

Citation

Christoforou, A., Mansfield, L., Blair, R., and Rhind, D. (2024) Conceptualizing Family Wellbeing in Elite Swimming. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*.

Abstract

This paper presents a novel theoretical framework for understanding family wellbeing (FWB) in elite swimming. It uses qualitative data from longitudinal interviews with families of elite swimmers in Cyprus to show the importance of understanding the impact of FWB on athlete wellbeing. Adopting an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, a year-long study was conducted to understand the experiences of four Cypriot families with an adolescent swimmer who had Olympic potential. The study employed four rounds of individual interviews with each family member to explore in-depth wellbeing, family life and elite sporting experiences. The findings revealed that a mutual sense of FWB was characterised by health, the emotions and a sense of belonging and worthwhileness. We argue for the need to move from individual accounts of athlete wellbeing to multidimensional models that help to understand the sociocultural contexts and complex relationships that impact on how athletes feel. Our research argues that understanding athletes' wellbeing cannot be separated from the environment and communities in which they live and practise their sport, and explores this issue through the family context.

Introduction

Athletes often portray 'winning at all costs' attitudes, as a form of courage and toughness. More recently, and through the personal stories of elite athletes (e.g., Michael Phelps and Adam Peaty), we witnessed an increased understanding of the short and long-term negative impact elite sport can have on a range of issues connected to what has been framed as mental health (Jackson et al., 2022). Knowledge and awareness have developed on topics connected to safeguarding and athlete welfare, with high profile cases of sexual abuse, injuries, eating disorders, and post-retirement transition difficulties (Nahman and Tan, 2022). Whilst such work is critical for supporting athletes, it largely focuses on psychological conditions, ignoring wider complexities of athletes' experiences, and the daily emotional and relational occurrences that may underly their wellbeing (Purcell et al., 2022). There is wider recognition that wellbeing is central to human life; how we feel we are doing as individuals and communities matters to our sense of capabilities, the relationships we have with others, and our sense of pleasure and purpose in life (Dolan and Metcalfe, 2012). Recently, limited research sought to explore elite athletes' wellbeing through the lens of self-determination theory (Stenling et al., 2015), quality of life (Lundqvist et al., 2021), psychological wellbeing (Nicholls et al., 2020) and subjective wellbeing (Giles et al., 2020; Uzzell et al., 2022). Yet, the theoretical focus remains largely concentrated on individual psychological constructs and mental health, missing from this critical debate the impact of wider contextual factors on the wellbeing of athletes. Despite the burgeoning literature on wellbeing and society (Dolan and Peasgood, 2008), and wellbeing and leisure (Mansfield et al., 2020) there is limited knowledge about elite athlete wellbeing, and holistic and multidimensional models of athlete wellbeing remain limited (Lundqvist and Sandin, 2014). Although it is well known that families play a significant role in people's personal wellbeing (Fahey et al., 2013), no studies have taken an in-depth

sociological approach to understanding the connection between elite sport, families, and athlete wellbeing. Adopting more sociological perspectives in research could enable developing deeper understanding of the complex interplay between individual experiences, social structures, and well-being outcomes within the elite sporting context (Ortiz, 2022).

Seeking to go beyond individualistic and psychologically focused accounts of athlete wellbeing, this paper explores the significance of multidimensional concepts connected to subjective wellbeing for understanding and conceptualising family wellbeing and the role of elite swimmer's experience in the family wellbeing dynamic. We argue that such thinking can help to understand the sociocultural contexts and complex family relationships that impact how elite athletes make sense of how they are doing and how that impacts on their performance. It does so by drawing on longitudinal interviews with families of elite swimmers and the swimmers themselves in Cyprus conducted and analysed in an Interpretative Phenomenological Framework. The paper is organised into 5 sections. First, a brief overview of the conceptual approach to wellbeing that has framed this study is presented. We explore the extant literature on elite sport, wellbeing and families in section 2 to illustrate the importance of building knowledge about family relationships in understanding and supporting athlete wellbeing. Section 3 gives a detailed account of the methods and analysis that underpin the theoretical discussions. The findings are examined in section 4 where 2 overlapping themes of family wellbeing and elite swimmers are presented: (i) Personal wellbeing: physical ability and happiness, and (ii), Mutual sense of FWB. We conclude the findings in the final section of the paper.

Conceptualising Wellbeing in Sport

Fundamentally, wellbeing refers to what is good for us, the best possible states of being (e.g. being happy), the ideal ways of living and ways of achieving it (Tiberius, 2006). Sport is commonly associated with positive wellbeing of individuals and societies. Different theoretical approaches have been used by researchers to understand the wellbeing benefits of performance and recreational sport including a focus on life satisfaction, quality of life, self-determination, self-esteem, happiness, personal growth, capability and flourishing, belonging, meaning and purpose, and in terms of a variety of positive and negative mood indicators (Mansfield et al 2020). Two overarching theoretical positions are evident in academic literature on wellbeing; a eudaimonic position proposes human flourishing as positive psychological states, traits and functioning, and a hedonistic position proposes happiness, positive affect and life satisfaction as characteristics of wellbeing. Whatever the theoretical framework, in sport research, most consider wellbeing as multidimensional and connected broadly to the well-established definition that wellbeing is how we feel we are doing as individuals, communities and societies (Dolan and Metcalf, 2012). There is no scope in this article to give a detailed overview of the different approaches to understanding sport and wellbeing that have emerged since the 1970s and such detail can be found elsewhere in the literature (see Gibson, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2020 for reviews). Advances in understanding wellbeing, sport, participation and performance have mainly derived from Ryff's (1989) multidimensional model of personal growth, self-acceptance, environment mastery, positive relationships, self-determination and a sense of purpose in life. Self-determination theorists identify elite athlete wellbeing as founded on three psychological needs - (eudaimonic) perceptions of autonomy, competency and social relatedness. It is argued that a positive motivational climate for self-determination is created when athletes feel nurtured, have positive perceptions of their abilities, are optimistic and feel confident, and this will lead to improved or higher wellbeing (Lundqvist 2021, Stenling et al, 2015). However, changing perceptions of these psychological constructs happens over time in sport and is influenced by psychological traits, coaching and the impact of performance and stressors in social life (Reinboth and Duda 2006). Emerging work on wellbeing and sport performance

emphasises a multidimensional perspective and focuses on supporting athletes to flourish or thrive in performance sport (Brown et al 2018). Wellbeing in sport may be best understood through an analysis of positive and negative wellbeing outcomes arising from the interactions of personality traits, attitudes, beliefs, emotions, behaviours and coping skills, and wider contextual factors including family, relationships and social support with sport-specific experiences. In this regard, theories of subjective wellbeing were significant to this study (e.g. Downward and Rasciute, 2011). SWB draws on Diener's (1984) framework, explaining that people assess their experiences via cognitive appraisal of emotions, mood or affect. Taking this position, SWB provides an approach to understanding mental states, both positive and negative, determined by how people feel about taking part in sport and for how long those feelings last (Testoni et al. 2018). SWB allows an understanding of different mental states and how they reflect both hedonic characteristics of wellbeing like happiness or stress and anxiety, and eudaimonic components such as worthwhileness and purpose, or boredom. In this study, thinking with a broad SWB conceptual perspective has provided an understanding about elite swimming and the role of the family in impacting wellbeing of swimmers and family members. We also explored theoretical perspectives on elite sport, families and family wellbeing to develop our conceptual approach and outline relevant concepts below.

Elite sport, wellbeing, and families

Specific definitions of family represent many different types, scopes and cultural meanings of relationships in family groups. It is generally understood that a family is a basic organising group of people who are related by ancestry or kinship, or another type of affinity; yet, many different types of family prevail across communities and cultures, and different legal definitions can be found. For example families may be multigenerational including parents and children from across different ancestral 'steps', conjugal or nuclear and based on parents, typically heterosexual, living together with their children single parent (often father or mother), or of-choice (e.g. commune-based). Families have a strong social role to play in human life but this varies as much as the precise definition and also reflects the cultural and community norms of social life (Ruspini, 2013). Broadly speaking, families serve as key institutions for socialisation, transmitting values and norms across generations, while providing emotional support and stability, ensuring members' wellbeing. It is suggested that in collectivist cultures, families emphasise cohesion and welfare, and their wellbeing is highly connected to their family. In individualist cultures, autonomy and personal growth are often prioritised and wellbeing becomes a more personal responsibility (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2008). In the sport literature, families are often described as 'teams', providing support and facilitating participation, especially in the early years (Kay, 2000). To some extent sporting families operate to socialise children into the sporting environment, encouraging participation, and performance. Parents facilitate participation by identifying sports for their children to take part in, buying them equipment and taking them to sport sessions (Kay, 2000). It is known that families accumulate sport stressors, which can impact family members' wellbeing but also the wellbeing and functioning of the family unit, particularly in the ages where the involvement of parents or caregivers is essential (Hellstedt, 2005; Newhouse-Bailey et al., 2015).

The kind of family support for sport noted above indicates a wellbeing function in sporting families. Literature on sporting families has focused extensively on the negative impact of parental behaviours on athletes' motivation and competition anxiety (Dorsch et al., 2015; Knight et al., 2016). Parents' wellbeing has mostly been discussed in relation to the financial stressors, performance anxiety, and guilt for neglecting the athlete's siblings (Burgess et al., 2016). Similarly to elite athletes, parents with adolescents involved in organised sport report more life stress, and time pressures than parents of

non-athletes (Sutcliffe et al., 2021). Sporting parents are often criticised for unconventional parenting (e.g. prioritising sport performance over education), or using sport to showcase their good parenting, and subsequently, parenting becomes a stressful ‘public act’ (Trussell and Shaw, 2012). Siblings are often perceived as the marginalised/neglected family member, yet studies revealed mixed perspectives on how they feel towards their sibling (athlete), highlighting the uniqueness on the family structure and functioning (Davis and Meyer, 2008; Knoetze-Raper et al., 2016; Trussell, 2014). Factors like age, birth order, and sport engagement seem to be predominant to their emotions. Trussell (2014) suggests that sometimes it provides more opportunities to spend time together and bond; for example, older siblings sometimes developed a mentor relationship with their siblings, showing them new skills and providing advice. Tension though can be created when a younger same-sex sibling is thought to be the star athlete, and when siblings were teammates. Similarly, Davis and Meyer (2008) found that younger siblings can express bitterness and jealousy towards their talented older sibling or feel pressure to measure up to their achievements.

There is emerging literature identifying FWB as an important conceptual approach in family studies. FWB has been used mostly as an umbrella term, for understanding family members’ individual wellbeing and the contribution of individual wellbeing to the stability and quality of relationships between family members (Fahey et al., 2013). Armstrong, Birnie-Lefcovitch and Ungar (2005) suggested that FWB reflects interconnecting characteristics connected to of ‘family organisational structure’ (family harmony, cohesion, agreement on caregiving, expressiveness and conflict); ‘interpersonal relationships’ within and outside the family; ‘parents’ psychological status’ and, ‘parent self-efficacy’ (sense of competence in dealing with their children’s challenges). Such a multidimensional way of thinking about FWB is informative and could be developed with a conceptual focus on SWB outlined earlier. It is this potential that has provided the rationale and focus for the study in this paper. Prior to presenting a critical discussion of the findings of the study we explain the methods by which the data was collected and analysed.

Methods

This study aimed to explore FWB in the context of Cypriot families, with an adolescent elite swimmer. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach was adopted, framing an inductive qualitative strategy for developing an in-depth understanding of the way that elite swimmers and their families perceive and make sense of the social and personal world of performance swimming (Smith and Osborn, 2007). IPA is committed to idiographic values and is recognised for its value in exploring the complexities of individual subjective experiences, and their interconnection with social structures and cultural processes (Smith and Osborn, 2007). This dovetails with the focus of this study which explored the lived experiences of elite swimmers and their family members, and the complex ways in which family dynamics intertwined with the swimming experiences to impact on wellbeing of the family or what we are referring to as FWB. This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of [X University].

Connecting with elite swimmers and their families in Cyprus

This study adopted the definition of ‘nuclear family’ provided by the United Nations (2008), suggesting that family members are related by blood, marriage or law, and a family cannot contain more than one household. Although this definition excludes non-traditional family models, it highlights the

influence of constitutional structures on people's perceptions and experiences of 'family' and given that Cyprus' law only recognises traditional heteronormative family models, it was deemed more relevant for the study's context. The study included families with all members having Cypriot nationality and an adolescent (15-18 years old) current elite level swimmer (Cyprus National Team member). All family members living in the household and over the age of 12 years for the duration of the study were included in the interviews. The cut-off age was determined by methodological and ethical considerations, including the power-relations between child participants and the researcher, which could be developed through the prolonged involvement, and the potential ability of children to talk in-depth about their wellbeing and family experiences (Einarsdóttir, 2007). Around age 12, Cypriot children enter lower secondary school and are introduced to more sensitive topics, encouraged to express thoughts and opinions. Consequently, age 12 was considered a suitable cut-off age.

The first author had long-term and established links to elite swimming in Cyprus as a former international swimmer. We explore related issues of positionality later. Here we explain that recruitment of study participants took place at the Cypriot National Swimming Championships in 2017. Initially, the researcher identified the top four swimmers eligible for the study and approached their coach at the venue to discuss the study. Coaches were approached first as it was thought that this could avoid parents enforcing participation for reasons not connected to the study (e.g., thinking that by talking to an 'expert' they could receive information on improving their children's performance). Coaches who agreed to the involvement of identified athletes were provided with an invitation letter for participation and communicated the invitation with their swimmers. Those interested were then introduced to the researcher, who explained the study. Taking part in the study was entirely voluntary and this was made clear to potential participants. Interested swimmers, who expressed interest to participating then introduced the researcher to their parents, who were at the venue. The participants received project information sheets, had the chance to ask questions, and were encouraged to take time to consider the invitation and to return with any further questions. Families were included if all members of the family agreed to take part. This decision was based on the notion that, to examine FWB it was crucial to have the voice of all family members.

The elite swimmers and their families.

Two male and two female adolescent elite swimmers and their families agreed to take part in the study (n=16). All the swimmers (pseudonymised as Andrea, Natalie, Mark and Peter) lived with their mother, father and a sibling. From the four families, in total three siblings were excluded; Peter's brother (aged U12 years), and two of Natalie's elder siblings who lived abroad.

(Table 1)

Talking about elite swimming, wellbeing and families.

Data collection took place over a 1-year period between 2017-2018 and included four rounds of individual interviews with 16 family members. Sixty-two interviews were conducted and lasted between 45-70 minutes (average interview time 60 minutes) All participants took part in all interviews except Andrea's parents (Matthew and Anna), who, due to personal circumstances, could not participate in the final interview. Interviews were conducted in Greek Cypriot (the first author and participants' mother language) and took place at the participants' households, in rooms that allowed privacy.

All rounds of interviews explored three key topics drawn from the theoretical and conceptual focus on elite swimming, subjective wellbeing and family relations. As the rounds progressed, conversations developed the topics in an exploratory way. The three topics were: (a) personal life and wellbeing; (b) family life and FWB; (c) swimming experiences and subjective wellbeing. The first round aimed to get to know the participants and develop an understanding of how their background, previous experiences, and everyday life, shaped their sense and view of wellbeing, FWB, and their perception of swimming. Developing this base knowledge enabled the lead author to create an informed trajectory of discussion for each participant and family, and understanding how different daily, weekly and longer term events in swimming and wider life influenced their wellbeing. Interview guides for rounds 2, 3 and 4 were iterative and reflected preliminary analysis of participants' subjective experiences. They included standardised questions like "how are you doing lately?" and "could you describe your family life during this period?" alongside personalised prompts. The standardised questions helped exploring the three main topics and observe how shared experiences (e.g. National Championship) were perceived by individuals and family units. At the end of each interview, participants were asked to share their plans, goals, hopes, and emotions towards the following three months. This information contributed to developing the follow-up interview guides. In the final round, participants also reflected on the year, and revisited their understanding of wellbeing and FWB, aiding in tracking changes in their perception of wellbeing and evaluating the study's quality. **Analysing the data in an IPA framework**

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed individually following IPA's idiographic approach, which focused on detailed examination of individual subjective experiences to understand how participants make sense of their personal and social worlds (Smith et al., 2009). After each round, transcripts were examined to explore participants' experiences, interpret emotional aspects, and identify conceptual connections. Transcripts were analysed until there were no more interpretations to be made. Through reviewing the notes on each transcript, emergent themes were identified, which were then clustered to develop the superordinate themes, which describe the findings in an organised and coherent manner for each participant. A cross-case analysis (Larkin et al., 2019) was then conducted, examining superordinate themes within each family, and those themes were explored at the end of the study to explore further families' longitudinal dynamics. Finally, a second cross-case analysis of the four families revealed new emergent themes relating to social wellbeing, self-satisfaction, physical health, happiness, family relationships and contentment. One superordinate theme underpinned our conceptualisation of FWB which we define as a 'Mutual Sense of FWB'. This was characterised by a number of overlapping subthemes including appraisals of physical health, the expression of positive and negative emotions and a sense of belonging and worthwhileness.

Being a former national swimmer in Cyprus

The first author was a former international swimmer competing for National team of Cyprus for eleven years who retired from sport seven years prior to the research. This provided a unique position of involvement in the study enabling close contact to national coaches and supporting the recruitment of swimmers and their families into the study. Yet such a position of involvement also frames degrees of biases and preconceptions and in this case about the author's personal experiences of positive and negative experiences of elite swimming and family relationships. This position of involvement was one that required constant revisiting and renegotiation to ensure entirely personal and individual experiences of the first author were explored and considered in making sense of the research (Hopkins et al., 2017). It is commonly the case in this kind of research, issues of involvement and detachment and the need to critically examine personal passions and interests, and their potential impact on the study (Mansfield, 2007). In this project it was helpful and important to reflect with coauthors about the first authors

feelings and experiences and to explore the balance and blend of theoretical analysis as a way to offer a robust and accurate account of elite swimming and family wellbeing.

Study Findings and Discussion: Towards an understanding of FWB in elite swimming

The findings provide an in-depth understanding of the ways that FWB, is shaped by a dynamic interplay between each family member's personal wellbeing and the members' mutual sense of FWB in a Cypriot socio-cultural and elite swimming context. Using participants' quotes (removing places and swimming times for anonymity purposes), the following sections demonstrate the complex interplay and overlap of the characteristics of FWB, under one superordinate theme 'A Mutual Sense of Family Wellbeing' which is characterised by three subthemes (i) FWB and health, (ii) happiness, emotional dynamics and FWB, (iii) FWB, belonging and worthwhileness. The presented quotes have been translated by the researcher and approved by a Cypriot English Literature teacher, as recommended for ensuring language validity (Van Nes et al., 2010). The interview round of each quote is indicated using 'r', next to participants' pseudonyms. This paper offers a starting point for future research on FWB in elite sport.

A Mutual Sense of Family Wellbeing and the Impact of Elite Swimming on Swimmers and Family Members

FWB and Health

Family wellbeing appeared as a complex and negotiated construct tied to personal experiences of being an elite swimmer or a parent of an elite swimmer and individual constructions of wellbeing in that regard. Wellbeing, at the personal level was articulated by participants as principally connected to feelings of good physical health

"it's health above everything, happiness and then the rest. Health is about having a healthy body above all and of course when you are ill or something, to be able to fight and get over it, not having much that impacts you negatively" (Natalie, swimmer, family 2, r1)

To a large extent elite swimming provided a defining context for participants' experiences and sense of personal wellbeing. Significantly, physical health was perceived as an acquired benefit from elite swimming and a personal duty in terms of maintaining it for performance. For instance, swimmers' muscular pain and exhaustion were considered signs of progress and part of fulfilling their performance duties, and were often used as actualisation criteria of physical ability and development, which in return defined their personal sense of wellbeing.

"I feel that I'm in the best condition that I could be! Because, I'm doing well at the sessions, I feel that I can race well. I'm not getting exhausted so easily anymore... I used to swim [time] whereas I was supposed to swim 3 seconds faster, and I was getting exhausted. Now I still get exhausted but I swim the times I should and even faster!" (Mark, swimmer, family 3, r2)

Mark highlights the connection between health and performance expectations in his daily routine and how higher levels of tiredness define his perception of good physical ability and capacity to perform and therefore define his sense of personal wellbeing. For parents, similar physical feelings of tiredness or muscular pain were associated with negative personal perceptions of poor health created by the

intense commitment of parenting children who were elite swimmers. Mark's parents' show how parental responsibility and their sporting aspirations for their children effectively put their own physical health to the side in terms of priority.

"There's just no time for myself... I always say that "next year I will start doing some walking". In the past I used to be an athletic person. I used to go to the gym, the pool, I used to do aqua aerobics... but then with the kids, I stopped and this is why I became like this!" (Gloria, mother, family 3, r1)

Gloria was sarcastic and humorous when referring to her appearance, but she also revealed a sense of disappointment, guilt, and shame in herself for becoming *"like this"*; something she did not want to identify herself as, especially as it does not reflect her previous *"athletic"* identity. Parenting elite swimmers then had a negative impact on parent's health and sense of personal wellbeing at times.

Family members were often acutely aware of the potential health-related impacts of the demands of swimming and appraised them differently to swimmers themselves bringing a sense of emotional support and understanding to the fore. As one sibling noted:

"When you hear her saying that she is too tired and that she might not swim well, which she only said once because she was extremely tired, you can't be alright with that – knowing that your sister is extremely tired and sensing that she feels sad!" (Chris, sibling, family 1, r4)

Seeing Andrea struggling with tiredness and worrying about performing was difficult for her younger brother, Chris, as he wanted to support but felt sad and powerless to help. Anna, their mother shared similar emotions, yet realising Andrea's struggles and the meaningfulness of swimming, she tried to support her by lowering her own expectations of other areas of Andrea's life including schooling as a way to justify the elite swimming demands.

"It's only now that I realised that Andrea won't get a chance to rest this year [...] I became more lenient [about studying] because I was feeling sorry for her. It's very hard. Very hard! She was away for a month and then was like, "mum I haven't done great at the exams." Whatever I'd say... what could I say? All I'm saying is that, that's the price of the gold medals." (Anna, mother, family 1, r3)

Happiness, emotional dynamics and FWB

Happiness was revealed as one amongst a range of positive emotions that was central to personal wellbeing of elite swimmers and their family members. Elite swimmers and their families in this study articulated positive and negative feelings and mental states. Happiness, pride and a strong sense of personal satisfaction reflected notions of subjective wellbeing (Testoni et al., 2018) in the evidence for personal wellbeing as a component of FWB.

"there won't be another guy who can be the first Cypriot who swims under [X time]... No matter what, it's a historic [achievement]... it will be remembered!" (Peter, swimmer, family 4, r1)

Elite sport provides opportunities to perform, acquire a social status and become memorable and respected (Knoetze-Raper et al., 2016). When elite swimmers are recognised for their success, FWB is

enhanced for both the swimmers and their family members through the development and maintenance of positive emotions such as pride, status and respect. Brothers and sisters of elite swimmers explained they were proud of their siblings' achievements and that made them feel good about the family.

"They [friends] know that he is a swimmer, that he is breaking records, that he started travelling now... They always congratulate me about my brother!" (Irene, sibling, family 3, r1)

"Whenever I talk about my sister, I end up doing a monologue! And that's because I'm proud and it's a topic that I kinda like 'bragging' about [giggling]!" (Harry, sibling, family 4, r2)

A range of complex emotional dynamics, both positive and negative were highlighted by elite swimmers and their families as important to understanding FWB. George, for example, revealed guilt towards his other child, which is common in the sports literature (Knoetze-Raper et al., 2016); a feeling of failing in one's parental duties to the child who is not the elite performer.

"[other child] might want to go somewhere and you can't... it's almost as if we are neglecting her... umm because we are constantly at the swimming pool we end up neglecting her... although she has her own achievements with her art, we neglect her [...] she hasn't expressed it. But I can tell. She is happy about her brother but, I can feel it" (George, father, family 3, r1)

He felt that swimming did not affect his other child's development or health per se, but not being able to dedicate as much time as he wanted to was influencing his own sense of personal wellbeing in terms of being satisfied or happy with the success in the parenting role.

The maintenance and sustainability of positive emotions that contribute to personal and family wellbeing was shown to be fragile in this study and often dependent on elite swimming performance and success. Peter, in the first round, expressed a sense of superiority and pride deriving from achieving to be the first Cypriot to have that achievement; however, a failure to keep up with successful performances had a negative influence on his subjective wellbeing through feelings of failure, sadness, anxiety and shame.

"I was 'the topic' on the stands, everyone was talking about what could be going wrong with me..." (Peter, swimmer, family 4, r4)

Negative emotions related to poor subjective wellbeing in elite swimming were not simply felt by the athlete but embodied by family members. Not being recognised for elite performances or afforded respect for them by others served as a source of negativity for families and had a damaging effect on FWB. Nicos, Peter's father, highlighted his irritation at others who did not recognise or understand the path to elite performance or successes achieved.

"For example a colleague of mine comes to see her son [racing], and she never congratulated me... I don't want it though, I only want it from people who understand the struggles of athletes and when they say congratulations they mean it!" (Nicos, father, family 4, r2)

And Maria, Peter's mother, also became annoyed and frustrated at the conversations of other parents who she considered went beyond parental pride into less acceptable forms of arrogance.

“Whenever she sits next to me at competitions I’m always trying to find a chance to move away because she always starts going “my daughter this, and my daughter that!” [...] You’ll never hear me bragging “Peter did this and did that...!” And she was laughing and was being sarcastic when Peter came second” (Maria, mother, family 4, r2)

Peter’s family felt anger, disappointment, and injustice by people underestimating or pretending to admire his efforts and ability. The spouse experienced rivalries with other parents, yet seemed unable to react. Maria’s experiences illustrate the sports’ ‘side-line behaviours’ (Dorsch et al., 2015) which, for the participants in this study impact negatively on FWB through the elicitation of negative emotions including annoyance and frustration. Also important to note, is how family experiences can be transmitted to the swimmers and consequently influence their relationships with their swimming peers.

“in Cyprus it’s all about being mean to one another... surely, swimmers abroad also have some competition between them but they’re not wishing for one another to not swim well!” (Peter, swimmer, family 4, r3)

The competition season brought increasingly intense emotions to the fore as athletes often spend a significant amount of time away from her family and had to cope with more negative feelings associated with missing their family. The countdown for moving abroad appeared to create additional emotional stress and guilt for prioritising swimming over family time.

“I was away for three weeks, then I came back for two and then went away for another two. I would like it if they could come too, I don’t like that I’m always that far. Especially this year that is my final one [in Cyprus]. But okay, they will come in [X competitions]!” [...] I would rather if they came at the [Y competitions], as I could have achieved something better there!” (Andrea, swimmer, family 1, r4)

Families illustrated that they were bonded together in the challenges of elite swimming and there was a reciprocal relationship between the felt stress of training and being away from family to do so and the performance outcome of the swimmer. Athletes feel their performance can somehow give back to their families for the sacrifices they make. In the following quote, Peter feels guilt and self-disappointment for not performing well enough which made his family sad. His younger brother’s affection was comforting but also unsettling, as he experienced his sadness as his own fault.

“I caused more sadness to Alexis. He was holding me in his hug and telling me “don’t be scared mate, whatever happened, we’ll get over it...” basically I don’t know... I felt that, I should give them a little happiness” (Peter, swimmer, family 4, r4)

Overall, the participants’ experiences and emotions were extensively shaped by how they anticipated their family would feel, indicating the existence of the notion of ‘familiocracy’, in the Cypriot culture. Familiocracy refers to “a system dominated by family”, where family is “predominant in social and economic life of the society” (Minas et al., 2013: 4). Research suggests that athletes often feel responsible for their family’s emotions (Knight et al., 2016; Omli and Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011); however this study shows how for these families, there is a shared sense of accountability for each other’s emotions. To our knowledge, previous studies have not discussed how siblings may feel accountable for each other’s emotions, yet this finding is particularly relevant to familiocratic cultures. This study highlights how the personal and FWB were perceived by all members as a personal responsibility; however, the swimming expectations (performance and behaviours) and often

inadequate sport knowledge, created limited control and inability to help, which often affected their sense of self-satisfaction.

FWB, Belonging and Worthwhileness

Feeling connected to or a part of a family is intertwined with a sense of belonging to a supportive family network for elite swimmers. A sense of belonging to a family elicited strong feelings of contentment characterised by feeling loved, supported and understood (Ferguson and Ryan, 2019). When family relationships were harmonious with positive interactions including open communication, spending time together and being actively involved when needed, benefits to individual and FWB were shown. Chris described the collective range of feelings felt by families of elite swimmers and the shared emotions in families that are strongly bonded.

“We were here, with the laptop on. I was sitting there, mum there, and dad there. And they were kinda, stressed, a lot! They were really nervous, especially mum! And when she finished first, dad stood up screaming, hugged mum [...] but I wish Andrea was here to watch how great she is doing!” (Chris, sibling, family 1, r3)

Chris’ notes how that race allowed the family to develop a mutual sense of contentment in the family. He illustrates how, despite only three members being in the same physical environment, all four members got to share a similar emotional experience, (e.g., arousal before the race, happiness, pride, and joy). Significantly, it created a safe environment for communicating their emotions openly, contributing to sensing positive affect.

In other occasions, the sense of contentment was challenged by elite swimming, because swimmers sometimes felt that their family could not see and sympathise their challenges:

“it wasn’t a holiday for me. I was all the time at the pool. Hotel – pool, hotel – pool. [...] they had fun, they were with some other parents too. They stuffed themselves with food, they did a lot of shopping... they must have had fun” (Mark, swimmer, family 3, r4)

“we went all together, we had fun, we had a good company as well! My daughter liked it too, she did some shopping, got some stuff, shoes, clothes, a bag...” (Gloria, mother, family 3, r4)

Mark’s and Gloria’s quotes demonstrate how they experienced a family trip abroad for competitions, differently. Gloria described the trip as fun, where they all together enjoyed different leisure activities, whereas Mark experienced loneliness. He felt physically isolated and trapped in a monotonous routine, and that his family was oblivious. Mark appeared annoyed about not having a fun experience, and his experiences not being acknowledged seem to have made him feel lack of support, belonging and relatedness.

Worthwhileness, in this study, refers to members feeling valuable as part of their family system. As observed, worthwhileness was developed when members received positive recognition from their family for fulfilling their family role duties and being perceived as valuable individuals for contributing

to the society as good people, students, swimmers, professionals, parents or siblings. One elite swimmer, Natalie explained

“I have the ideal family that an athlete and student could have!...Dad was doing the ‘chauffeur’ for me to have my physio, my training and that. I know that he does everything in his power to help me!” (Natalie, swimmer, family 2, r2)

And Natalie’s father described his parenting commitment as challenging but ultimately with an important purpose, thus providing him with a sense of reciprocal value.

“Natalie... is the type of person who demands stuff, you know, she can’t stop... ‘take me here, take me there, hurry up!!’ Haha! I’m not complaining. That’s just her... character. I’m glad I can do it ... I’m not... [one] day... I had to drive to town and back [25mins each ride] five times” (Gregory, father, family 2, r2)

This did not mean that all family relationships were harmonious. The demands on elite swimmers and their families creates tension at times which has to be negotiated. Appreciation of athlete and parental role but both parties is essential to good FWB as a way of avoiding a sense of being devalued and worthless. As one parent noted:

“I have a few issues with him [Peter]. It’s been a month, that we barely talk. It’s unacceptable walking by, saying a simple hi and leaving while I am doing housework, and not even ask if I need any help.” (Nicos, father, family 4, r1)

To an extent, the uncertainty and challenges of elite training create psychological challenges that impact on family dynamics and it is the most understanding, loving and bonded families who are able to navigate those difficulties and recognise the value that each member brings to the family as one parent and a sibling noted:

“I was like “see! We all have faith in you and you don’t! For once, just believe in yourself”, “Urgh! Leave me alone” he’d say, so I leave it there because I know that, after a while, he’ll be after hugs and be all like “mummy, mummy, you’re the best mum!” (Maria, mother, family 4, r2)

“I think that as soon as he starts [training] and sees and realises that I’m there [for him] too, he’ll be fine” (Thomas, sibling, family 4, r3)

It is well known that family roles, expectations and dynamics are not always clear and boundaries and expectations become blurry, allowing confusion and misunderstandings to develop (Broderick, 1993). This is certainly the case with elite swimmers and connected to the demands of training and different patterns of performance which can challenge the way in which each family member values, recognises and respects others in the family and ultimately the extent to which family members feel they belong to the family and experience a sense of value or worthwhileness in family relationships and activities. (Brown, 1999).

Conclusion

The findings offer a novel approach for exploring family wellbeing and elite swimmers in Cyprus. We suggest that FWB can be conceptualised as a dynamic interplay between health, the emotions and belonging and worthwhileness. We argue that these components broadly reflect the significance of understanding wellbeing in elite sport through a subjective wellbeing lens.

Athletes' wellbeing cannot be understood separately from their families. Given the country's small size, familiocratic culture and strong socio-cultural norms, the findings could reflect other Cypriot elite sporting families. They might also be relevant to sporting families from similar cultures.

In understanding FWB of elite swimmers and other high performance sporting families, we recommend for future studies to consider the wider social environment. For example religion, local history, and political landscape could all influence FWB in different way. With this knowledge, we argue for the need to move from individual accounts of athlete wellbeing to multidimensional models, which consider the role of families and sociocultural factors.. Such models would enable developing policies that promote athletes' long-term wellbeing and improve families' experiences in elite sport.

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the International Olympic Committee for funding this research, and the four families who took part in the study.

References:

- Armstrong MI, Birnie-Lefcovitch S and Ungar MT (2005) Pathways Between Social Support, Family Well Being, Quality of Parenting, and Child Resilience: What We Know. *Journal of Child and Family Studies* 14(2). Kluwer Academic Publishers-Plenum Publishers: 269–281. DOI: 10.1007/s10826-005-5054-4.
- Broderick CB (1993) *Understanding Family Process : Basics of Family Systems Theory*. London: Sage Publications.
- Brown J (1999) Bowen Family Systems Theory and Practice: Illustration and Critique. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Family Therapy* 20(2). Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 94–103. DOI: 10.1002/j.1467-8438.1999.tb00363.x.
- Brown DJ, Arnold R, Reid T and Roberts G (2018). A qualitative exploration of thriving in elite sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology*, 30(2), 129-149.
- Burgess NS, Knight CJ and Mellalieu SD (2016) Parental stress and coping in elite youth gymnastics: an interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 8(3). Routledge: 237–256. DOI: 10.1080/2159676X.2015.1134633.
- Davis NW and Meyer BB (2008) When Sibling Becomes Competitor: A Qualitative Investigation of Same-Sex Sibling Competition in Elite Sport. *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 20(2). Taylor & Francis Group : 220–235. DOI: 10.1080/10413200701864817.
- Dolan P and Metcalfe R (2012) Measuring subjective wellbeing: Recommendations on measures for use by national governments. *Journal of Social Policy* 41(2): 409–427. DOI:

- 10.1017/S0047279411000833.
- Dolan P and Peasgood T (2008) Measuring Well-Being for Public Policy: Preferences or Experiences? *Journal of Legal Studies* 37(SUPPL. 2). DOI: 10.1086/595676.
- Dorsch TE, Smith AL, Wilson SR, et al. (2015) Parent goals and verbal sideline behavior in organized youth sport. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology* 4(1): 19–35. DOI: 10.1037/spy0000025.
- Downward P and Rasciute S (2011). Does sport make you happy? An analysis of the well-being derived from sports participation. *International Review of Applied Economics*, 25(3): 331–348. DOI:10.1080/02692171.2010.511168
- Einarsdóttir J (2007) Research with children: methodological and ethical challenges. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 15(2): 197–211. DOI: 10.1080/13502930701321477.
- Fahey T, Keilthy P and Polek E (2013) Family Relationships and Family Well-Being : A Study of the Families of Nine Year-Olds in Ireland. University College Dublin and the Family Support Agency. Available at: <http://researchrepository.ucd.ie/handle/10197/5102> (accessed 12 July 2017).
- Ferguson SM and Ryan AM (2019) It's Lonely at the Top: Adolescent Students' Peer-perceived Popularity and Self-perceived Social Contentment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 48(2): 341–358. DOI: 10.1007/s10964-018-0970-y.
- Gibson H (2018). Chronicling the use of life satisfaction, quality of life, wellness and wellbeing in leisure research. In *20th Leisure, Recreation and Tourism Research Symposium and International Forum, September*.
- Giles S, Fletcher D, Arnold R, et al. (2020) Measuring Well-Being in Sport Performers: Where are We Now and How do we Progress? *Sports Medicine*. DOI: 10.1007/s40279-020-01274-z.
- Hellstedt J (2005) Invisible players: A family systems model. *Clinics in Sports Medicine*. DOI: 10.1016/j.csm.2005.06.001.
- Hopkins RM, Regehr G and Pratt DD (2017) A framework for negotiating positionality in phenomenological research*. *Medical Teacher* 39(1). DOI: 10.1080/0142159X.2017.1245854.
- Jackson JR, Dirks EJ and Billings AC (2022) From Athlete to Advocate: The Changing Media Coverage of Michael Phelps Pre- and Postretirement. *International Journal of Sport Communication*: 1–8. DOI: 10.1123/ijsc.2022-0074.
- Kay T (2000) Sporting Excellence: A Family Affair? *European Physical Education Review* 6(2): 151–169. DOI: 10.1177/1356336X000062004.
- Knight CJ, Dorsch TE, Osai K V, et al. (2016) Influences on Parental Involvement in Youth Sport. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology* 5(2): 161–178. DOI: 10.1037/spy0000053.
- Knoetze-Raper J, Myburgh C and Poggenpoel M (2016) Experiences Of Families With a High-Achiever Child in Sport: Case Studies. *South African Journal for Research in Sport Physical Education and Recreation* 38(1): 75–89.
- Larkin M, Shaw R and Flowers P (2019) Multiperspectival designs and processes in interpretative phenomenological analysis research. *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 16(2). Routledge: 182–198. DOI: 10.1080/14780887.2018.1540655.
- Lundqvist C and Sandin F (2014) Well-Being in Elite Sport: Dimensions of Hedonic and Eudaimonic Well-Being among Elite Orienteers. *The Sport Psychologist* 28(3): 245–254. DOI: 10.1123/tsp.2013-0024.
- Lundqvist C, Träff M and Brady A (2021) “Not everyone gets the opportunity to experience this”: Swedish elite athletes' perceptions of quality of life. *International Journal of Sport Psychology* 52(5). DOI: 10.7352/IJSP.2021.52.412.
- Mansfield L (2007) Involved-Detachment: A Balance of Passion and Reason in Feminisms and Gender-related Research in Sport, Tourism and Sports Tourism. *Journal of Sport & Tourism* 12(2). Routledge : 115–141. DOI: 10.1080/14775080701654762.

- Mansfield L (2008) Reconsidering feminisms and the work of Norbert Elias for understanding gender, sport and sport-related activities. *European Physical Education Review* 14(1). DOI: 10.1177/1356336X07085711.
- Mansfield L, Daykin N and Kay T (2020). Leisure and wellbeing. *Leisure Studies*, 39(1): 1–10. DOI: 10.1080/02614367.2020.1713195.
- Minas C, Mavrikiou PM and Jacobson D (2013) Homeownership, family and the gift effect: The case of Cyprus. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 28(1): 1–15. DOI: 10.1007/s10901-012-9281-x.
- Nahman C and Tan JOA (2022) How should we ensure that children are safeguarded in gymnastics? *Sports Psychiatry* 1(2). DOI: 10.1024/2674-0052/a000009.
- Nahman C and Tan JOA (2022). How should we ensure that children are safeguarded in gymnastics? *Sports Psychiatry: Journal of Sports and Exercise Psychiatry*, 1(2): 34–35. <https://doi.org/10.1024/2674-0052/a000009>
- Newhouse-Bailey M, Dixon MA and Warner S (2015) Sport and Family Functioning: Strengthening Elite Sport Families. *Journal of Amateur Sport* 1(2): 1–26. DOI: 10.17161/jas.v0i0.4934.
- Nicholls AR, Madigan DJ, Fairs LRW, et al. (2020) Mental health and psychological well-being among professional rugby league players from the UK. *BMJ Open Sport and Exercise Medicine* 6(1). DOI: 10.1136/bmjsem-2019-000711.
- Omli J and Wiese-Bjornstal DM (2011) Kids Speak. *Research Quarterly for Exercise and Sport* 82(4). Taylor & Francis Group : 702–711. DOI: 10.1080/02701367.2011.10599807.
- Ortiz SM (2022) Sport Groupies: Perpetuating Patriarchal Power. *Contexts* 21(1). DOI: 10.1177/15365042221083012.
- Purcell R, Pilkington V, Carberry S, et al. (2022) An Evidence-Informed Framework to Promote Mental Wellbeing in Elite Sport. *Frontiers in Psychology* 13. DOI: 10.3389/fpsyg.2022.780359.
- Reinboth M and Duda JL (2006). Perceived motivational climate, need satisfaction and indices of well-being in team sports: A longitudinal perspective. *Psychology of sport and exercise*, 7(3), 269–286.
- Ruspini E (2013). Diversity in family life: Gender, relationships and social change. Diversity in Family Life: Gender, Relationships and Social Change. Bristol: Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668803.2015.1082737>
- Ryff CD (1989) Happiness is everything, or is it? Explorations on the meaning of psychological well-being. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 57(6). American Psychological Association: 1069–1081. DOI: 10.1037/0022-3514.57.6.1069.
- Smith JA and Osborn M (2007) Pain as an assault on the self: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the psychological impact of chronic benign low back pain. *Psychology & Health* 22(5). Routledge : 517–534. DOI: 10.1080/14768320600941756.
- Smith JA, Flowers P and Larkin M (2009) *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis : Theory, Method, and Research*. London: SAGE.
- Stenling A, Lindwall M and Hassmén P (2015) Changes in perceived autonomy support, need satisfaction, motivation, and well-being in young elite athletes. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology* 4(1). DOI: 10.1037/spy0000027.
- Sutcliffe JT, Kelly PJ and Vella SA (2021) Youth sport participation and parental mental health. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 52. DOI: 10.1016/j.psychsport.2020.101832.
- Tamis-LeMonda CS, Way N, Hughes D, Yoshikawa H, Kalman RK. and Niwa EY (2008). Parents' goals for children: The dynamic coexistence of individualism and collectivism in cultures and individuals. *Social development*, 17(1):183-209. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9507.2007.00419.x
- Testoni S, Mansfield L and Dolan P (2018) Defining and measuring subjective well-being for sport policy. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics* 10(4): 815–827. DOI: 10.1080/19406940.2018.1518253.
- Tiberius V (2006) Well-Being: Psychological Research for Philosophers. *Philosophy Compass* 1(5).

- Blackwell Publishing Ltd: 493–505. DOI: 10.1111/j.1747-9991.2006.00038.x.
- Trussell DE (2014) Contradictory Aspects of Organized Youth Sport: Challenging and Fostering Sibling Relationships and Participation Experiences. *Youth & Society* 46(6). SAGE PublicationsSage CA: Los Angeles, CA: 801–818. DOI: 10.1177/0044118X12453058.
- Trussell DE and Shaw SM (2012) Organized Youth Sport and Parenting in Public and Private Spaces. *Leisure Sciences* 34(5). DOI: 10.1080/01490400.2012.714699.
- United Nations (2008) *Principles and Recommendations for Population and Housing Censuses, Revision 2, Statistical Papers Series M. No. 67/Rev.2*. New York. Available at: https://unstats.un.org/unsd/demographic/sources/census/docs/P&R_Rev2.pdf (accessed 7 August 2017).
- Uzzell KS, Knight CJ and Hill DM (2022) Understanding and Recognizing High-Performance Swimmers' Well-Being. *Sport, Exercise, and Performance Psychology* 11(1). DOI: 10.1037/spy0000284.
- Van Nes, F, Abma T, Jonsson H and Deeg, D (2010). Language differences in qualitative research: is meaning lost in translation?. *European journal of ageing*, 7(4): 313–316. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-010-0168-y>