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Article Title: Realising, Adapting, and Thriving in Career Transitions from Gymnastics to Contemporary Circus Arts

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Running Head: CAREER TRANSITIONS FROM SPORT TO CIRCUS

Author note

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the career transition experiences of elite gymnasts who became professional circus artists. Eight (inter)national level gymnasts who worked as circus artists were interviewed. Using a constructionist approach to thematic data analysis, we identified a three-phase career transition process. High levels of psychological resilience characteristics were required in the first, ‘realising’ phase (i.e., motivation, hard work, social support, and optimism). The second, ‘adapting’ phase involved balancing context-specific demands which included general stress, a loss of competence, social adjustment, taking calculated risks, and physical recovery. The third, ‘thriving’ phase involved experiences of freedom, personal development, and social connectedness. During the career transition, changes from an athletic to circus artist identity were experienced. Practitioners are encouraged to support the psychological resilience and experiences of autonomy among circus artists during their career transitions. This is expected to facilitate circus artists’ wellbeing, safety, and career longevity.

Keywords: resilience, identity, circus, retirement, sport

Contemporary circus is a performance art form in which human performers use circus skills to tell a story (Leroux, 2014). In terms of physical skills and demands, there are similarities between contemporary circus disciplines and sports such as gymnastics. Recognising these similarities, various world leading circus companies purposefully recruit professional athletes to join their troupe (Babinski, 2004; Rantisi & Leslie, 2014). For instance, Cirque du Soleil had numerous former national and international level athletes under contract in 2018, amongst which were seventeen Olympians (Keating, 2018). Career transitions to contemporary circus are thus common amongst athletes, and gymnasts in particular. However, little is known about the lived experiences of circus artists, as few systematic studies have considered this performance domain (Ross & Shapiro, 2017). Given that practitioners in the field of sport and performance psychology are increasingly working with performance artists, research exploring this domain is warranted (Ross & Shapiro, 2017).

Within the sport domain, two distinct types of career transitions have been identified, each of which has been associated with unique challenges (Park, Lavallee, & Tod, 2013). The first type concerns transitions within sports, which refers to changes in levels of competition, such as from junior to senior, or amateur to professional competition levels (e.g., Franck, Stambulova, & Ivarsson, 2016; Pummel, Harwood, & Lavallee, 2008). The athletic career transition model (Stambulova, 2003) proposes that successful career transitions within sport are characterised by a good match between career transition demands and the athlete’s resources and strategies to manage these demands. Resources and strategies that are relevant to successful career transitions include the development of the athletes’ coping skills, financial resources, and social support (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017). Research suggests that successful transitions within sport follow a sequence of preparation, orientation, adaptation, and stabilization phases, which may take several years to complete (Pehrson, Stambulova, & Olsson, 2017). Although these phases reflect demands, barriers, resources, and outcomes relevant to junior athletes' career progression, it is likely that athletes who successfully transition to a career under the big top may also progress through several transitional phases.

The second type concerns career transitions out of sport, such as retirement from sport or the pursuit of a post-sport career (Park et al., 2013). Career transitions out of sport include sudden retirements due to injuries and de-selection, and voluntary, planned retirement (Schinke et al., 2017). Athletes often report that retirement from sport is stressful, and approximately 15-20% of retired elite athletes report needing psychological assistance to cope with their retirement from sport (Alfermann, 2000). Research has shown that, in early specialisation sports such as gymnastics, former athletes particularly struggle with athletic retirement due to the loss of their athletic self-identity (Gagné, Ryan, & Bargmann, 2003; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Similar to career transitions within sport, coping skills and personal resources are critical in positive transition experiences out of sport. However, factors external to the sport setting, such as the development of an academic identity, and guidance in finding a post-sport career, are also deemed important for positive transition experiences (Erpič, Wylleman, & Zupančič, 2004).

There are several similarities in terms of the challenges professional performers in sport and contemporary circus face during their careers. First, professional sport and contemporary circus place high physical demands on the performer, and athletes as well as circus artists have reported experiences of exhaustion, fatigue, overtraining, burn-out, and injuries (Filho, Aubertin, & Petiot, 2016; Shrier & Hallé, 2011; Stubbe, Richardson, & van Rijn, 2018). Second, both athletes and circus artists have reported experiencing mental challenges such as performance anxiety and maintaining concentration (Ross & Shapiro, 2017).

Despite these similarities, the sport industry can be considered different to the performance arts industry. Specifically, success in sports is linked to achieving performance perfection in front of a jury or winning a game, whereas in contemporary circus building a connection with the audience is key to a successful performance (Fisher & Ménard, 2016). Additionally, circus artists perform up to 400 shows per year, and given that it is virtually impossible to perform one's most difficult skills in every single performance, circus artists are recommended to perform at about 85% of their abilities (Fisher & Ménard, 2016). This is in contrast to sport, where athletes are oftentimes required to perform to the best of their abilities during every competition (Fisher & Ménard, 2016). These competitions occur once per week or once every several months. Further, Babinski (2004) suggested that athletes in general, and gymnasts in particular, find the cultural change from sport to contemporary circus mentally and physically demanding, as they are required to experiment with artistic expressiveness. These differences in performance evaluation along with the unique technical dimensions of different circus disciplines, have been suggested to weaken or diminish the athletic identity of gymnasts transitioning to a circus career (Filho et al., 2016; Rantisi & Leslie, 2014). Consequently, it can be argued that transitioning from sport to contemporary circus may bear resemblance to career transitions out of sport.

To date, only a handful of systematic studies have considered the performance domain of contemporary circus (Leroux, 2014; Rantisi & Leslie, 2014). These studies investigated themes such as experiences of injuries and injury management (Shrier and Hallé, 2011; Stubbe et al., 2018), the necessity of mental skills for success in circus (Ross & Shapiro, 2017), and neuro-psychophysiological markers in juggling (Filho, Bertollo, Robazza, & Comani, 2015). This study thus explores a novel research area. Therefore, we have chosen to utilize a qualitative research design aimed at gaining a rich, detailed insight (Smith & Sparkes, 2016) into circus artists' career transition experiences from gymnastics to contemporary circus arts.

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Method

Participants

Eight circus artists (4 male, 4 female) ranging from 24 to 38 years of age were interviewed (M_{age} = 30.9, *SD* = 4.4). The circus artists were born in Australia (*n* = 4), North-America (*n* = 2), Europe (*n* = 1), and South-America (*n* = 1), and were all current (*n* = 5) or retired circus artists (*n* = 3) at large, world leading circus companies such as Cirque du Soleil and Dragone. Four participants also had experience working for small, independent circus companies. The participants were at least 18 years of age at the time of their transition to a contemporary circus career.

The participants performed in a diverse range of circus disciplines, including teeterboard, Russian swing, uneven bars, high bar, cord de lisse, tournik, aerial silks, bungees, contortion, and cyr wheel. The participants’ experience as professional circus artists ranged from 1.5 to 10 years (*M* = 5.8 years). All participants were national (*n* = 2) or international level (*n* = 6) gymnasts in artistic gymnastics (*n* = 6), trampoline (*n* = 3), double mini trampoline (*n* = 1), and/or tumbling (*n* = 1).

Procedures

Ethical approval for the study was granted from the institutional research ethics committee. Only participants who were national level or above gymnasts, and who had worked at least one year as full-time professional circus artists for a leading circus company, were recruited for this study. For the purpose of increased generalisability of the study findings to the population of gymnasts who transition to a contemporary circus career, a balance between male and female circus artists, who performed in a wide range of circus disciplines was sought. Further, both current and recently retired circus artists were recruited with the aim of including experiences of those who may have struggled more during their transitions (and consequently would be more likely to retire from their circus careers).

The interviewer (leading author) purposefully recruited participants using her personal network in the circus and gymnastics community. Three separate recruitment strategies were used simultaneously in order to gain an understanding of circus artists with diverse career transition experiences (as opposed to purposefully recruiting circus artists who competed or performed together). First, potential participants at local circus schools and gymnastics training centres were asked if they would like to participate in the study, (n = 3 participants recruited). Second, befriended elite gymnasts asked potential participants in their networks to contact the researchers if they would like to participate in the study (n = 2 participants recruited). Third, two physiotherapists who previously worked for contemporary circus companies asked their clients to contact the interviewer if they were interested in participating in the study (n = 3 participants recruited). To assess data saturation, the interviewer transcribed and coded the interviews immediately after the interviews took place, and sent them to the second author. The authors recruited participants and assessed the data until they agreed that no new emergent patterns were found in the data (Smith & Sparkes, 2016).

Participants recorded their athletic competition level and circus experience on a sheet to be returned to the interviewer prior to the start of the interview. Each participant was interviewed individually, provided written consent to participate in the study, and consented to audio recording of the interview. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the participant (e.g., café, hotel, participants' home), and ranged from 52 to 126 minutes in duration (M = 70.1; SD = 26). To build a relationship with the participants, the interviewer started each interview with an introduction to the research and her experience in trampolining and circus (Andersen & Ivarsson, 2016). Participants were invited to ask questions. A semi-structured interview guide was followed and therapeutic approaches were built into the interview to facilitate positive participant experiences (see Andersen & Ivarsson, 2016). Interview topics included the participants' journeys towards becoming athletes and circus artists, their experiences as an athlete and circus artist, and their work-life balance (see appendix).

Data Analysis and Quality

To ensure the participants' confidentiality, their names were replaced by aliases, and at times completely removed. Additionally, all potentially identifiable information (e.g., nationalities, world rankings, and names of shows) was removed from the transcripts. Interview transcripts were transcribed verbatim and imported into the NVIVO 10 qualitative data management software. As the goal of this study was to gain a deep insight into the experiences of the participants, a constructionist approach to thematic data analysis was chosen in which the socially produced and reproduced experiences and realities of the participants were deemed central (Burr, 1995). Within this, we first used an inductive, data driven, approach to identify all themes in the data. Subsequently, we used a deductive approach to connect identified themes to existing theories.

The six phases to thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. Data analysis commenced with data familiarisation. Specifically, the interviewer transcribed the interviews herself, and read and reread the transcripts until she was familiar with the raw data (phase 1). Next, she segmented the transcripts into meaningful units of text, which she coded (phase 2), organised (phase 3), and refined and re-organised (phase 4) in themes by similarity of meaning. The coded themes and coding framework were finalised (phase 5), the results from data analysis were reported, and quotes that captured the meaning of the themes were selected (phase 6).

We employed a relativist approach to establish validity, and thus relied on study-specific, contextually situated criteria (see Burke, 2016). Rather than relying on post-hoc evaluations to establish methodological rigor, we used various quality verification strategies that were built into our qualitative research process (see Burke, 2016). These criteria included: topic worthiness, contribution of the work to developing an understanding of career transitions to circus, external coherence with regards to existing theories, and transparency by means of an audit trail in which data collection and analysis were examined by an independent colleague. Further, we analysed and conducted the interviews concurrently, and wrote reflexive field notes after each interview (Tracey, 2010). These reflexive field notes, described how the circus artist appeared to feel during the interview, the context of the interview, and the type of relationship that was established during the interview (see Smith & Sparkes, 2016). Each reflexive note was several paragraphs long. A recurring theme within these reflexive field notes was the vividness with which the participants shared their stories. All made strong use of body language, gestures, facial expressions, and intonation, a skill which they may have learned while becoming a circus artist. To attain information rich cases, we used a highly distinctive sample of participants who had extensive experiences as gymnasts and circus artists at a high level (Tracey, 2010). To increase the confirmability of the study, the second author served as 'critical friend' during phase two to six of data analysis (Burke, 2016). Together, the authors discussed differences in themes and interpretation until agreement was reached.

Results

We identified three phases within the career transition from gymnastics to professional circus. In the first *realising* phase, the participants reflected and achieved their goal of transitioning from sport to circus. Second, the participants had to *adapt* to their new circus careers. Third, participants *thrived* in their circus careers. Various psychological skills and stressors were identified within each of these transition stages. Table 1 provides an overview of the first and second order themes according to each transition stage. Further, we identified that the circus artists experienced *identity changes* during the career transition process, specifically that athletic identity weakened while a circus artist identity was developed.

Realising a Contemporary Circus Career

The realising phase spanned from the moment the participants started to contemplate a professional circus career, to the moment they achieved their first contract as a professional circus performer. This phase fluctuated from several months to two years in duration. It was evident that psychological resilience was crucial in the successful pursuit of a transition from gymnastics to circus, as many of the identified themes within the realising phase beared resemblance to factors within the psychological resilience model (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Psychological resilience is described by Fletcher and Sarkar (2012) as the mental processes and behaviour used to protect oneself from potential negative effects of stressors. In this study, participants reported that hard work, motivation, social support, and optimism were required to realise a professional circus career.

Hard work. Although there were differences in the steps required to obtain a circus contract, the journey of most participants started with an audition process. Effective preparation for the audition process consisted of hard work, and the intensity of this was compared to “competing for a place in the Olympics” (Luke). Emma, Lisa, and Elly returned to intensive gymnastics training after their athletic retirement to prepare for their circus audition: “I had retired from being an elite athlete and I was preparing for an entire year just for this audition!” (Elly). Luke disclosed that he pursued competing at the World Championships because Cirque du Soleil would recruit at the event.

Motivation to accomplish the transition. Two main motives to pursue a circus career were identified: a need for personal development and a need to be physically active.

Need for development. The participants recalled many enjoyable aspects of gymnastics. They "loved learning", the discipline the sport required, and the friendships they made. The participants believed that a circus career would provide them with opportunities to continue to learn and develop: "I saw that they were doing similar things to what I could do, but much crazier. And I thought that I could maybe do that" (Luke).

Although Alex, Nathan, Luke, and Emma looked back on their gymnastics careers fondly, others did not. Four participants (three females) mentioned outright that they wanted to quit gymnastics prematurely due to negative experiences in their sport. Frequent examples of negative experiences in gymnastics were: "getting yelled at by coaches", not feeling safe doing skills they were "forced to" do, "politics", and "getting weighed all of the time" (Lisa, Lisa, Luke, & Jess). Furthermore, some felt their creativity was restricted by the strict gymnastics rules: "I was drawn to performing rather than being this strict athlete who follows the path and who does these positions and this many tricks in their routine" (Lisa). Those who emphasised negative gymnastics experiences saw circus as an opportunity to continue to develop their skills, but "in a fun way". As such, the participants appeared to see circus as an opportunity to be involved in a more autonomy supportive environment (Gagné et al., 2003). Luke, Elly, and Lisa further explained that from a young age, they favoured being a circus artist over becoming a professional gymnast, in the hope that circus could provide them with a more enjoyable environment to nurture their love for gymnastic skills:

> I didn't really want to do gymnastics anymore. So I was telling my mum 'I want to quit' and she was like 'no, you can't quit yet'. So from that time on my whole competitive career was with the mindset of I have to compete, but really I want to go to Cirque du Soleil at the end of all of this. (Elly)

Need to be physically active. Prior to pursuing a career in Cirque du Soleil, Emma had already retired from gymnastics. Her motivation to pursue a professional circus career was triggered by her wish to train again:

> I was really missing being in the gym so I thought this is a nice excuse to start training. Cause it's kind of frowned upon in the States, like why are you training, you're not going to the Olympics, you're done with college. People kind of think you're crazy. So at least I had a purpose, an excuse for being in the gym.

Living an active lifestyle was important to the participants, and a circus career provided them with an opportunity to meet their need of physical movement upon retirement from sport: “being in the circus, being on stage is almost a mechanism to allow me to train as much as I want during the day” (Mike). Six of the participants, and Mike in particular, reported that being physically active was integral to their sense of self, which is not surprising as body changes after retirement from sport contribute to lower levels of self-worth and sport competence (Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007). Living a less physically active life was difficult for the participants; Luke, who had (temporarily) retired from fulltime performing at the time of the interview explained: “I'm feeling a bit edgy from computer work, […] I'm getting problems now from just sitting at a desk. It's more dangerous than circus I think!”.

Social support. Most participants recalled high levels of perceived social support in their pursuit of a career transition into circus. This encouragement and practical support (e.g., financial) from family and teammates was deemed crucial to realising a transition to circus. Alex recalled about his mother: “I wouldn't be where I am today without her, she was very supportive.” Upon request, the participants' former coaches dedicated time to their retired athletes to aid their circus audition preparations. These high levels of perceived social support are known as a stress buffering component of resilience amongst elite athletes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). It was evident from the data that for most participants, the perceived social support transferred from gymnastics to the circus context. However, Mike and Nathan reported having to convince their parents to support their pursuit of a circus career: “Based on what my parents' thoughts were, and just society in general, I just felt all these external pressures that I should kind of stay on the straight and normal” (Mike).

Optimism. While two participants received long-term contracts after their first auditions, most mentioned having to cope with rejections. Despite these rejections, the participants remained optimistic: "I was sad at that moment but I was still hopeful. I was like I'm still going to train, still going to do my best" (Alex). Similarly, Jess did not give up after fracturing her back in the selection process. Rather, she worked hard during her rehabilitation and believed that she might receive a contract from the company if she showed a positive attitude during her recovery:

> I was pretty focussed on getting the contract, and sorting my back out, I was like okay, I'll get this. […]. I remember the accident, and just being in pain, but not being scared. […] I just sort of kept focussing on the goal. I kind of knew that I was going to make it at that point.

This optimism can be interpreted as a positive personality characteristic. This component of psychological resilience affects challenge appraisal and meta-cognition, and causes a more positive response to adversities (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012).

Adapting to a Contemporary Circus Career

The adapting phase extended from the moment the participants entered the professional circus industry to the moment they felt adjusted to their new environment. For most participants, this adapting phase lasted anywhere between several months to years in duration. The participants vividly recalled feeling elated when they obtained their first circus contract: "It was amazing news, I'm going to cry just thinking about it!" (Elly). Once this initial excitement subsided the participants reported having to adapt to the various stressors, which included general stress, a loss of competence, social adjustment, taking calculated risks, and physical recovery.

General stress. The general stressors experienced by the participants were feeling overwhelmed, performance pressure, and contract uncertainties.

Feeling overwhelmed. Although the participants' first days in the circus were mainly positive, they admitted feeling overwhelmed by the scale of the companies they were working for. This included the amount of people involved in a show, the amount of languages that were spoken, and the size of the equipment:

> I knew that I was doing tramp wall for a show, and I knew it was kind of high but I hadn't seen it live, so they took us and they showed us the apparatus, and I looked at it and said 'o my god, what have I gotten myself into'. It looked so scary, something that I would never choose to do in my life, never! […] But it didn't cross my mind to give up. I was so scared, and kind of worried but I thought, if that's what it takes […], I'm going to learn it. (Alex)

As evident from Alex's example, determination helped the participants through the initial process of learning their new disciplines. The initial learning stages of these skills were described as "magical" and "fun", whilst simultaneously being "scary" and "harsh on the body".

Participants who were relatively young when they joined a circus company, and those who did not have a lot of experience travelling, were particularly prone to feeling overwhelmed. These participants reported struggling to adapt to being independent:

> Living my life, and taking care of myself outside of the show, that was really quite tricky. I used to go to work really early, we needed to be there at 1.45 pm at most days, but I was there before. Because it was more comfortable being at work rather than being at home, sorting out my life. (Jess)

Performance pressure. Performing was seen as "very, very different to competing" (Nathan). In sport, the participants were (over)prepared to compete, whereas in circus most participants did not have this extensive preparation time. This resulted in an initial peak in performance anxiety. Jess recalled the following about her first performance: "I was shaking so bad! I remember that my catcher, I was a flyer, as soon as I finished my tricks, he patted me on the back […] and said, 'you can stop shaking now'".

After this initial peak in performance anxiety, the participants noticed a decline: "In the beginning I was nervous, but I got rid of that pretty quickly. And then I was starting to have fun, playing on stage, in the routine that I was doing" (Mike). Furthermore, the performance pressure experienced in circus was different than in gymnastics: "In circus I was nervous but I was really excited, whereas at gym […] it was more like fear" (Emma). This was likely due to two factors. First, the participants realised that in circus "there is always a show coming, one more opportunity, one more moment" to perform, whereas in gymnastics "you build up, build up, build up, and all of a sudden you have one opportunity, and if you fail […] it's done. In some specific cases you have to wait two to four years to repeat that moment" (Nathan). Secondly, performance pressure declined upon the realisation that a great show does not require perfection from the circus artist: "You can make a mistake and you can fall on your ass but you can roll out of it and you can sell it" (Alex).

Contract uncertainties. Although working for large circus companies provided the participants with more job security than independent circus artists, temporary contracts and shows closing caused stress in three participants:

> I am a temporary artist here, because the girl has gone on maternity leave and we don't know when and if they return. […]. There's also small talk like 'we hear she is coming back' and it's really stressful because you never know who is going to return when. (Emma)

Another example involved the closure of a show and subsequent contract termination days before the birth of a participant's child: "It was a crazy time, you are jobless, your child is born. I tried to apply for different jobs, different shows […] but for most of the shows I could not really apply, because they wouldn't support a family".

Loss of competence. The participants reported struggling to adjust to a loss of perceived competence while adapting to their new circus careers: "I felt that I really was out of my comfort zone, because basically I was used to being good at what I do. And then all of a sudden I was crap" (Nathan). For most participants, circus was their first introduction to learning artistic skills, which included learning various forms of dance, singing, and acting.

While learning artistic skills, the participants were unsure whether they were doing things right (or even what right was). It required them to stop pursuing perfection, and to shed the "robot mentality" they were taught in gymnastics. To many, this was a shock: "They told me to stop dancing so perfect, they wanted to see me have fun, and I was like, I don't know how to have fun, I'm a gymnast!" (Jess). Luke recalled astonishment hearing the feedback from circus coaches because "my trampoline coach never asked me 'show me what you are feeling inside.'" All participants agreed that the loss of competence, in combination with artistic skills training, caused a drop in confidence:

> Doing this artistic stuff took every little bit of self-esteem and self-confidence that I had as a little 18 year old, made me feel like I was shit, like I was terrible at everything, and then slowly it taught me a lot. (Lisa)

These findings are consistent with previous literature which states that retirement from sport may cause a drop in self-confidence (Lavallee, Gordon, & Grove, 1997). However, as evidenced by Lisa's statement, the uncomfortable artistic skills training was perceived as an opportunity for personal growth. This growth mindset is indicative of high levels of resilience (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Sarkar, Fletcher, & Brown, 2015).

Social adjustment. Adapting to a career in circus required the participants to adjust to new social settings, which caused challenges fitting in, adapting to new coaching relationships, and adjusting to interdependency.

Fitting in. The pursuit of a professional circus career caused most participants to move countries, and all participants had to build a new social life. Although the participants enjoyed travelling and experiencing new cultures, forming new social relationships was challenging to some. The ease with which social bonds were formed depended on individual circumstances. In general, those who were more mature found it easier to fit in. The two participants who struggled the most were young girls at the time of transition, and Lisa recalled thinking: "I don't feel in place here". The lack of relatedness they experienced (and corresponding feelings of isolation) likely contributed to their early retirement from circus. These findings are consistent with the psychological resilience model (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012), which relates higher levels of social support to increased abilities to bounce back from adversities. Additionally, some participants needed to learn a new language in order to communicate with others.

We also identified social adjustment challenges unique to the circus environment. Notably, the participants experienced cultural differences between the lifestyles of retired athletes and cast members with traditional circus and performing art backgrounds:

> As an athlete I was very straight and narrow, and there were […] a lot of people partying, and doing stuff that I didn’t really understand why you’d be doing that […] people smoking, and drinking, and partying, I didn’t want to be around those people because I didn’t want to do that. So I was sort of isolating myself a little bit. (Jess)

Further, the participants perceived that traditional circus artists looked down on cast members with a sport background. Three out of four men in the sample (and none of the women) reported a social hierarchy in which circus artists with the best circus skills, rather than those with the most pleasant personality, were respected the most: “If you are a bad performer, you’re going to be bad socially” (Luke). These men reported that they needed to achieve a high skill level in their circus discipline before they were socially accepted. The aforementioned difficulties hindered the formation of a social support network between the participants and other cast members.

Coaching relationships. In general, circus coaches were seen as more empathetic than gymnastics coaches. However, in two instances participants were forced to work with highly autocratic coaches and directors who behaved inappropriately by disrespecting and bullying circus artists:

> Unfortunately I got in the hands of a very mean director, who did not like me for personal reasons […] He judged, bullied, criticized, and condemned me all the time. There was not one constructive piece of feedback I got from him, and he chose to do these things in front of other people too. So it demoralised me in front of my friends. He made me feel very self-conscious and not very confident. […] I was anxious every day. I did not want to go to work… I felt anxiety just thinking about it. I felt sad just going on the bus to go play. I was not me. And I decided to go seek for help.

The participant did not want the company to know about these issues, afraid it may impact on contract renewal. The search for help in a foreign country lead the participant to a psychiatrist who prescribed antidepressants:

> I think I had a reaction from the two pills, it was strong medication, and it made me lose control of my emotions. I was about to go on stage and I was bawling backstage, crying uncontrollably, couldn't stop crying, having a panic attack. […] So I get myself together, and I do the show, and intermission comes and I am completely crazy, I lost it. That's when I realised, okay that's gone too far. I went to the physio and they cut me from the rest of the show, they put someone else in to do it.

Based on the risks associated with the participant's circus discipline, it is important to note that the participant's safety may have been in jeopardy. Both cases with inappropriate behaviour from coaches/directors caused the participants to leave the shows. After some time, their well-being and confidence increased. Although the participants stated that they "wouldn't wish this experience on anybody", they reported it made them a "stronger person", indicating adversial growth associated with high levels of psychological resilience (Howells, Sarkar, & Fletcher, 2017; Sarkar et al., 2015).

Interdependency. The majority of the participants fulfilled roles as catchers, pushers, and flyers. Consequently, most participants were dependent on others for their safety and performance. This interdependency was new to the participants:

> It was something I was not used to. Being a person that always did individual sport at a high level, it was always just me. And if I perform well I perform well, and if I don't perform well I don't make other people perform badly. And no one can actually affect my performance. And all of a sudden I am in a position that I can make someone else perform on a lower level because I make a mistake, or I can be in a situation where I cannot do my tricks because someone else didn't do their job right. (Nathan)

As such, the participants reported that it was important to learn how to work in a team and to trust their partners. Some flyers struggled to entrust their safety to their colleagues, and eventually opted to work with "reliable" apparatuses instead of people. Pushers and catchers felt high levels of responsibility for their flyers' safety:

> If I go out the night before and get drunk and I'm not in a good condition and I miss the push, then it's my partner who dies, it's not me. (…) If I crash and I kill myself, then that's on me. But if I do that to someone else, that's a bit more serious I think. (Luke)

The pressure associated with these high levels of personal responsibility caused some artists to take extensive breaks in their performance careers.

Taking calculated risks. As athletes and circus artists, the participants' bodies were their commodities. Many of the participants' circus disciplines can be labelled as high-risk because the consequence of something going wrong could be life threatening (Woodman, Hardy, Barlow, & Le Scanff, 2010). Most participants performed acts several meters off the ground, and were aware of the subsequent risks: "Russian bar is quite dangerous, they can throw you up seven meters in the air […] you have to be responsible with what you're doing" (Lisa). Some participants considered themselves "lucky" not to have suffered "too severe" injuries, whilst others endured lengthy rehabilitation journeys to recover from broken spines, legs, and shoulders after falls. Dependent on the participants' contracts, injuries were not only a threat to their bodies, but also to their income. Some participants perceived getting injured as a let-down to their employers: "their attitude towards you changes because you are not able to work and they have to find a replacement and you become a little bit of a liability" (Elly). Consequently, the participants were conscientious in calculating the risks they took in their disciplines.

Physical recovery. There are high physical demands associated with professional circus careers: "It's the circus you train hard, and the days are long, 60 to 70 hours per week sometimes" (Mike). All participants agreed that the physical demands in circus were different to those they had experienced in elite sports. Some experienced the physical demands of professional circus as higher compared to gymnastics:

> In [name circus show] we had a huge job and it was very strenuous. The things that we were doing were a bit more mechanical than at gym, so the body was tiring quicker, and there was no up and down time. (Elly)

The high physical demands from circus, combined with previous stressors endured by the circus artists in their gymnastics careers, caused physical pain and exhaustion:

> By the end of the week I'm just so tired. […] I'm ready to do the show, I want to do the show, but my body is a little achy […] That's a really tough part for me. I have aches and pains from my years as a gymnast, and from all of the shows too. (Emma)

Consistent with Shrier and Hallé (2011), balancing physical stress and recovery was deemed crucial in successful long-term circus careers. Most participants were proactive in educating themselves on physical recovery, and physiotherapists at circus companies were unanimously praised for their important work: "At Cirque du Soleil, the physio department was incredible. […] We needed to take care of our bodies ourselves but we were also able to see a physio" (Elly).

Thriving in the Transition from Gymnastics to Circus

In this section, we conceptualised the term 'thriving' as a construct which encapsulates consistent high levels of bio-psycho-social wellbeing and performance (see Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, & Standage, 2017; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014a). The thriving phase followed the adapting phase, and experiences of freedom, personal development, and social connections were important to reach this phase. Six participants reached the thriving phase, and some moved from thriving to adapting, and back to thriving as a result of challenges they encountered during their careers (such as changing employers or shows).

Freedom. We identified that freedom was a key contributor to the participants' well-being, enjoyment, and motivation. After transitioning to circus between the ages of 18 to approximately 31, the participants were encouraged to discover and express who they were by their circus companies. This encouragement was seen as liberating, and in stark contrast to previous experiences in sport: "In gymnastics you are more or less a robot, you do your routine and that's about it" (Mike), while "In circus, you go and show who you are, you still do gymnastics but you are free, you are yourself" (Alex). This perception of greater freedom was particularly important to the females in our sample. In gymnastics, most female participants experienced pressure to conform to gymnastics norms and to continuously monitor their weight. These women were "relieved" that this was not a requirement to being successful anymore. Furthermore the participants felt liberated that they could propose their own ideas: "Whether it being a trick, or you wanted to invent something, or you had an idea, or you wanted to move a certain way, you were able to do this. You are fully encouraged to be free" (Elly).

Personal development. The participants unanimously reported a need to continuously grow and develop themselves. Participants who thrived in their transition to circus fulfilled this need for personal growth in both the psychological and the physiological domains.

Psychological skill development. Personal development in the transition to circus was particularly valued due to the restrictions some experienced in gymnastics: "Gymnasts pretty much only develop the body, and their mind stays almost in a box. So now [in circus] we were totally developing our minds, our bodies, and our souls" (Elly). The participants reported developing from "shy people", "nerds" or "hard working sports people", to expressive, "crazy circus people" (Luke, Mike, Jess, and Luke). This development was deemed valuable off and on stage. Furthermore, travelling and working with people from around the world was described as an "eye opening" learning experience (Lisa).

Physical skill development. Most participants experienced a steep learning curve in their new circus disciplines: “I like that aspect of learning new skills, learning new techniques, figuring out where I am going wrong. Seeing improvement, and that evolution process, so that was really awesome” (Mike). The importance of learning was also evident in Lisa’s story. She was disappointed that she did a gymnastics discipline (bars) in circus. Eventually, she left a renowned circus company to learn a “real” circus discipline.

Further exemplifying the participants’ need for growth, Lisa and Jess opted to retire from being full-time circus artists because they felt that they “achieved all of my goals”. Others sought-out ways to continue to grow and achieve by learning a wide range of circus disciplines, portraying various characters, starting their own circus companies, keeping score of the amount of shows they performed in, or adopting mentoring and coaching roles.

Social connectedness. Social support, and bonding with other circus artists did not only help the participants adapt early in their transitions, but this component of resilience also helped the participants thrive:

> New friendships were being made. […] it was scary too, because pretty much all of us who have come from this athletic background where we are not very open, we’re all very closed. And we got to take all of these straps off that were holding us down and be free. (Elly)

For many (but not all) participants, audience reactions gave the participants an increased sense of purpose in performing, something that was not present in gymnastics:

> I never had that drive like ‘oh I really want to win this competition’, I was like ‘okay whatever, I’ll do it’. […] In circus you will bring enjoyment to others. And bringing enjoyment to others is really special and people don’t do it very often. I think that was something I was always most proud of as a circus performer. (Lisa)

Identity Changes in the Career Transition Process

The transition process involved the emergence of a circus artist identity for all participants. This circus artist identity extended to more than the label the participants used to describe themselves. Rather, it encapsulated their physical and psychological development, and refers to their understanding of what a circus artist is. All participants concurred that having acrobatic skills gave them a basic reason to be on stage. However, the participants agreed that a true circus artist does more than tricks: “A person that actually engages with me, captivates me, does a trick, tells a story, and plays a character… That’s an artist to me” (Alex). A circus artist is thus a person who is able to use his/her expressions to connect with an audience, because “all those twists don’t mean anything if you don’t have an intention, if you don’t know how to be on stage” (Nathan).

The manner in which the circus artist identity emerged varied, and did not appear to be related to phases in the career transition process. Rather, it seemed to depend on experiences in the participants’ gymnastics careers and the circumstances of their career transitions. Emma did not immediately consider pursuing a circus career after retiring from a mostly enjoyable time as a gymnast. She vividly recalled the “little identity crisis” she had in the vacuum between gymnastics and circus. All participants who had their hearts set on a circus career during their athletic retirement did not report the sense of loss or despair commonly associated with retirement from sport (Lavallee & Robinson, 2007). Rather, those who did not enjoy their gymnastics experience recalled quickly shedding their athletic identity in favour of a circus identity:

> I see that I come from an athletic background, but I don’t normally see myself as an athlete, I definitely see myself as an artist. […] I feel like I have lived two separate lives, and it’s amazing to see the difference between where I’ve come from and where I’m at now, I feel like I’m completely different. (Elly)

Lisa shared this sentiment; however she added that despite quickly labelling herself as a circus artist, she did not truly feel like one in the first two years of her professional circus career: “I felt like a gymnast wearing make-up. Who didn’t quite know how to act, who didn’t quite know how to be on stage, but because of these million dollars of props and lighting my presence there was somewhat justified." Lisa and Luke only started to feel like real circus artists upon performing a circus discipline, which was unlike any gymnastics discipline.

Nathan and Alex had the most extensive professional gymnastics careers in our sample. Nathan reported that his identity shift from gymnast to circus artist was gradual, and that he was not aware of it at the time. Looking back, he attributes this identity change to the amount of time and effort he invested in being a circus artist. Alex mentioned that he embraced a circus identity without shedding his athletic identity:

> I would lie if I said that I don't find myself an athlete still. I do, because the tricks I do now […] are still very technical, and I pay attention to the detail and the technique and I want to be as clean as possible still, and point my feet and straighten my knees and focus on those details that in competition really matter because you don't want to lose points. [...] If I was not worried with that side so much I guess I'd be more tricking and more circus-ish, but the fact is that I want to do things perfect. I love doing things perfect, I love sticking my jumps, I love having that sensation in me again. And I think I always will. But I do think I'm an artist too. Today, I do believe artistry is more important than anything else.

Alex was one of the most experienced circus artists in our sample. Therefore, his quote indicates that it may be beneficial to maintain both athletic and circus artists identities during a professional circus career.

Discussion

In this paper, we explored career transitions from gymnastics to contemporary circus. Our results suggest that career transitions from sport to circus consist of three phases: realising, adapting, and thriving. While realising the career transition, and adapting to their new career, circus artists encountered various stressors. Some of these were similar to competitive, organisational, and personal stressors common in sport (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014b), while others appeared unique to the circus context. These unique stressors included interdependency and risk-taking, fitting into the circus culture, and performance pressure. Circus artists used a range of psychological resilience skills when they encountered these stressors. The use of these psychological resilience skills was associated with increased wellbeing and safety. This finding is consistent with previous research which emphasizes the importance of a balance between stressors and personal resources for successful career transitions (Schinke et al., 2017). Experiences of freedom, personal development, and social connectedness were important to facilitate thriving. Thriving was reported to relate to career longevity, and the circus artists' psychological wellbeing.

Consistent with previous literature (Babinski, 2004; Lavallee & Robinson 2007), career transitions from sport to circus triggered identity changes. All participants adopted a circus artist identity, yet individual differences were found between participants regarding the emergence of this identity. These individual differences may in part be explained by the extent to which the participants enjoyed their gymnastics careers, and whether the participants had retired from sport before pursuing a circus career. Additionally, copious similarities between the participants' previous gymnastics discipline and their new circus discipline hindered the development of a new circus artist identity.

The findings of our study carry several practical implications. First, career transitions to contemporary circus are challenging. Gymnasts who are able to transfer their psychological resilience skills from gymnastics to circus may experience less difficulties during this career transition. Therefore, we recommend practitioners in gymnastics to support the existing psychological resilience skills of their athletes. Identified weaknesses in components of psychological resilience could serve as an indicator of the psychological assistance needed through-out the realising and adaption stages of career transitions. To support the wellbeing and safety of athletes who transition to a circus career, practitioners in contemporary circus are encouraged to assess the psychological resilience of new circus artists, and to work with them to strengthen weaker components of psychological resilience.

During the realising and adapting phases of the career transition, the 'social support' component of psychological resilience is expected to weaken because the new circus artists are away from their existing social support networks. To support this component of psychological resilience, practitioners in gymnastics are encouraged to remain in contact with retired gymnasts during the realising and adapting phases of their career transitions. Practitioners in contemporary circus are encouraged to support the formation of new social support networks among cast members. A formalised buddy system, in which transitioning circus artists are paired with more experienced circus artists, could facilitate this component of psychological resilience. Similar buddy systems have been reported to aid the adjustment and wellbeing of expatriates who moved abroad for work (Hughes, 2009).

Third, experiences of freedom were found to affect the wellbeing and career longevity of circus artists in the thriving phase. Therefore, practitioners in the circus domain are recommended to develop an autonomy supportive environment (see Gagné et al., 2003). This environment facilitates decision making by the circus artists, and would be absent of controlling behaviour by coaches and directors. In the sport context, an autonomy supportive environment positively affects wellbeing (Stebbings, Taylor, & Spray, 2015) and persistence (Pelletier, Fortier, Vallerand, & Brière, 2001), while decreasing drop-out (Sarrazin, Vallerand, Guillet, Pelletier, & Curry, 2002). We recommend researchers to investigate the effectiveness of an autonomy supportive environment in the circus context.

The fourth practical implication concerns the reported changes in identity of the circus artists. Although gymnasts typically report struggling with the loss of their athletic identity (Gagné et al., 2003; Warriner & Lavallee, 2008), this experience was rare in our sample. The sense of purpose associated with the career transition to contemporary circus and the gradual loss of the athletic identity may have contributed to the ease with which the athletic identity was shed (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). However, professionals in circus may have also unwittingly alleviated the stress associated with the loss of an athletic identity. Importantly, as part of their training as circus artists, all participants were coached to explore and express who they are. This coaching appears to have facilitated the formation of a self-identity that extends beyond the roles the individual fulfils, and may prevent the sense of identity confusion reported by retired gymnasts (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008). Therefore, we encourage practitioners in sport and circus to collaborate and implement similar strategies to benefit retiring athletes who do not wish to pursue a circus career.

The current work is not without limitations. First, we relied on a sample consisting of highly successful circus artists. As such, the findings cannot be generalised to athletes who did not succeed in their pursuit of a contemporary circus career. Second, the retrospective design of this study could have affected the circus artists' perceptions of their career transition experiences. To address these limitations, we recommend future research to conduct longitudinal research in which a cohort of aspiring circus artists is followed during their career transition journey.

To conclude, our research findings provide insight into transition experiences of athletes who pursued a career under the big top. Specifically, the findings reported here suggest that there are unique socio-cultural, risk-taking, and performance factors associated with contemporary circus. Given that practitioners in the field of sport and performance psychology are increasingly working with performance artists (Filho et al., 2016; Leroux, 2014; Ross & Shapiro, 2017), we encourage researchers to investigate topics such as performance pressure, risk taking, and group cohesion in the contemporary circus domain.

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“Realising, Adapting, and Thriving in Career Transitions from Gymnastics to Contemporary Circus Arts”
by van Rens RECA, Filho E
Journal of Clinical Sport Psychology

Table 1: Themes associated with Realising, Adapting, and Thriving in Career Transitions from Gymnastics to Professional Circus.

Phase 1 Realising		**Phase 2 Adapting**		**Phase 3 Thriving**	
Hard work		General stress	- Feeling overwhelmed - Performance pressure - Contract uncertainties	Freedom	
Motivation	- Need for development - Need to be physically active	Loss of competence		Personal development	- Psychological skill development - Physical skill development
Social support		Social adjustment	- Fitting in - Coaching relationships - Interdependency	Social connectedness	
Optimism		Taking calculated risks			
		Physical recovery			

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Appendix

Interview guide

Introduction:
- Introduce study background
- Introduce interviewers' background (gymnastics/circus/psychology)
- Opportunity for interviewee to ask questions
- Consent to participate in research project and audio record the interview

Interview questions:
- How did you get involved in your sport?
- How did that evolve to becoming a high level athlete in your sport?
- How would you describe your life as an athlete? Prompt: What was a day like? What were the training/competition demands?
- Which aspects of life as an athlete did you enjoy most?
- Which aspects of life as an athlete were most challenging/did you not enjoy?
- What inspired you to become a circus artist?
- How did you make the transition to circus happen? Prompts: What was it like? What did you need to do? Who helped you achieve this?
- How would you describe your first day at the circus? Prompts: How did you feel? What were your first impressions? How did you meet others? Which disciplines did you do? What did you think of these disciplines?
- What do you remember of your first circus performance? Prompts: What did you do? How did you feel?
- What did it take to integrate into the circus? Prompt: Did you notice similarities/ differences compared to sport?
- How would you describe your life as a circus performer (now/retrospectively)? Prompts: What is a day like? What are the training/performance demands?
- How does performing compare to competing?
- In your opinion, what makes a good circus artist?
- Which aspects of life as a circus performer were/are most challenging/ do you enjoy least?
- How did you cope with these challenges?
- How do you balance your life outside of circus (i.e., family, friends, education, other interests)?
- Which aspects of life as a circus performer did/do you enjoy most?
- What would you like to achieve in the future?
- Is there anything else you think I should know?

Closing:
- Thank you, brief reflection, opportunity for interviewee to ask questions

**Note:* This list of questions served as a semi-structured guide only. A holistic, client-centred approach was used to connect with the participants, meaning that paraphrasing and reflecting techniques were used to personalise questions to the participants' experiences (see Andersen & Ivarsson, 2015).