government etc. (Wang, 2006); however, the original skill capital failed because of the lack of relevant social support (Liu, 2012). The career development of retire athletes is a systematical public issue which needs the cooperation between country, market and society (Gao, Zhang, & Li, 2013).

2. PROSPECT OF ATHLETES CAREER TRANSITIONS SOCIAL SUPPORT

2.1 Retired Athletes are Belonging to Socially Vulnerable Groups

In a sense, solving or alleviating issues related to socially vulnerable groups, in particular through the establishment of a sound social support system for vulnerable groups of society, will be conducive to the adaptation of social structures and social relations. This paper also endorses the view that the object of social support is selective. Social support should be for the community to support vulnerable groups in society, especially for our country which is in the socio-economic transformation. Due to the rapid transformation of social structure and social relations disorder, or the fact some people not suited to the reality of society because of their own reasons (such as competition failure, unemployment, frail, disabled, etc.), Special populations with life obstacles and difficulties in life may occur, such as the lives of vulnerable groups of people living in poverty, unemployment people who have disadvantaged in employment, physiological vulnerable people with disabilities, elderly people with age vulnerable, children, women with gender vulnerable and so on. The difficulties they often face are some social problems need to be solved.

In China, athletes under the nationwide system, "refers to specializing in a particular sport training and participate in the competition, and who have sports workout allowance or sports allowance ", their professional identity is as athletes job, which is belong to national institution staff management system and part of the national institution staff have prepared. However, once stop training, which means failing to achieve organizational placement, education or apply for their own jobs and decommissioning procedures, they can apply for athlete career transition period of transition which is no more than one year voluntarily. After the transition period, institutions prepare will be canceled. Athletes have to retire.

As a member of public institution, athletes get a full range of job security including labor income, disability rehabilitation, education, career transition security. In the planned economy period, retired athletes were scheduled entirely by the personnel department to the various units, but this policy placed has been difficult to sustain since market economy and the employment of independent way. Because of long-time training, a lot of athletes have the issue such as low cultural quality, weak awareness and social skills of employment, social integration difficulties and so on. What's worse, there are some athletes with a physical disability who failed in career transition after retirement, lost their jobs and lived in poverty, even including some sports stars. In China, 3000-6000 professional athletes are retired every year, of which about 40% people can not be arranged timely. Since 2003, there has been some news that retired athletes' career transition is not successful and life is miserable, like Cai Li died for illness, Liu Fei lives in hardship, Zou Chunlan raised her family by rubbing, Ai Dongmei sell her medals to survive, Zhang Shangwu entertain to beg money. These news leads to social heated discussion. Faced with career transition, retired athletes turn into socially vulnerable groups who only have single vocational skills, lack of culture education, are difficult to social integration and career transition. In order to achieve career transition and promote personal abilities, it does not only need to continue the existing social support to sports fields, but also need to take the initiative and for their initiative to create and develop new social support to help them improve their self-development capacity and achieve career transition.

2.2 Particularity of Athletes Career Transition

Career development is an important area of a person's life. Athletes who leave the sports teams, need to find new jobs. Compared to other employment groups, they have particularity in career transition in many aspects. Specific and special social support should be provided to them in offering information and suggestion of employment and development, career training and further studies, career counseling of career transition, social integration and development, built and use of social relationship and so forth. In such areas, we need to conduct an in-depth investigation and analysis.

Compared with foreign countries, the domestic research on social support for athletes groups still remain in descriptive explanation, and the main responsibility of social support system for athletes' career transition is still restricted to sports department. In addition to that, there is a lack of discussion of the basic premise to build and improve the social support system for athlete career transition. That is to say, there are barely discussions of social support mechanisms for athlete's career transitions. It leads to the fact that the countermeasures and suggestions to improve the social support is lack of the

perspective of social support. Finally, the related policies are mostly static and integrated without taking into account the mutual collaboration between relevant social support subjects, nor considering the dynamic object mechanism—the athletes themselves and their acceptance and action.

2.3 Research Direction of the Social Support for Athletes' Career Transition

In summary, constructing and making the social support system better can help athletes achieve career transition smoothly. It does not only affect the quality of the athletes' re-employment, but also affect reservation of national sports talents. The social support system of the athletes' professional transformation is a complex system. The diversity of social support and diversity of social support must be related to the object of social support, the initiative, consciousness and initiative of the athletes themselves. To establish a link between basic motor skills and basic professional skills, make a clear understanding and transfer the skills they already possess effectively is the key to help the athletes to make a successful career transition. The primary stage of the labor market development and the nationwide system of sports need to use the power of government and market, break the barriers between trades and increase the power in order to construct and make the social support system for the athletes' professional transformation better and better. Indeed, the countermeasures and suggestions for the systematic, scientific and operational measures are put forward. So, what kind of career transition social support does Chinese athletes in need the nationwide system after retirement? We need to take the athletes' career transition as the main line, study on the main body, content, way and mechanism of social support in different stages, the training period, the transition period and the new occupation adaptation period, which can help the successful career transformation. It is necessary to focus on the social supports which influence and restrict the effective of the professional skills' transformation, and the concrete way of the development of smooth career transformation of the athletes and the specific way of the career transition. Secondly, to solve problems of athlete's social support and career transition, we can learn from relevant scale to establish "Career change social support scale", jointing PIC, take an analysis of the main body and object, depth and breadth, structure and function of the social support for the athletes' professional transformation. What's more, the problem that Chinese athletes' career transition is lack of social support can be studied through the comparative research on the foreign athletes' social support. Finally, construct and perfect the social support system of the athletes' career transition. Based on the comparison between the ideal and the reality, the athletes' career transition social support system with the multi dimension and dynamic is constructed. It means that the government, market, social and family (individual) works together to give athletes psychological counseling,

self-esteem, information, career planning, skills training and material support, etc.

At the same time, the career transition should be taken as the core, the barriers between industries need to be broken through combining the key interaction point and the function link. The targeted social support development strategy will be proposed with the orientation of increasing the power. This is exactly what we need to study and explore. The research on social support is needed to take the athletes' career transition as a process not a "single event". Both separation and continuation of social support from the original sports circle should be considered, and the new occupational social support should be developed as well. Research on the social support is doing during the whole process including the period before the transition, the transition period and the adaptation period. We can use the multi-dimensional method to measure the main body, object, content, scale, strength and function of social support for athlete's career transition through social support questionnaire and focus interview. In the nationwide system, the social support of athletes in our country is different from any other country, which needs to construct and improve the social support system for the athletes career transformation in the diversified and dynamic based on the cultural background and the nationwide system. The specific cultural background must be considered seriously. Theoretically, it is helpful to construct systematic, targeted, scientific and operational social support system of athlete career transition by studying the social support with main line of athlete's career transition process. This is conducive to a certain extent, deepen and enrich the theoretical research on the theory of Chinese athlete's career transition and the construction of their security system.

CONCLUSION

From the literature, social support for athletes' career transition is a common trend, especially it is necessary to re-link or develop a new social support system to effectively transit the original skills of the athletes. Social support research in China mainly caters to socially vulnerable groups. In the domestic and international research on retired athletes and re-employment, discussions related to social support for athletes begin to appear; however, these researches mainly are confined to descriptive explanation, and the social support bodies are mainly sports authorities, lack of discussion of the social support for the athletes' career transition mechanism; and the related countermeasures are mostly static, without taking into account the mutual cooperation between relevant social support bodies and the dynamic mechanism of athletes. Chinese retired athletes belong to vulnerable groups in society, their cultural quality is not high; their employment consciousness is weak, their social skills and employment are low, and they have difficulty in social

integration, and furthermore, they need some specific, special social support. Construction and improvement of a social support system can help athletes achieve a smooth career transition, which is not only related to the quality of the athletes' re-employment, but also related to cultivation and reserve of Chinese sports talents. This shall take the athletes career transition process as the main line, clarify the social support bodies, contents, modes and mechanisms that contribute to the success of athletes' career transitions in different phases from in-service training period-career transition period-and new career adaptation period, discusses which social supports affect and restrict the effective migration of vocational skills of athletes, focuses on specific ways of smooth career transition and development, understand the status quo and problems of the social support for athletes' career transition, and then provide a basis for the construction of a social support system for athletes' career transition.

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