Protecting and Promoting the Wellbeing of High-Performance Swimmers

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Summary

The aims of the present thesis were two-fold. First, to gain an in-depth understanding of high-performance swimmers' experiences of wellbeing. Second, to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers. Study 1 used an interpretive description methodology to explore swimmers' wellbeing experiences, in terms of how it was understood, experienced, and recognised. Findings suggested that wellbeing was understood and experienced in relation to personal values and goals, and could be recognised via numerous affective, cognitive, and behavioural indicators. Study 2 used a grounded theory methodology to develop a substantive theory of the process through which participation in high-performance swimming affects athlete wellbeing. The resultant theory illustrated how a dominant performance narrative influenced the development and maintenance of an exclusive swimmer identity that was tied to performance. Subsequently, transitions were highlighted as critical points where wellbeing was likely to be affected, due to the increased potential for change and uncertainty to impact on performance (and therefore identity). However, proactive coping strategies (e.g., planning, social support) were shown to minimise the impact on wellbeing. Informed by the findings of the first two studies, Study 3 used an action research methodology to develop, implement, and evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of a multi-component online wellbeing intervention. Findings suggested the intervention was effective in increasing knowledge and skills, improving self-awareness, and provided reassurance that led to increased confidence in coping abilities. Such outcomes were perceived to be facilitated by the delivery of timely and relevant content, the inclusion of a professional swimmer, use of real-world examples, and opportunities for self-reflection and interaction with peers. However, findings also illustrated some key challenges related to delivering a workshop-based intervention, such as ensuring content is relevant and useful for all, and delivering workshops at a time that suits everyone, in a format that fits individual preferences.

Declarations and Statements

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed: [redacted] (candidate)

Date: 05/10/2022

STATEMENT ONE

This thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by footnotes giving explicit references. A bibliography is appended.

Signed: [redacted] candidate)

Date: 05/10/2022

STATEMENT TWO

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available online in the University's Open Access Repository and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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STATEMENT THREE

This thesis has been produced following the University's ethical procedures and ethical approval was granted for the research.

Signed: [redacted] (candidate)

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Publications

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sport offers an avenue through which individuals are able to realise their potential through the pursuit of peak physical performance and athletic excellence (Martindale et al., 2014). Additionally, participation in sport for people of all ages has been shown to facilitate numerous positive psychosocial outcomes, including feelings of empowerment, increased confidence, competence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy, as well as a sense of belonging, social interaction and connectedness, teamwork, and sportspersonship (see e.g., Anderson et al., 2019; Eime et al., 2013, Kim et al., 2020 for reviews). Sport also provides a source of enjoyment and is often perceived to positively impact the wellbeing of those who take part (e.g., Wilson et al., 2022).

However, sport participation does not guarantee positive outcomes. At the elite level in particular, life as an athlete often means making numerous sacrifices in the pursuit of improved performance (Douglas & Carless, 2006). In seeking continual performance improvements, many elite athletes endure rigorous and intense training regimes, and follow strict diets to maximise energy and performance whilst maintaining the required body composition for their sport (Reardon & Factor, 2010). Further, elite athletes are expected to be role models for society and are often faced with intense media scrutiny across their professional and personal lives (Scarf, 2008). In fact, a 2016 review found that elite athletes face a wide variety of sport-related stressors, including but not limited to; overtraining, injury, failure and performance difficulties, career transitions, media scrutiny, and high expectations of others (e.g., coaches) (Rice et al., 2016). As a result, elite athletes are vulnerable to experiencing reduced wellbeing, as well as depression and anxiety, body image concerns and eating disorders, and issues with anger and aggression (Rice et al., 2016).

For a long time, elite athletes have been perceived to be mentally and physically superior to the general population (Hughes & Leavey, 2012). However, an increasing number of high-profile athletes are speaking publicly about their experiences of elite sport, with many highlighting the negative impact that sport has had on their wellbeing and mental health. For example, Newman et al. (2016) conducted an autobiographical analysis of 12 elite athletes including Serena Williams (tennis), Ian Thorpe (swimming), and Ricky Hatton (boxing). The findings indicated many athletes felt that sport positively impacted their mental health initially, as it represented a form of escape from difficult and painful experiences in the outside world (e.g., low self-esteem, bereavement). However, many of

the autobiographies detailed how, over time, external pressures to perform coupled with an internal need to succeed contributed towards a fear of failure that changed sport from being facilitative to debilitative for mental health (Newman et al., 2016). The dark side of elite sport has been further highlighted in the multiple and extensive cases of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse that have been reported across numerous sports around the world (see e.g., Kavanagh et al., 2020).

Recognising the need for sports to do more to protect those who participate, the U.K. government commissioned an independent report to identify key areas of improvement. Among other concerns, (e.g., improving equality, diversity, and inclusion in sport and better education for the parents of young people joining talent development pathways), the Duty of Care in Sport report highlighted the mental health of elite athletes as a key area of concern (Grey-Thompson, 2017). However, the issue of elite athlete mental health is not a U.K. specific problem. In 2019, an independent report commissioned by the Australian Institute for Sport highlighted similar concerns (AIS, 2020). Moreover, in the past five years, at least 13 separate consensus, expert, and position statements related to athlete mental health have been published (see Vella et al., 2021 for a review). Clearly, elite athlete mental health is a widespread, international concern that requires action.

The World Health Organisation defines mental health as "a state of wellbeing in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stress of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2004). Under this definition, wellbeing represents an integral component of mental health. Furthermore, high levels of wellbeing may also serve as a protective factor against the development of mental illness (Keyes, 2007). As such, improving levels of wellbeing is one way in which athletes may be protected from the potentially detrimental effects of elite sport on mental health. In addition, there are several other benefits associated with high levels of wellbeing that are relevant for elite sport. In particular, high levels of wellbeing have been associated with better physical health, increased resilience, and better relationships (Kanksy & Diener, 2017). However, perhaps the most beneficial outcome of increased wellbeing levels for athletes are the potential performance gains; evidence indicates wellbeing and performance are highly correlated (Van Yperen, 1998). More specifically, high levels of wellbeing may lead to improved performance via positive changes that occur to physical health, attitudes, and cognitive abilities (Bryson et al., 2014).

Lunqvist (2011) highlighted that the considerable time and emotional commitment required by elite athletes means that wellbeing in the sporting domain is likely to have a substantial impact on the overall wellbeing levels of athletes. Subsequently, academic literature on the topic of athlete wellbeing has expanded rapidly in the past decade (Larsen et al., 2021). In particular, a number of studies have attempted to contextualise wellbeing within sport (e.g., Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018), although the findings are limited in that previous studies have focused on contextualising the highest levels of wellbeing only (i.e., flourishing or thriving) and have tended to contextualise wellbeing across a variety of sports (rather than a single sport). Other studies have explored the factors that affect athlete wellbeing and a wide variety of personal, social, and environmental factors linked to athlete wellbeing have been identified (see e.g., Kuettel & Larson, 2020; Rice et al., 2016 for reviews). However, the methodological approaches adopted by many of these studies (i.e., quantitative, cross-sectional, or one-off qualitative interviews) means that researchers have produced an extensive list of individual factors linked to athlete wellbeing, yet little is known about how these factors might interact to influence wellbeing in different ways, or how the influence of specific factors changes over time.

Recently, there has also been a growth in the number of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions documented within the literature (see e.g., Breslin et al., 2022, Sutcliffe et al., 2021 for reviews). The majority of extant interventions have aimed to protect and promote athlete wellbeing and mental health by improving mental health literacy and awareness (e.g., Breslin et al., 2019; Gulliver et al., 2012; Vella et al., 2020), reducing symptom severity (e.g., Davis & Turner, 2020; Donohue et al., 2018; Dowell et al., 2021), or teaching strategies for stress management (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2015; Fogaca, 2021). Such interventions have been shown to be effective in facilitating a range of positive outcomes, including increased knowledge and awareness of mental health, decreased stigma relating to mental illness and help-seeking, increased confidence in seeking help for and supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties, increased coping self-efficacy, and decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression. However, the impact on wellbeing is difficult to assess, as many intervention evaluation studies have not measured wellbeing directly (e.g., Davis & Turner, 2020; Fogaca, 2019; Gulliver et al., 2012). Of the studies that have measured wellbeing directly, some report no impact on wellbeing (e.g., Breslin et al., 2018), whereas others report small effect sizes (e.g., Vella et al., 2020).

There are also several issues related to the methodological quality of extant athlete wellbeing interventions (e.g., Breslin et al., 2022; Purcell et al., 2019). Specifically, Breslin et al. (2022) note that most interventions do not appear to be theory-driven or evidence-based, and there is a lack of prior engagement with the target population to identify needs. Further, with the notable exception of Vella et al. (2018), previous athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions have tended to be narrow in scope (i.e., they only target the athlete) (Purcell et al., 2019). There is also a significant lack of research that has evaluated the effectiveness of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions using qualitative methods. This means that additional outcomes to those that are anticipated may be missed, as quantitative approaches can only assess the effectiveness of an intervention on outcomes that are measured.

Given the limitations with the extant literature, the purpose of this thesis was to use detailed, in-depth qualitative methodologies to explore athlete wellbeing experiences within the specific context of high-performance swimming, with the overarching aim of developing an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting athlete wellbeing. Swimming was chosen due to the demanding nature of the sport, as athletes competing at the highest levels (e.g., national and international) are presented with a variety of challenges that have the potential to impact negatively on wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Lang et al., 2015; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). In particular, competitive swimming involves intense, frequent training sessions and long seasons (Lang, 2015), that may contribute to athlete burnout and sport dropout (e.g., Gustafsson et al., 2017). It is also an individual sport and there is a focus on being lean, both of which are risk factors for mental illness (e.g., Nixdorf et al., 2016; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Specifically, the thesis had two main aims: (1) to gain an in-depth understanding of high-performance swimmers' experiences of wellbeing in terms of how it is understood, recognised, and affected within the context of high-performance swimming, and; (2) to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting high-performance swimmers' wellbeing.

1.1 Thesis Structure

Following this introductory chapter, this thesis comprises five further chapters. Chapter 2 begins with a brief overview of the relevant wider wellbeing literature to introduce and situate the topic of wellbeing, before a comprehensive overview and critical review of the athlete wellbeing literature is provided. Specifically, this section reviews literature related to how wellbeing has been conceptualised and contextualised within

sport, the factors related to athlete wellbeing, as well as the extant literature on athlete wellbeing interventions. Next, the empirical studies of the thesis are presented across three chapters. Specifically, Chapter 3 details the use of an interpretive description methodology to explore the wellbeing experiences of high-performance swimmers, in terms of how wellbeing was understood, experienced, and recognised. Chapter 4 details the use of a grounded theory methodology to develop a substantive theory of the process through which participation in high-performance swimming affects athlete wellbeing. Chapter 5 describes the development, implementation, and evaluation of a multi-component online wellbeing intervention, the content of which was informed by the findings of the studies detailed in Chapters 3 and 4. Finally, Chapter 6 comprises a general discussion that draws together the findings of the earlier chapters and considers the overall conceptual, theoretical, methodological, and applied contributions of the thesis, alongside the limitations. Future research directions are also suggested. In addition, I provide some personal reflections and key lessons learnt from conducting qualitative wellbeing research whilst being embedded within a high-performance sport, in the hope that others can draw upon them to support their own research journey.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Historically, mental health was viewed from a pathological perspective, where the absence of mental illness signalled the presence of mental health. This view of mental health dominated the 20th century, despite numerous calls for health to be considered as more than a lack of disease (e.g., WHO, 1948; Jahoda, 1958). However, the turn of the century saw the emergence of positive psychology and a shift of focus from pathology to optimal functioning and human potential (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This led to the widespread acceptance that the absence of mental illness in itself does not necessarily imply the presence of mental health (e.g., Keyes, 2002). This is a perspective that is reflected in the World Health Organisation's definition of mental health as a "state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2004, p.10). Within this definition, it is clear that mental health is not merely the absence of mental illness, rather it involves the presence of something positive – wellbeing.

Nowadays, the term wellbeing is commonly used in everyday language; there are an abundance of wellbeing-focused self-help books available (e.g., Gilbert, 2006; Haidt, 2006; Harris, 2014) and a growing number of businesses are employing wellbeing as a marketing strategy to sell goods and services (e.g., Grenman & Raikkonen, 2015; Kim & Cho, 2012). Wellbeing is also a key focus for governments at local, national, and international levels. For instance, ensuring healthy lives and wellbeing for all is considered a global goal that has been adopted by 193 United Nations member states (United Nations, 2015). Reflecting its growing popularity elsewhere, the academic literature on wellbeing has increased significantly over the last 20 years, and substantial bodies of literature exist across a broad range of social science disciplines (e.g., public policy, organisational psychology, clinical psychology).

An overview of the wider wellbeing literature is necessary to introduce the concept of wellbeing and highlight some of the main issues, as many of these issues also apply to the athlete wellbeing literature. However, as one might expect given the popularity of the topic, the wellbeing literature is vast and an in-depth discussion is beyond the scope of this thesis. As such, the following chapter is structured as two main parts. First, an introduction to wellbeing and a brief overview of some of the wider main issues and areas of tension that are relevant to this thesis are presented. Second, a comprehensive overview and

critical discussion of the athlete wellbeing literature is provided, split into three main subsections: (1) defining and measuring wellbeing in sport, (2) factors related to athlete wellbeing, and (3) athlete mental health interventions.

2.2 What is Wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a topic that has interested humans for millennia; early work on the subject can be traced back to as early as around 350 B.C, where ancient Greek philosophers, such as Aristippus and Aristotle, pondered the meaning of "the good life" (Waterman, 1993). However, despite being a subject of interest for over 2000 years, wellbeing is a term that has continued to evade a universally agreed definition (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Over the years, various definitions of wellbeing have been proposed, each with a slightly different focus (see Table 2.1 for a comprehensive range of examples of theoretical wellbeing definitions that are available within the extant literature). For example, Bradburn (1969) defines wellbeing in terms of a balance in affective experience, suggesting wellbeing is "the degree to which he has an access of positive over negative affect" (p.9), whereas Shah and Marks (2004) argue that wellbeing is "more than just happiness" (p.2). Taking a different perspective, Dodge et al. (2012) define wellbeing in terms of coping ability, describing it as "the balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (p.230).

Further, some have suggested that wellbeing means different things to different people at different times (e.g., Ereaut & Whiting, 2008; Fattore et al., 2007). Reflecting this individuality, Shin and Johnson (1978) define wellbeing as "a global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria" (p.478). Similarly, Felce and Perry (1995) describe wellbeing as "objective descriptors and subjective evaluations of physical, material, social and emotional wellbeing, together with the extent of personal development and purposeful activity, all weighted by a personal set of values" (p. 60). With so many views and opinions regarding what wellbeing is, finding a universal definition has led wellbeing to be described as a complex and elusive construct (e.g., Crivello et al., 2009).

530 **Table 2.1**

531 *Theoretical Definitions of Wellbeing*

Bradburn (1969)	"The degree to which he has an excess of positive over negative affect" (p.9)
Crivello et al. (2009)	"Wellbeing is a socially contingent, culturally anchored construct that changes over time, both in terms of individual life course changes as well as changes in socio-cultural context" (p.53)
Diener et al. (1999)	"A broad category of phenomena that includes people's emotional responses, domain satisfactions, and global judgements of life satisfaction" (p.278)
Diener et al. (2002)	"A person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (p. 403)
Dodge et al. (2012)	"The balance point between an individual's resource pool and the challenges faced" (p.230)
Ereaut & Whiting (2008)	"The meaning of wellbeing is not fixed – it cannot be. It is a primary cultural judgement; just like 'what makes a good life?' it is the stuff of fundamental philosophical debate." (p.7)
Fattore et al. (2007)	"Wellbeing is socially contingent, a construct embedded in society and culture and prone to change and redefinition over time" (p.11)
Felce & Perry (1995)	"Wellbeing... comprises objective descriptors and subjective evaluations of physical, material, social and emotional wellbeing, together with the extent of personal development and purposeful activity, all weighted by a personal set of values" (p. 60)
Gillett-Swan (2015)	"An individual's capacity to manage over time, the range of inputs, both constructive and undesirable that can, in isolation, affect a person's emotional, physical and cognitive state in response to a given context" (p. 15)
Headey & Wearing (1992)	"Depends on prior equilibrium levels of wellbeing and of life events, and also recent events" (p.95)
Huppert (2014)	"Feeling good and functioning well" (p.9)
Keyes (1998)	"The appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in society" (p.122)
Pollard & Lee (2003)	"A complex, multifaceted construct that has continued to elude researchers attempts to define and measure" (p.60)
Ryan & Deci (2001)	"The concept of well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and experience" (p.142)
Seligman (2011)	"Wellbeing… has several measurable elements, each a real thing, each contributing to wellbeing, but none of them defining wellbeing" (p.15)
Shah & Marks (2004)	"More than just happiness. As well as feeling satisfied and happy, wellbeing means developing as a person, being fulfilled, and making a contribution to the community" (p.2)
Shin & Johnson (1978)	"A global assessment of a person's quality of life according to his own chosen criteria" (p. 478)

2.2.1 Dimensions of Wellbeing

Wellbeing has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy (Waterman, 1990; 1993). For philosophers such as Aristippus, the sole purpose of human existence was to maximise pleasure and minimise pain, whereas other philosophers, such as Aristotle, felt that the key to a good life was to live with purpose and virtue (Huta, 2016). This led to the development of two distinct theoretical perspectives regarding a good life – hedonic and eudaimonic. A similar debate has found its way into the contemporary wellbeing literature, where wellbeing has been approached from hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives, which has led to the development of different dimensions of wellbeing (e.g., see Table 2.2).

Table 2.2

Dimensions of Wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing (Diener, 1984)	Hedonic	Life satisfaction Frequent positive affect Infrequent negative affect
Psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Singer, 1998)	Eudaimonic	Self-acceptance Positive relations Autonomy Environmental mastery Purpose in life Personal growth
Social wellbeing (Keyes, 1998)	Eudaimonic	Social coherence Social acceptance Social integration Social contribution Social actualisation

2.2.1.1 Hedonic Wellbeing. Hedonic approaches define wellbeing in terms of happiness (e.g., Kahneman et al., 1999). From this perspective, wellbeing is often conceptualised as subjective wellbeing and defined as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (Diener et al., 2003, p.63). Subjective wellbeing is sometimes called emotional wellbeing (e.g., Keyes, 2002), however, despite differences in nomenclature, there appears to be relative agreement that subjective (or emotional) wellbeing comprises a combination of cognitive and affective components (see Table 2.3). Thus, subjective wellbeing occurs when an individual evaluates their life positively and experiences high levels of positive affect (e.g., joy, pleasure) in comparison to negative affect (e.g., guilt, shame) (Diener, 1984).

Table 2.3

Subjective Wellbeing Components

Life Satisfaction	"the degree to which a person positively evaluates the overall quality of his/her life as a whole. In other words, how much a person likes the life he/she leads" (Veenhoven, 1996, p.6)
Positive Affect	The experience of positively valanced emotional states and moods such as happiness, joy, and contentment (e.g., Diener et al., 2017)
Negative Affect	The experience of negatively valanced emotional states and moods, such as anger, worry, and depression (e.g., Diener et al., 2017)

2.2.1.2 Eudaimonic Wellbeing. In contrast to the hedonic approach, the eudaimonic approach considers wellbeing to be synonymous with positive psychological functioning and living a purposeful and meaningful life (e.g., Ryff, 1989). Within the extant literature, there is less agreement on how eudaimonic wellbeing should be conceptualised, however, commonly referenced conceptualisations include psychological wellbeing (e.g., Ryff, 1989; Ryff and Singer, 1998) and social wellbeing (e.g., Keyes, 1998).

2.2.1.2.1 Psychological Wellbeing. With regards to psychological wellbeing, Ryff and Singer (1998) proposed six dimensions of effective psychological functioning (see Table 2.4) that suggest psychological wellbeing occurs when a person; can acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses and accept themselves for who they are; is able to develop meaningful relationships with people they can trust; has a direction for their life; takes steps toward achieving their full potential; feels competent in their environment; and perceives that they have a choice in how they live their lives.

Table 2.4

Psychological Wellbeing Components

Self-acceptance	Long-term self-evaluation involving awareness and acceptance of personal strengths and weaknesses
Positive relations with others	Develop meaningful and trusting relationships with others; ability to identify, empathise and feel affection for others
Autonomy	Sense of freedom and choice about how to think and behave
Environmental mastery	Feeling of having the knowledge, skills, and ability to choose or create own environment
Purpose in life	Living an intentional life, full of meaning and a clear understanding of one's direction
Personal growth	Dynamic, continual process of development in order to realise personal potential

2.2.1.2.2 Social Wellbeing. Whereas psychological wellbeing relates to a person's private and personal ability to function, social wellbeing has been defined as "the appraisal of one's circumstances and functioning in society" (Keyes, 1998). Operationally, social wellbeing includes five dimensions (see Table 2.5) that suggest a person experiences social wellbeing occurs when they understand, accept, and feel part of society; believe that they can contribute to society; and see the potential for collective growth (Keyes, 1998).

Table 2.5

Social Wellbeing Components

Social integration	Sees themselves as belonging to a community that they have things in common with and are supported by
Social contribution	Feels able to contribute to society and that their actions are recognised and valued by others
Social coherence	Perceives that the social world makes sense and is predictable
Social actualisation	Believe that society is functioning well and is able to reach its potential
Social acceptance	Has a positive attitude towards and accepts others, even when their behaviour does not align with own beliefs or expectations

Traditionally, hedonic and eudaimonic approaches to wellbeing were seen as opposing, however the overlapping and complementary relationship between the two approaches has since been highlighted (e.g., Huta & Ryan, 2010; Keyes et al., 2002). This has led to a shift in perspective, as wellbeing researchers no longer have to choose between a hedonic or eudaimonic approach. Instead, wellbeing is commonly viewed as a multi-faceted construct that includes emotional, psychological, and social components. That is, more recent definitions accept that wellbeing contains elements of both feeling good **and** functioning well (Huppert & So, 2009). This represents an important shift in thinking that has provided the potential for wellbeing research to become less fragmented as researchers explore how feeling and functioning aspects of wellbeing might interact and influence each other (e.g., Huta et al., 2012; Braaten et al., 2019).

2.2.2 Operational Definitions of Wellbeing

Seligman (2011) suggests that wellbeing "has several measurable elements, each a real thing, each contributing to wellbeing, but none of them defining wellbeing" (p.15). In line with this suggestion, many researchers have chosen to take an "objective-list" approach, where wellbeing is defined in terms of its components (Knight & McNaught, 2011). This approach to defining wellbeing has led to the development of various operational definitions of wellbeing (see Table 2.6 for some examples of operational definitions of wellbeing and their suggested components).

598 **Table 2.6**

599 *Operational Definitions of Flourishing*

Diener et al. (2010)	Purpose and meaning Supportive relationships Engagement Contribution to others Being a good person Competence Being respected Optimism
Huppert & So (2009)	Positive emotion Optimism Vitality Emotional stability Resilience Self-esteem Engagement Competence Meaning Positive relationships
Keyes et al. (2002)	Happiness Interest in life Satisfaction with life Social coherence Social acceptance Social integration Social contribution Social actualisation Self-acceptance Positive relations with others Autonomy Environmental mastery Purpose in life Personal growth
Seligman et al. (2011)	Positive emotions Engagement Relationships Meaning Accomplishment
Tennant et al. (2007)	Energy Clear thinking Self-acceptance Personal development Competence Autonomy

Although there appears to be substantial similarity across the various operationalisations (i.e., they all include hedonic and eudaimonic wellbeing dimensions), there is a lack of consensus regarding the specific components, particularly in relation to the eudaimonic dimension. Illustrating this point, a review by Martela and Sheldon (2019) found at least 45 different operationalisations of eudaimonic wellbeing existed, with 63 separate components of eudaimonic wellbeing reported in total. Thus, although operationalising concepts is an important step towards being able to define and measure a concept, it appears that, in the case of wellbeing, a lack of consensus regarding the specific components of wellbeing has led to the development of multiple operationalisations that in turn, will impact the measurement of wellbeing.

2.2.2.1 Impact of Operational Definitions on the Measurement of Wellbeing.

As operational definitions provide a way to measure a construct, each operationalisation of wellbeing has introduced new ways of measuring wellbeing. Given the substantial differences in how wellbeing has been defined and operationalised, any researcher who wishes to measure wellbeing is faced with numerous measures to choose from. For example, a review found at least 99 measures of wellbeing were introduced between 1993 and 2015, and most of these measures (95 out of 99) contained multiple items. Overall, Linton and colleagues found that the identified measures assessed 196 different indicators of wellbeing. Further, there appears to be little consensus regarding which (if any) of these wellbeing measures are superior, which has led to substantial variation in how wellbeing is measured across studies. As such, the current approach to measuring wellbeing has been described as “haphazard” (Diener and Seligman, 2004, p.2).

Indeed, when deciding how to measure wellbeing, some researchers equate wellbeing with a single construct (typically life satisfaction) and measure it using a single item measure, such as the Cantril Ladder of Life Satisfaction (Cantril, 1965). However, the use of single item measures of wellbeing has been criticised for ignoring the diverse, multi-faceted nature of wellbeing (Gasper, 2004). As such, many researchers choose to measure wellbeing via the use of multiple items (see Table 2.7 for some commonly used multi-item wellbeing measures). Yet, this approach faces challenges regarding how the scores of multiple item measures should be presented. That is, whether scores should be combined and presented as a single wellbeing score (e.g., Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale, Tennant et al., 2007), or if they are better presented using a dashboard approach where separate scores are presented for different dimensions of wellbeing (e.g., PERMA-Profiler, Butler & Kern, 2016).

Table 2.7

Wellbeing Measures

Flourishing Scale (FS) (Diener et al., 2010)	Respondents presented with 8 statements and asked to score how strongly they agree with each statement using a 7-point likert scale with "strongly disagree and "strongly agree" as anchors. Examples of statements include "I lead a purposeful and meaningful life" and "My social relationships are supportive and rewarding." Produces a total score of between 8 and 56, with higher scores indicating higher wellbeing.
Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) (Keyes, 2005)	Respondents presented with 14 statements and asked to answer how often they have experienced these over the past month, using a 6-point likert scale with "never" and "everyday" as anchors. Contains three items related to emotional wellbeing (e.g., How often do you feel satisfied with life?), six items related to psychological wellbeing (e.g., How often do you feel that people are basically good?) and five items related to social wellbeing (e.g., How often do you feel you had something important to contribute to society?). Produces a total score of between 0 and 70, with higher scores indicating higher wellbeing. To be categorised as flourishing, respondents must report experiencing at least 1 aspect of emotional wellbeing, and at least 6 aspects of social or psychological wellbeing.
PERMA-Profiler (PERMA-P) (Butler & Kern, 2016)	Respondents are presented with 23 statements related to each of the five PERMA pillars (positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, achievements) as well as additional questions related to negative emotion and physical health. Respondents asked to respond using a 10-point likert scale. The anchors change depending on the question asked. Examples of questions include "In general, how often do you feel joyful?" and "How often do you achieve the important goals you set yourself?" Questions are grouped and scores are summed for each group. Scores presented as a dashboard, with separate scores for each pillar of wellbeing (as well as negative emotion and physical health).
Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (Tennant et al., 2007)	Respondents presented with 14 statements related to positive thoughts and feelings (e.g., I've been feeling cheerful) and asked to answer how often they have experienced these over the past two weeks, using a 5-point likert scale with "none of the time" and "all of the time" as anchors. Produces a total score ranging from 14 and 70, with a higher score indicative of higher wellbeing.

Either way, the substantial variability in how wellbeing is measured presents a significant barrier when trying to synthesise wellbeing research in a clear and coherent manner, as the findings are not directly comparable. Illustrating this point, a study comparing four different conceptualisations of wellbeing using the same sample of over 10,000 individuals found that, despite significant similarities between the four operationalisations, the cut-off points for categorising various levels of wellbeing meant that prevalence of the highest levels of wellbeing ranged from 24% to 47% (Hone et al., 2014). The issue of comparing findings across studies is further compounded by the fact that not all wellbeing studies specifically measure wellbeing itself, rather some use proxy measures. For example, some wellbeing studies use scales designed to measure psychological distress (e.g., Kessler Psychological Distress Scale, Kessler et al., 2003) and infer wellbeing from the absence of illbeing (Huppert, 2017). However, wellbeing encompasses more than merely the absence of illness (Keyes, 2002). As such, this approach to measuring wellbeing is limited in that it misses a significant part of wellbeing (i.e., the positive part).

2.2.3 Domain-Specific Wellbeing

Evidence suggests that wellbeing can occur at both the global level and at the domain level (e.g., Diener et al., 2003; Page & Vella-Broderick, 2009). For example, a person may report high overall life satisfaction whilst also reporting low job satisfaction. Similarly, that person may experience high levels of positive affect (e.g., pleasure, joy) when playing sport, and also experience high levels of negative affect (e.g., lethargy, boredom) at work. This has led to the introduction of domain-specific conceptualisations of wellbeing, for example, financial wellbeing (e.g., Brüggen et al., 2017; Vlaev & Elliott; 2014) sexual wellbeing (e.g., Lorimer et al., 2019), spiritual wellbeing (e.g., Ellison, 1983), digital wellbeing (Vanden Abeele, 2021), and sport wellbeing (e.g., Lundqvist, 2011).

However, although domain-specific wellbeing influences overall wellbeing, global-level wellbeing is not merely the sum of domain-level wellbeing (Diener et al., 2003). Rather, some domains appear to have a greater influence on global-level wellbeing than others, depending on how salient that domain is an individual's stage of life (e.g., Cantor & Sanderson, 1999). For example, relationship development is a key part of adolescence and, as such, young adults tend to place a greater weight on relationship satisfaction when assessing global life satisfaction than satisfaction with other life areas (Oishi et al., 1999). Thus, rather than wellbeing being a universal experience, it appears that wellbeing is a

highly subjective and personal experience that is significantly influenced by important life domains.

2.2.4 Cultural Differences in Wellbeing

Related to differences in wellbeing across different domains, many attempts to define wellbeing have been criticised for ignoring the important influence of social and cultural contexts (Sointu, 2005). Typically, wellbeing has been conceptualised from a western perspective and, as such, most operational definitions of wellbeing include elements that reflect the ideals of western societies which are not always the same for all cultures (Joshanloo et al., 2021). For example, most operational definitions include happiness or some form of positive affect (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Keyes, 2002), yet many non-western cultures perceive the pursuit of happiness to be bad for a person, and as such, many are averse or fearful of experiencing happiness (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2014). Similarly, limited research into wellbeing with non-western populations suggests that spirituality is considered a key component necessary for wellbeing (e.g., Kiyimba & Anderson, 2022; Maulana et al., 2018), an aspect that is not often included in western operationalisations. Thus, it appears culture plays a critical role in how wellbeing might be defined, experienced, and measured (Diener et al., 2018). As such, it is important to be aware of the specific cultural values, beliefs, and practices of a population and understand that our current understanding of wellbeing may not be generalisable across all populations.

2.2.5 Wellbeing as a Process

Although wellbeing is often measured as an outcome (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Keyes et al., 2008; Tennant et al., 2007), a small pocket of literature has questioned whether wellbeing is best conceptualised as a process (Atkinson, 2013; Atkinson et al., 2012; Gillett-Swan & Sargeant, 2014; White, 2015). Aligned with the two sections above, it has been suggested that wellbeing is "socially and culturally constructed, rooted in a particular time and place" (White, 2015, p.5). This means that how people experience and evaluate their lives cannot be separated from the cultural and social environments in which they operate (Crivello et al., 2009). Reflecting this, Atkinson and colleagues argue that wellbeing is an active and dynamic process that involves the individual and the social and environmental contexts in which they are situated (e.g., Atkinson, 2013; Atkinson et al., 2012; White, 2015). Further, Crivello et al. (2009) suggest that wellbeing is a construct that changes over time as individuals progress through life, influenced by various socio-

cultural contexts through which they move. Thus, what is important for wellbeing is ever-changing and fluctuates depending on the context (e.g., Fattore et al., 2007).

The idea of wellbeing as a dynamic process which is dependent on the person and the wider socio-cultural context that they are in is appealing as it helps to explain why researchers have previously found defining wellbeing so difficult. It also sheds some light on why wellbeing seemingly encompasses many different components, yet assessment of these components themselves seem unable to capture "the essence of wellbeing" (Huppert, 2014, p.9). To progress our understanding of wellbeing further, it appears that future research would benefit from viewing wellbeing as a process and considering how the environmental context and wider socio-cultural factors may be interacting with an individual's personal characteristics and previous life experiences to influence their understanding and experience of wellbeing.

2.2.6 Wellbeing-Related Terminology

Individuals who experience high levels of wellbeing may be described as 'flourishing' (e.g., Keyes, 2002) or 'thriving' (e.g., Spreitzer et al., 2005). Similarly, individuals experiencing low levels of wellbeing may be described as 'languishing' (e.g., Keyes, 2002) or 'striving' (e.g., Porath et al., 2012). Although use of such terminology allows researchers to be more specific in their language regarding various levels of wellbeing, the introduction of these terms into the scientific literature has created further challenges for the coherence of wellbeing research. This is because, similar to the term wellbeing, the terms flourishing, thriving, languishing, and striving have not been well-defined within the literature. For example, flourishing has been defined as "a combination of feeling good and functioning effectively" (Huppert & So, 2009, p.1) and "to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience" (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p.1). Similarly, thriving has been defined within the literature as "the psychological state in which individuals experience both a sense of vitality and a sense of learning at work" (Spreitzer et al., 2005, p.538) through to, "flourishing, prospering and progressing toward or realising a goal despite, or because of circumstances" (Feeney & Collins, 2015, p.114), and "the joint experience of development and success" (Brown, Arnold, Fletcher, and Standage, 2017, p.168). Again, like the term wellbeing, the introduction of multiple definitions opens up the opportunity for multiple ways of operationalising and measuring flourishing and thriving which further hinders the ability to compare and contrast findings across studies.

2.2.6.1 Conceptual Similarity between Flourishing, Thriving, and Other Related Terms.

In addition to the definitional issues, the conceptual similarity of flourishing and thriving requires some consideration. For instance, both flourishing and thriving have been characterised by a range of similar affective and functioning components, such as vitality, positive affect, motivation, and growth (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015; Diener et al., 2010) and it is often difficult to see how, or even if, these concepts differ. The issue of conceptual similarity is further compounded by several other related and characteristically similar terms, such as resilience and flow, that are also prevalent within the wellbeing literature. Some attempts have been made to differentiate between flourishing and/or thriving and other related terms (e.g., Carver, 1998; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). For example, Carver (1998) suggests resilience refers to a return to a previous level of functioning after an event, whereas thriving refers to an improvement in functioning after an event. Meanwhile, Sarkar and Fletcher (2014) recognised that thriving may occur even in the absence of a negative or traumatic event, whereas resilience always occurs in response to such an event. Therefore, it is clear that whilst thriving and resilience are similar in their characteristics, they differ in their outcomes and, on occasions, may differ in the events which precede their occurrence.

2.2.6.1.1 Similarities and Differences Between Flourishing and Thriving.

The distinction between flourishing and thriving is less clear; Brown et al. (2017) argue that thriving and flourishing differ as thriving encompasses physical aspects of wellbeing, whereas flourishing does not consider these in relation to wellbeing. Yet, although this is true for certain operational definitions of thriving (e.g., Feeney & Collins, 2015), other operational definitions of thriving do not include a physical aspect. Indeed, a qualitative study published by Brown et al. (2017) did not mention any specific physical aspects that characterised thriving within an elite athlete population. Similarly, it has been argued that thriving and flourishing differ in their emphasis on performance (Brown et al., 2017). Specifically, it is suggested that one of the main characteristics of thriving is performance, growth, and success (Brown et al., 2017). Again, whilst this argument may hold when comparing to some operational definitions of flourishing (e.g., Keyes, 2002), other operational definitions of flourishing do include aspects related to performance. For instance, one of the main components of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of flourishing is achievement. Given the substantial similarities and lack of clear distinction between the concepts of flourishing and thriving, it may be argued that these terms have fallen prey to the 'jangle' trap of the 'jingle-jangle' fallacy (e.g., Block, 1995; Marsh et al., 2018) where

rather than representing distinct constructs related to wellbeing as has been argued thus far, the terms flourishing and thriving may actually reflect different names for the same concept – high levels of wellbeing.

2.2.7 Mental Health, Mental Illness, and Wellbeing

Given that optimal mental health involves both the absence of mental illness and the presence of wellbeing (e.g., Keyes, 2002; 2005), it is useful to consider how mental illness and wellbeing might be related. According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (2005), mental illness refers to "a clinically significant behavioural or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual and that is associated with present distress (e.g., a painful symptom) or disability (i.e., impairment in one or more areas of functioning) or with a significantly increased risk of suffering death, pain, disability, or an important loss of freedom" (Stein et al., 2010). In terms of their relationship, it has been suggested that mental illness and wellbeing reflect opposing ends of a single continuum, with mental disorders at one end and high levels of wellbeing at the other (e.g., Huppert, 2009). However, others have argued that mental illness and wellbeing do not represent opposite ends of a single continuum, rather they are distinct but related concepts (e.g., Keyes, 2002; 2005; 2014). Based on this idea, Keyes proposed the dual continua model of mental health (Figure 2.1), where the mental illness continuum ranges from severe mental illness to no mental illness, and the mental health continuum ranges from low wellbeing (languishing) to high wellbeing (flourishing) (Keyes, 2014).

Figure 2.1

Keyes' Dual Continua Model of Mental Health

Note. Reprinted from "Mental Health as a Complete State: How the Salutogenic Perspective Completes the Picture**",** by Keyes, C., 2014, *Bridging Occupational, Organizational and Public Health,* p. 182.

Under the dual continua model, mental health - operationalised as wellbeing - and mental illness represent separate but overlapping constructs, meaning individuals may experience high levels of wellbeing whilst also experiencing a mental illness (Keyes, 2002; Keyes, 2005). Supporting this claim, Keyes (2002) reported 0.9% of their sample could be categorised as having major depressive disorder and also flourishing. However, to meet the criteria for a mental illness under the Fifth Edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-V; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), not only must an individual report the specific symptoms of the mental illness (i.e., anxiety, depression) but

they must also be experiencing prolonged distress and significantly impaired functioning. Given that Keyes' (2002) conceptualisation of wellbeing requires a combination of feeling good and functioning well, it seems unlikely that an individual can experience both high levels of wellbeing and mental illness simultaneously. Instead, findings that support the dual continua model likely reflect temporal issues related to the way that wellbeing and mental illness are measured. For example, participants within Keyes' (2002) study were asked to report mental illnesses experienced within the last 12 months, whereas wellbeing was assessed over the past month. Thus, it is possible (and probable) that those participants may have previously been diagnosed with major depressive disorder, but were not currently experiencing symptoms (Huppert, 2014).

2.2.8 Section Summary

Wellbeing is a complex multi-faceted construct that encompasses elements of feeling good and functioning well (Huppert & So, 2009). Within the extant literature, various definitions of wellbeing have been proposed and a universally agreed definition is lacking (Pollard & Lee, 2003). Instead, wellbeing has typically been defined operationally, in terms of a list of components by which it can be measured (Dodge et al., 2012). However, a lack of consensus regarding the components of wellbeing means that various operational definitions have been proposed, each containing similar, yet slightly different, components. This has led to the development of numerous ways to measure wellbeing which makes it difficult to synthesise the findings of wellbeing research clearly and coherently (Hone et al., 2014).

Further, operational definitions present wellbeing in terms of a list of components that are the same for everyone in all areas of life. However, wellbeing is not universal - not only can wellbeing differ between the global level and the domain level (e.g., Diener et al., 2003), but also the way in which wellbeing is understood differs across cultures (Joshanloo et al., 2021). Thus, to capture the complexity, it has been suggested that wellbeing may be best conceptualised as a process involving the individual and the social and cultural contexts in which they are situated (Atkinson, 2013).

Finally, the clarity of wellbeing research is convoluted by the introduction of wellbeing-related terminology, such as the use flourishing or thriving to refer to high levels of wellbeing, as it is unclear if there is a conceptual difference or if thriving and flourishing represent two different words that both describe high levels of wellbeing. It is also unclear whether mental health – and therefore wellbeing – represent the opposite end of a spectrum

from mental illness (Huppert, 2009) or whether mental health and mental illness represent distinct, yet overlapping, constructs (e.g., Keyes, 2002).

2.3 Wellbeing in Sport

Evidence from the wider wellbeing literature suggests that wellbeing means different things to different people and individuals draw on the cultural contexts within which they are situated to develop their understanding of wellbeing (Diener et al., 2018). For high-performance athletes, sport is a fast-paced, highly pressured, and demanding environment (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017). A recent review of Australian high-performance sport found that nearly one-third of athletes felt disposable and the report concluded that high-performance sport favours performance over people, physical health over mental health, and views wellbeing as a luxury (AIS, 2020). It is a similar story for high-performance sport within the UK, where the Duty of Care in Sport report found that athlete wellbeing is often overlooked and highlighted elite athlete wellbeing as a key area of concern (Grey-Thompson, 2014).

One reason for the lack of consideration for athlete wellbeing within elite sport may stem from the concern that experiencing high levels of wellbeing will lead athletes to become complacent and therefore less motivated to achieve new goals (Lam et al., 2014; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). This worry is understandable given that elite sport is an environment where performance is key to success, however the evidence does not seem to support this concern. Instead, athlete wellbeing and performance appear to be highly correlated (e.g., Van Yperen, 1998) and evidence from the wider wellbeing literature suggests that individuals with higher levels of wellbeing are more likely to seek approach goals (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), which are beneficial for sport performance (e.g., Stoeber & Crombie, 2010). Further, higher levels of wellbeing have been linked to numerous other benefits that have relevance within the context of high-performance sports. Specifically, higher levels of wellbeing may improve performance via positive changes to physical health, attitudes, and cognitive abilities (Bryson et al., 2014). Wellbeing has also been associated with better physical immunity against illness, increased resilience, and improved relationships (see e.g., Kansky & Diener, 2017 for a review).

Another reason athlete wellbeing may have been previously overlooked is the perception that elite athletes are physically and mentally superior compared to the general population and therefore immune to experiencing psychological difficulties (e.g., Hainline and Reardon, 2019). However, numerous articles have been published over the past ten years that illustrate the potential negative impacts of elite sport on athletes' wellbeing and

mental health (e.g., Hammond et al., 2013; Hughes & Leavey, 2012; Newman et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2016). Further, it appears that even some of the most successful athletes experience poor wellbeing, despite achieving their sporting goals (Bishop, 2020). Although this suggests that wellbeing is not essential for performance, this does not mean that the wellbeing of elite athletes should be overlooked. Indeed, sports have 'duty of care' for their participants, which extends beyond physical health and safety and encompasses mental health (Grey-Thompson, 2017). As such, sports are obligated to consider how they can protect and promote athlete mental health, to ensure that athletes are not detrimentally impacted by sport participation.

Recently, there has been a considerable increase in research focused on athlete wellbeing and mental health. For instance, the number of articles on mental health in sport published per year has increased from 50 in the year 2006 to nearly 400 in the year 2018 (Larsen et al., 2021). Further illustrating the growing popularity of the topic of mental health in sport, there have been an influx of position, expert, and consensus statements published in the past five years that have attempted to synthesise evidence and provide guidance on how best to support athlete wellbeing (e.g., Gorzcynski et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2019; Henriksen et al., 2020; Moesch et al., 2018; Reardon et al., 2019; Schinke et al., 2018; Van Slingerland et al., 2019). In 2021, a review identified 13 position and consensus statements that covered six broad areas; (1) writing a mental health plan, (2) provision of mental health care, (3) athlete support system, (4) high risk events, (5) mental health of the athlete, and (6) future directions (Vella et al., 2021). However, Vella and colleagues concluded that the overall quality of these statements was low, particularly in relation to stakeholder engagement, rigour of development, and consideration of facilitators and barriers for implementing recommendations.

2.3.1 Defining Wellbeing in Sport

Unsurprisingly, the definitional issues that exist within the wider psychology literature are also prevalent within the sport wellbeing literature. Over a decade ago, a review of the sport wellbeing literature reported that over half of the studies included in the review did not explicitly define what they meant by wellbeing, and many of the studies used the term wellbeing interchangeably with related terms such as life satisfaction and happiness (Lundqvist, 2011) Further, Lundqvist (2011) also noted methodological inconsistencies with regard to how many of the studies defined wellbeing, and how wellbeing was subsequently measured. Lundqvist (2011) concluded that, within sport, wellbeing is "treated as an unspecific variable, inconsistently defined and assessed using a

variety of theoretically questionable indicators" (p.118). Over ten years on, a lack of consensus regarding the definition of wellbeing remains, with many studies choosing to avoid defining wellbeing altogether.

Where wellbeing has been defined within the athlete literature, studies often refer to the World Health Organisation's definition of mental health, where wellbeing is considered to be a state where an individual "realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community" (WHO, 2004) (e.g., Marsters & Tiatia-Seath, 2019; Schary & Lundqvist, 2021; Sheehan et al., 2018; Woodford & Bussey, 2021). Other ways in which wellbeing has been defined within sport includes "a positive and sustainable state that allows individuals, groups, or nations to thrive and flourish" (Thomas et al., 2021, p. 592), "subjective judgment of his or her cognitive and/or emotional life" (O'Brien & Kilrea, 2020 p. 319), and "people's cognitive and affective evaluations of their lives... composed of life satisfaction (global judgments of one's life), positive affect (the extent to which one experiences many pleasant emotions), and negative affect (the extent to which one experiences few unpleasant emotions)" (Holding et al., 2020 p. 90).

More often than not however, athlete wellbeing studies tend not to explicitly define what they mean by wellbeing (e.g., Howells & Fitzallen, 2020; Kamusoko & Pemberton, 2013; Nobari et al., 2021; Silva et al., 2022; Walton et al., 2021). Instead, it is left to the reader to infer what is meant by the term, although this is not always a straightforward task. For example, two recent studies by Nobari et al. (2021) and Silva et al. (2022) that explored fluctuations in the wellbeing of soccer players did not explicitly define what they meant by wellbeing. Both studies went on to measure levels of stress, fatigue, delayed onset muscle soreness, and sleep quality, and concluded that wellbeing fluctuates depending on the time in the season (Nobari et al., 2021) and training intensity (Silva et al., 2022). However, although some of the concepts measured in these studies have previously been associated with athlete wellbeing (e.g., Biggins et al., 2018; Coyle et al., 2017), they do not appear to clearly align with any existing definition of wellbeing. Since wellbeing was not defined in either study, it is unclear how these concepts fit with extant definitions of wellbeing or why they were chosen as indicators of wellbeing.

2.3.2 Inconsistent use of Wellbeing, Mental Health, and Mental Illness in Sport

Within the sport wellbeing literature, Keyes' (2002) dual continua model of mental health is commonly used as a theoretical framework, where wellbeing and mental illness comprise separate, yet related, indicators of mental health. As such, the term mental health

is used in papers that are focused on wellbeing (e.g., Schary & Lundqvist, 2021), mental illness (e.g., Beable et al., 2017; Foskett & Longstaff, 2017; Rice et al., 2016), or both wellbeing and mental illness (e.g., Poucher et al., 2021; Vella et al., 2021). However, this interchangeable use of terminology can make it difficult to synthesise the literature clearly and coherently, as it is not always immediately clear what the specific focus of a study is. The lack of clarity is further exacerbated by the use of oxymorons, such as the phrase "mental health symptoms," which is commonly used to refer to sub-clinical symptoms of mental illness (e.g., Gorzcynski et al., 2020; Gouttebarge et al., 2021; Olive et al., 2021; Purcell et al., 2021).

Moreover, the use of terminology in sport wellbeing studies is often inconsistent. For example, whereas some studies use the term wellbeing synonymously with mental health (i.e., wellbeing or mental health are used to refer to the same thing) (e.g., Bean et al., 2021), other studies use the term wellbeing in conjunction with mental health (i.e., wellbeing **and** mental health) (e.g., Carson et al., 2018). Thus, in this case it appears that Bean et al. (2021) view wellbeing and mental health as the same, whereas Carson et al. (2018) perceives the two concepts to be different somehow. However, the lack of definitions for either term in both studies makes it difficult to know whether this is actually the case.

Additionally, wellbeing is sometimes included in studies as a subsidiary variable, where the main focus of the study is on other variables, such as mental toughness (e.g., Gucciardi et al., 2015; Mahoney et al., 2014) or life skills (e.g., Jones & Lavallee, 2009). Moreover, several studies appear to use the term wellbeing as an add-on (Ereaut & Whiting, 2008) even though wellbeing is not actually included. For example, Thornton et al. (2018) published a paper titled, "Impact of short- compared to long-haul flights on the sleep and wellbeing of national wheelchair basketball athletes" that argued there is a lack of research on the impact of travel on "sleep and subsequent wellbeing" (p.2). However, the study did not include any measures of wellbeing and there were no significant mentions of wellbeing in the article. In fact, the term wellbeing was only mentioned three more times throughout the whole article. Thus, it appears that the term wellbeing was used as an add-on, possibly to appeal to a wider audience due to the current popularity of the topic.

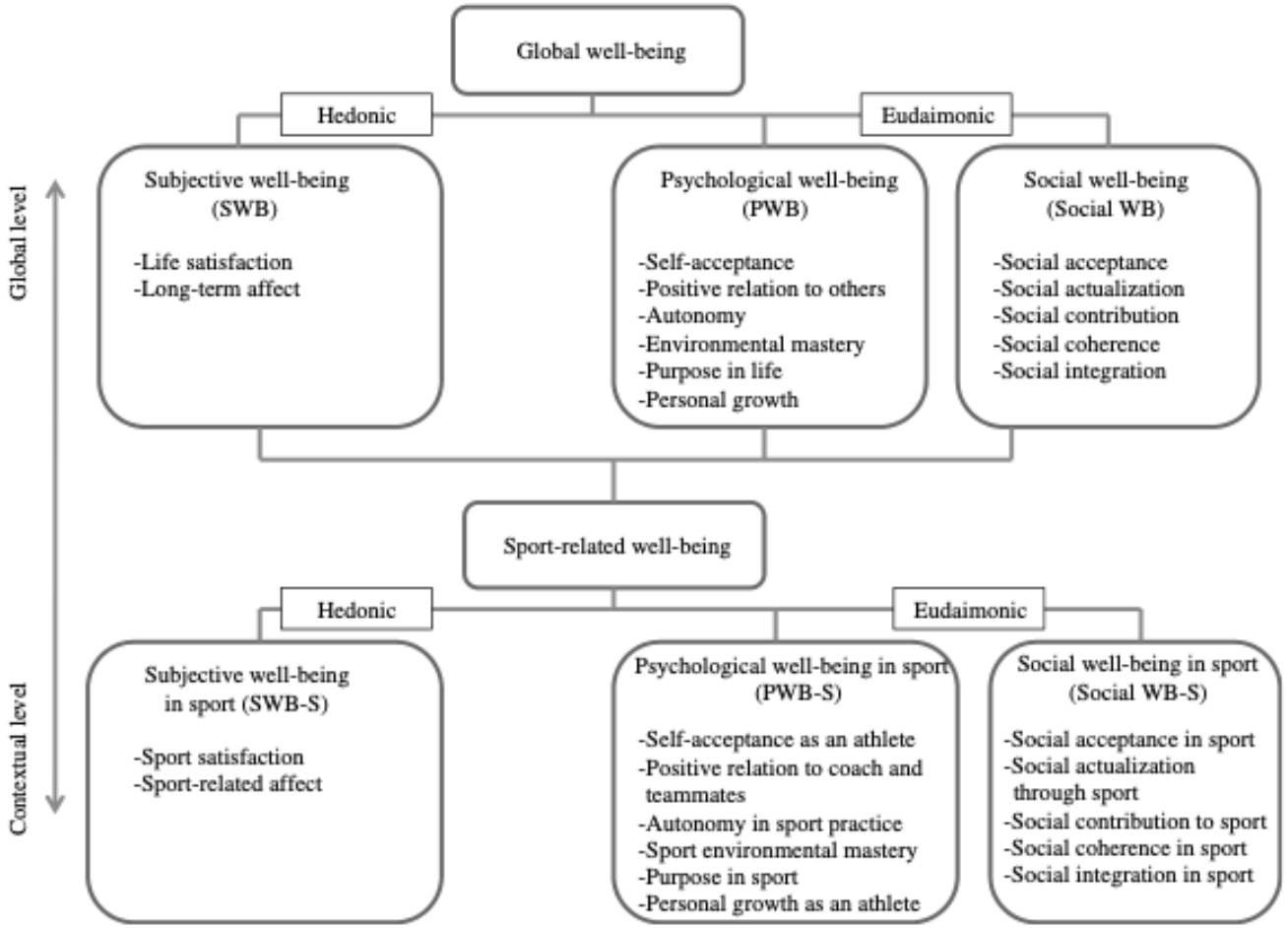
2.3.3 Contextualising Wellbeing in Sport

Evidence from the wider literature suggests that wellbeing can be both global and domain-specific (e.g., Diener et al., 2003) and wellbeing in salient life domains have a

greater influence on global wellbeing levels (e.g., Cantor & Sanderson, 1999). Given that elite sport requires considerable time and emotional commitment from athletes, wellbeing in the sporting domain is likely to have a substantial impact on athletes' overall wellbeing levels (Lundqvist, 2011). Recognising the influence that sport may have on wellbeing, Lundqvist (2011) proposed a theoretical model which integrated global and sport-specific wellbeing (see Figure 2.2). Lundqvist's model highlights various sport-related emotional (e.g., sport satisfaction, sport-related affect), psychological (e.g., purpose in sport, growth as an athlete), and social components (e.g., social acceptance in sport) related to wellbeing in this context. However, as Lundqvist (2011) acknowledged, this model was intended to "provide a broad framework of plausible well-being concepts in sport to act as a guide and inspiration for further studies of well-being in competitive sports" (p.122).

982 **Figure 2.2**

983 *Lundqvist's (2011) Integrated Model of Global and Sport Specific Wellbeing*



Note. Reprinted from "Wellbeing in Competitive Sports – the Feel-Good Factor? A Review of Conceptual Considerations of Well-being", by Lundqvist, C., (2011), *International Review of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, p. 120.

To date, a limited number of studies have used this model as a framework through which to explore athlete wellbeing (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Macdougall et al., 2016). First, using this model with elite orienteers, Lundqvist and Sandin (2014) found that global and sport wellbeing influenced each other, although global wellbeing was perceived to be more stable than sport wellbeing and appeared to serve as a foundation that also could act as a protective mechanism during fluctuations in sport-related wellbeing. Second, Macdougall et al. (2016) used Lundqvist's model to examine wellbeing in para-athletes and suggested that, when using this model with para-athletes, a physical health component should be added at both the global and domain level.

2.3.3.1 Contextualising Optimal Wellbeing in Sport. Recognising the impact that the unique context of elite sport can have on wellbeing, a small number of qualitative studies have attempted to contextualise athlete wellbeing within the context of sport (Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown & Arnold, 2019; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018; Kinoshita et al., 2022; Pankow et al., 2021; Stander et al., 2017). These studies have focused on exploring the experiences of flourishing or thriving athletes – two concepts that represent the highest levels of wellbeing. As discussed earlier in this chapter (section 2.2.6.1.1), both flourishing and thriving are conceptually similar, however, it is suggested that thriving differs from flourishing in that a person requires sustained high-level performance to be categorised as thriving, whereas this is not the case for flourishing (Brown et al., 2017).

Findings from the sport wellbeing literature suggest that thriving athletes are characterised by their sustained high-level performance, which is displaying an upward progression, as well as their optimistic outlook, high-quality motivation, and feelings of being focused and in control, and an awareness of areas for improvement (Brown et al., 2018). Additionally, Brown and colleagues reported that thriving athletes experienced holistic development and felt a sense of belonging. Studies of athlete flourishing have shown that flourishing athletes are future-focused, confident, happy, enjoy being challenged, and are achieving (Ashfield et al., 2012). Other characteristics of flourishing in athletes include multidimensional community support, personal accomplishments, persistent growth, and holistic athletic excellence (Ferguson et al., 2018). In terms of outcomes, studies have shown that thriving is perceived to lead to goal progress and continued intention to participate in sport (Kinoshita et al., 2022), as well as performance benefits, personal development benefits, and increased self-confidence (Brown et al.,

2018). However, thriving has also been linked to negative outcomes, such as decreased mood and motivation when an athlete is no longer thriving (Brown et al., 2018).

In addition to the characteristics and outcomes, a wide range of personal and contextual factors that facilitate high levels of wellbeing have been identified through research. In relation to the personal facilitators of thriving, Brown et al. (2018) found that possessing a positive mental state, desire and motivation, self-belief, and concentration, as well as setting challenging goals and experiencing previous success were factors perceived to facilitated athlete thriving (Brown et al., 2018). Additionally, having an understanding of the demands of elite sport, as well as an appreciation, trust, and commitment to the process of development, and the ability to manage stressful situations were also identified (Brown et al., 2018). With regards to the contextual factors, high-quality relationships, a supportive training environment, and (for some athletes) the experience of pressure have been found to facilitate thriving (Brown et al., 2018). Brown and Arnold (2019) also highlighted the facilitative role of bonds between teammates and a connection with coaching staff and the club have on athlete thriving.

In relation to flourishing, facilitators include the use of team strengths, as well as an environment that allows expression of individual strengths (Stander et al., 2017). Being recognised has also been highlighted as a facilitator for athlete flourishing (Ferguson et al., 2019). Finally, the factors that protect athlete flourishing appear to differ depending on where the athlete is in the sporting season (Pankow et al., 2021). For example, Pankow and colleagues found that positive connections and planning protected flourishing pre-season, whereas communication with coaches, looking for positives, and managing commitments and expectations protected flourishing in-season, and reflecting on the season and taking a break from sport protected flourishing post-season.

The studies discussed in this section shed some light on how high levels of wellbeing can be characterised (Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018), in addition to highlighting some of the related outcomes (Brown et al., 2018; Kinoshita et al., 2022), facilitators (Brown, Arnold et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018; Stander et al., 2017), and protective factors (Pankow et al., 2021) related to athlete wellbeing. However, there are several areas that still require further consideration. First, previous studies focused on contextualising wellbeing have mainly looked at athlete wellbeing in terms of flourishing (e.g., Stander et al., 2017) or thriving (e.g., Brown et al., 2018). Yet, wellbeing occurs on a continuum from low to high (e.g., Keyes, 2002) and, within the U.K. for example, only around 20% of the population can be

categorised as flourishing (Hone et al., 2014). Thus, it is necessary to contextualise wellbeing at all levels to fully understand what wellbeing looks like across the continuum. Such an understanding is needed to facilitate a more nuanced and effective recognition of declining athlete wellbeing levels, allowing for earlier intervention if necessary.

Second, previous studies have tended to contextualise athlete wellbeing across a variety of sports. For example, Brown et al. (2018) interviewed athletes from a range of sports, including swimming, judo, and rugby. Similarly, Pankow et al. (2021) included athletes from a mix of sports such as cross-country, track and field, and rugby. Contextualising wellbeing across multiple sports means that particular sport-specific factors that affect how athlete wellbeing is understood, experienced, and recognised may be overlooked. For instance, for team sports athletes (e.g., rugby, football, basketball), success is dependent on an athlete's ability to work in collaboration with their teammates. Conversely, athletes competing in individual sports (e.g., swimming, track and field, judo) may be training with the person they will be competing against, with success depending on their ability to beat that person. As such, it is likely that relationships with teammates will have a different impact on wellbeing for athletes who compete in team sports compared to those competing in individual sports, as positive relationships with teammates are key to success. However, there are a lack of qualitative studies that have explored the wellbeing experiences of athletes within a specific sport. One notable exception is a recent study by Brown and Arnold (2021) that explored the thriving experiences of elite rugby players and found that thriving was facilitated by bonds between teammates and a connection with the coaching staff and the club.

2.3.4 Measuring Athlete Wellbeing

Within sport, athlete wellbeing has been measured in a variety of ways. Commonly used measures of subjective wellbeing within sport include the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) (e.g., Chen et al., 2017; Holding et al., 2020) and the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988) (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Brown, Arnold, Standage et al., 2021; Gonzalez-Garcia et al., 2021; Rouquette et al., 2021). Other less commonly used measures of subjective wellbeing that have been used in sport include the Mood Report (Emmons & Diener, 1985) (Holding et al., 2020), the Profile of Mood States (POMS; McNair et al., 1971) (Biggins et al., 2018), and the Cantrill Ladder of Life Satisfaction (Cantril, 1965) (Rouquette et al., 2021). With regards to psychological wellbeing, measures that have been used to assess athlete wellbeing include the Subjective Vitality Scale (SVS; Ryan & Frederick, 1997) (e.g., Brown, Arnold,

Standage et al., 2021; Rouquette et al., 2021) and Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (SPWB; Ryff & Keyes., 1995) (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2015).

Some of the measures described above assess single components of wellbeing (e.g., the SWLS assesses satisfaction with life which is a component of subjective wellbeing), whereas others assess multiple components of wellbeing related to a specific dimension (e.g., the Scales of Psychological Wellbeing assess the six components of psychological wellbeing proposed by Ryff, 1989). Within sport, the measure(s) used to assess athlete wellbeing typically depends on the way in which wellbeing is conceptualised and the focus of the study. For instance, Ferguson et al. (2015) stated they were specifically interested in the relationship between self-compassion and eudaimonic wellbeing and as such, chose to measure athlete wellbeing using the SPWB. Although it makes sense for researchers to choose measures that are specific to the dimension or components of wellbeing of interest, the use of different measures makes it difficult to compare findings across studies.

Alternatively, studies that have conceptualised wellbeing more holistically (i.e., as a combination of hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions) have sometimes chosen to use a combination of measures (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Rouquette et al., 2021). In this case however, there is little consensus on the combination of measures that should be used. For instance, Rouquette et al. (2021) measured thriving using a combination of the PANAS, SVS, and the Cantrill ladder of life satisfaction, as well as health quality, whereas Brown et al. (2017) measured thriving using the only the PANAS and SVS. More often however, studies that conceptualise wellbeing more broadly (i.e., those that are not focused on a single component or dimension of wellbeing) tend to use integrated measures of wellbeing that include items related to hedonic and eudaimonic dimensions of wellbeing. Examples of integrated wellbeing measures that have been used in sport include Keyes' (2008) Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF) (e.g., Pankow et al., 2021; Stander et al., 2017), the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS; Tennent et al., 2007) (e.g., Breslin et al., 2018; Kuettel et al., 2021), the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) (e.g., Bullock et al., 2020; Martin et al., 2021), and the WHO-5 Wellbeing Index (WHO., 1998) (Belz et al., 2018).

One limitation of the wellbeing measures described so far is that they are not sport-specific and, as such, their use for measuring athlete wellbeing may be limited (Giles et al., 2020). For instance, is possible that non-sport-specific measures may inadvertently pathologise behaviours necessary for success within an elite sport context, such as athletes who engage in certain eating-related behaviours to achieve a certain weight (Donohue et

al., 2018). Consequently, some athletes may be reluctant to answer truthfully for fear of being labelled mentally ill, whereas some athletes may be unmotivated to answer generic measures of wellbeing as they may be unable to see how they relate to their performance within sport (Donohue et al., 2018). As such, there have been calls for sport specific measures of athlete wellbeing that are contextually phrased to reflect the sport context (Reardon et al., 2019). A recent paper by Giles et al. (2020) highlighted four key areas that those seeking to develop sport specific measures of wellbeing should consider, which included issues related to how wellbeing is conceptualised, item development, measurement and scoring, and analysis.

To date, a few sport-specific measures of wellbeing have been developed (Foster & Chow, 2019; Kouali et al., 2020a; Tigueros et al., 2021). These include the Sport MHC-SF (Foster & Chow, 2019) which is an adaptation of Keyes' MHC-SF for the sports context, the Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Sport Scale (EWBSS; Kouali, 2020a), and an adapted version of Salavera and Usan's (2019) Eudaimonic Wellbeing Questionnire (Tigueros et al., 2021). Although not technically a measure of wellbeing, Gouttebarge et al. (2021) also recently developed the Sport Mental Health Assessment Tool (SMHAT-1) as a way for sports to assess the mental health and identify athletes who may be at risk of mental disorders. However, sport-specific measures of wellbeing are still relatively new and so, generally, there is limited supporting evidence for their effectiveness in measuring athlete wellbeing. For example, only one study has used the EWBSS to explore the link between different types of motivation and eudaimonic wellbeing (Kouali et al., 2021) and, to the best of my knowledge, the EWQ has not yet been used to assess athlete wellbeing, aside from the initial validation study (Tigueros et al., 2021).

One exception is the Sport MHC-SF, which is becoming an increasingly popular choice by which to measure wellbeing at the sport level. For example, the Sport MHC-SF has been used to explore the effect of psychological skills and mindfulness on sport and global wellbeing (Foster & Chow, 2020), the relationship between mental toughness and sport-related wellbeing (Bird et al., 2020), the coach-athlete relationship and sport-related wellbeing (Simons & Bird, 2022), and academic and athletic identity and sport and global wellbeing (Ballesteros et al., 2022). The Sport MHC-SF has also been used in qualitative studies to identify flourishing athletes (Pankow et al., 2021) and coaches (Pankow et al., 2022) to interview regarding the factors they perceive to protect and promote flourishing. Finally, the Sport MHC-SF has recently been adapted and validated for use with Italian athletes (Bertollo et al., 2021).

2.3.5 Prevalence of Athlete Wellbeing

Within the sport psychology literature, there is a substantial body of research that has explored the prevalence of athlete mental illness (e.g., Appaneal et al., 2009; Bratland-Sanda & Sundgot-Borgen, 2013; Du Preez et al., 2017; Foskett & Longstaff, 2017; Gouttebarge et al., 2015; Hammond et al., 2013; Schaal et al., 2011; Schuring et al., 2017; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004). Such studies suggest that mental illness prevalence within the elite athlete population is broadly similar to that of the general population (Schaal et al., 2011), although it appears that some elite athletes may be more at risk of certain mental illnesses compared to the general population. For example, athletes who compete in individual sports (Nixdorf et al., 2016) or sports where leanness is desirable (e.g., swimming, gymnastics; Sundgot-Borgen & Torstveit, 2004) are more vulnerable to experiencing eating disorders and depression. Additionally, injured athletes (Gulliver et al., 2015), athletes experiencing performance failure (Hammond et al., 2013), and retiring athletes (Gouttebarge et al., 2015) may be at increased risk of anxiety and depression disorders. Finally, female athletes (Appaneal et al., 2009; Foskett & Longstaff, 2017; Schuring et al., 2017) appear more likely to experience certain mental illnesses (e.g., depression, eating disorders) than their male counterparts.

In contrast to the substantial body of literature regarding prevalence of mental illness, there had been comparatively little research focused on the prevalence of wellbeing in elite athlete populations. Recently, however, several studies have explored the prevalence of optimal wellbeing (i.e., flourishing) within athlete populations (Bullock et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2021; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). From this limited body of research, it appears that the proportion of athletes who are flourishing is fairly high, ranging from between 44.5% (Van Slingerland et al., 2018) and 64.2% (Kuettel et al., 2021) and athlete flourishing levels seem to remain fairly stable over time (Van Slingerland et al., 2018). Thus, it appears that the prevalence of flourishing is significantly higher in athletes than the general population, where flourishing prevalence ranges from between 24% and 47% depending on the specific definition and psychometric measure of flourishing that is used (Hone et al., 2014). Painting a similar picture, a comparison of psychological wellbeing in athlete and non-athlete women found significantly higher levels of psychological wellbeing for female athletes compared to their non-athlete counterparts (Alamdarloo et al., 2019).

In terms of which athletes may be more or less likely to flourish, Van Slingerland et al. (2018) found that flourishing was nearly twice as high in athletes who had never

received a mental illness diagnosis (55.6%), compared to athletes who had been diagnosed with at least one mental illness in their lifetime (28.3%), suggesting mental illness may pose a barrier to flourishing. There is also some evidence to suggest that elite athletes may be more likely to flourish than recreational athletes (Bullock et al., 2020), however, this study excluded athletes who were not currently playing for reasons such as injury, travel, or illness. Given that these scenarios have all been highlighted as having the potential to negatively impact wellbeing (Rice et al., 2016), these findings may not be an accurate reflection of flourishing within this population.

2.3.6 Section Summary

The wellbeing of high-performance athletes has been highlighted as a key area of concern (Grey-Thompson, 2014). Subsequently, academic literature on athlete wellbeing has grown rapidly in recent years (Larsen et al., 2021). Recognising that wellbeing is context-dependent (e.g., Diener et al., 2018), an increasing number of studies have sought to contextualise it within the context of high-performance sport (e.g., Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown, Arnold et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018; Kinoshita et al., 2022; Stander et al, 2017). Specifically, such studies have sought to understand how athlete wellbeing is characterised (Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018), as well as identify facilitators (Brown & Arnold, 2021; Brown et al., 2018; Ferguson et al., 2018; Stander et al., 2017), protective factors (Pankow et al., 2021) and outcomes (Brown et al., 2018; Kinoshita et al., 2022) related to athlete wellbeing.

However, many of the extant athlete wellbeing studies are limited in that they have only focused on contextualising the highest levels of wellbeing (i.e., flourishing or thriving) and have tended to contextualise wellbeing across a variety of sports (rather than a single sport). Further, the definitional issues that are prevalent within the wider literature also exist within the athlete wellbeing literature. In particular, issues related to the existence of multiple definitions and measures of wellbeing, as well as the inconsistent use of wellbeing-related terminology, which make it difficult to clearly and coherently synthesise the athlete wellbeing literature. Finally, the unique context of elite sport also raises the question of whether it is useful and/or appropriate to apply non-sport specific definitions and measures of wellbeing to athlete populations.

2.4 Factors Related to Athlete Wellbeing

Throughout their career, elite athletes will experience numerous personal (e.g., illness, injury), competitive (e.g., selection, travel), and organisational (e.g., leadership, culture) demands that have the potential to negatively impact on wellbeing, increasing the

risk of experiencing negative psychological outcomes such as burnout, anxiety, and depression (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Rice et al., 2016). Yet, not all elite athletes will experience such negative outcomes, rather some individuals thrive within a high-performance context (e.g., Brown et al., 2018). The extant sport psychology literature has highlighted a wide range of factors linked to athlete wellbeing and mental health (see e.g., Kuettel & Larson, 2020; Rice et al., 2016 for reviews) and increased research interest into the topic of athlete wellbeing and mental health means that new studies are being published frequently. For example, Kuettel and Larson (2020) found that 81% of the studies included in their review were published between the years 2013 to 2018. Therefore, the following section aims to provide an overview of the most recent studies (i.e., published in the last 10 years) that have sought to identify and explore the various personal, social, and environmental factors that are related to athlete wellbeing.

2.4.1 Personal Factors Related to Athlete Wellbeing

Athletes who experience the highest levels of wellbeing (i.e., they are categorised as flourishing and/or thriving) tend to be positive, proactive, flexible, and adaptable (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). They are likely to have high personal resilience (Brown et al., 2017; Martin et al., 2021; Sarkar & Fletcher., 2014), practice self-reflection (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014), be able to maintain balance and perspective, and have a broad sense of identity (Sarkar & Fletcher., 2014). In addition, they are likely to have mature defence mechanisms (Mousavi et al., 2017), accept that they hold multiple roles (e.g., athlete, student, partner), and have high levels of sport confidence (Lundqvist & Sandin., 2014). Athletes with higher levels of wellbeing also report having more sleep (Kuettel et al., 2018), and higher quality sleep (Biggins et al., 2018). Conversely, athletes who experience lower levels of wellbeing are more likely to have neurotic defence mechanisms (Mousavi et al., 2017), perfectionistic tendencies (Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015), and report lower quality sleep (Biggins et al., 2018). Retiring athletes who report lower wellbeing are also likely to have an extreme athletic identity (Diehl et al., 2020).

Psychological and physical development (van Rens & Filho, 2022), personal growth (Pankow et al., 2021), athletic excellence (Ferguson et al., 2019), and belief from successful performances (Diehl et al., 2020) have all been found to be positively related to athlete wellbeing. Further, athletes who are able to express themselves authentically (Doherty et al., 2016), set goals that are personally relevant and meaningful (Ferguson et al., 2019; Lundqvist & Sandin; 2014), and set realistic performance standards for themselves (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014) are more likely to experience positive wellbeing

outcomes. Taking a break from sport post-season has also been associated with high levels of wellbeing (Pankow et al., 2021).

Athletes who are able to cope successfully with the demands associated with their sport and other life domains (e.g., academic, personal) are also likely to experience higher levels of wellbeing (Purcell et al., 2020). Specifically, pre-season planning and taking an active role in managing commitments has been found to promote athlete wellbeing across a range of sports (Pankow et al., 2021). Similarly, engaging in preparation for the Olympic games and career planning has been found to promote wellbeing in a group of athletes transitioning to an Olympic training centre (Diehl et al., 2020).

Higher levels of wellbeing have also been seen in athletes who appraise competitions as challenging rather than threatening (Brown et al., 2017; Brown, Arnold, Standage, Turner et al., 2021) and those who use psychological skills, such as reframing (Brown et al., 2017; Pankow et al., 2021). In addition, certain mindfulness techniques – specifically decentering (taking an objective view of the situation) and non-attachment (not fixating on or trying to control experiences) – have been found to promote athlete wellbeing, whereas practicing acceptance (fully accepting experiences) and cognitive defusion (distancing from thoughts) has been shown to protect wellbeing in athletes across a range of sports (Zhang et al., 2021). Finally, recent wellbeing experiences have been shown to have a direct effect on current wellbeing, meaning athletes who have recently experienced high levels of wellbeing are more likely to be experiencing high levels of wellbeing currently (Brown, Arnold, Standage, Turner et al., 2021).

2.4.2 Social Factors Related to Athlete Wellbeing

Having positive connections and maintaining social connectedness have been linked to positive wellbeing experiences in athletes across various sports (e.g., Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014; Pankow et al., 2021) and has been shown to protect wellbeing during the transition into a new sport (van Rens & Filho, 2020). Maintaining positive relationships outside of sport (e.g., family, romantic relationships) can promote wellbeing, and also protect against the negative impacts of sport, by acting as a buffer (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014). Elite athletes who prioritise time with family, loved ones, and playing sport with club-level teammates pre-season build a foundation for flourishing in-season (Pankow et al., 2021). However, although positive relationships outside of sport can facilitate wellbeing, negative relationship spillover (i.e., where negative feelings, attitudes, and behaviours from relationships outside of sport are carried over into the sport domain) can be detrimental to athlete wellbeing (Jowett & Cramer, 2009).

Within sport, having a connection to coaching staff and club can also promote athlete wellbeing (Brown & Arnold, 2019) and athletes who trust in their coach are likely to experience more positive wellbeing outcomes (Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015). Coaches who adopt a transformational leadership style can also promote athlete wellbeing, via the positive impact on coach-athlete relationship quality and psychological safety (Gosai et al., 2021). Conversely, controlling coaching behaviours and coach-athlete conflicts can threaten athlete wellbeing (e.g., Davis & Jowett, 2014; Stebbings et al., 2016). In addition, sport friendships have been positively linked to athlete wellbeing (Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015) and bonding with teammates has been found to promote wellbeing in rugby players (Brown & Arnold, 2021; Stander et al., 2014), football players (Stander et al., 2015), and orienteers (Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014). Further, the extent to which teams use their collective strengths (as opposed to individual strengths) has been shown to predict athlete wellbeing (Stander et al., 2017).

In addition to positive relationships, those with high levels of wellbeing tend to feel that there is available social support (e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher., 2014), and higher levels of multi-dimensional support have been linked to positive wellbeing outcomes (Ferguson et al., 2019; Kuettel et al., 2021). Specifically, coaches can support athletes to maintain high levels of wellbeing during a sporting season by celebrating successes, helping athletes manage their expectations, and demonstrating a high level of belief in their athletes (Pankow et al., 2021). For parents of athletes, responsive parental support has been positively related to athlete wellbeing (Roquette et al., 2021). In addition, some studies suggest appreciation and recognition of achievements can facilitate wellbeing (Diehl et al., 2020; Ferguson et al., 2019).

2.4.3 Environmental Factors Related to Athlete Wellbeing

Highly supportive sporting environments have been shown to protect athlete wellbeing, whereas private, work, or educational environments characterised by high workloads (i.e., number of hours spent training/working) and environments that are perceived as stressful can threaten wellbeing (Kuettel et al, 2021). Sporting environments where the environmental culture, organisational policies, and team dynamics allow athletes to express their individual strengths and facilitate the use of team strengths positively impact on athlete wellbeing (Stander et al., 2017). Similarly, training environments where there is an honest, fear-free “family” culture, the club and team members share common goals, and the environment facilitates player enjoyment, development, and retention can foster athlete wellbeing (Brown & Arnold, 2019).

In addition, athletes who perceive that their environments satisfy their basic psychological needs are more likely to experience high levels of wellbeing (Brown et al., 2017; Brown, Arnold, Standage, Turner et al., 2021; Brown, Arnold, Standage & Fletcher, 2021). Specifically, autonomy-supportive environments that allow athletes to feel that they are making active choices and have a sense of control over their environment can facilitate wellbeing (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Conversely, needs dissatisfaction has been associated with higher levels of stress and lower levels of wellbeing (Lundqvist & Raglin., 2015). Motivational climate has also been linked to athlete wellbeing, with a mastery-oriented motivational climate associated with higher levels of athlete wellbeing (Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015).

2.4.4 Critical Review of Factors Related to Athlete Wellbeing Literature

The extant athlete wellbeing literature highlights a vast array of personal (e.g., personality characteristics and coping ability), social (e.g., relationships and social support) and environmental (e.g., environmental culture and motivational climate) factors that characterise, promote, protect, or threaten athlete wellbeing. However, there are numerous limitations that should be highlighted and gaps that future research should aim to address. A review of the sport wellbeing literature by Lundqvist (2011) highlighted that many athlete wellbeing studies have conceptualised and measured wellbeing slightly differently. Further, over half of the studies included in the review did not explicitly define what they meant by wellbeing, and many of the studies used the term wellbeing interchangeably with related terms such as life satisfaction and happiness. Lundqvist (2011) also noted methodological inconsistencies in many of the studies, regarding how the authors defined wellbeing and subsequently measured it.

Although it has been over a decade since this review was published, these issues are still prevalent today. For example, the diversity in terminology and measurement of wellbeing across the extant sport psychology literature makes it difficult to fully synthesise the current findings on athlete wellbeing. For example, in relation to terminology, some studies (e.g., Jowett & Cramer, 2009; Lundqvist & Raglin, 2014) chose to use the more general term wellbeing, whereas other studies chose to focus on the highest levels of wellbeing, with some of these studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Diehl et al., 2020) describing this as thriving and other studies (e.g., Pankow et al., 2021; Stander et al., 2017) describing it as flourishing. Additionally, whereas some of the studies explicitly defined what they meant when they used these terms (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; van Rens & Filho, 2022; Zhang et al., 2021), others did not (e.g., Diehl et al., 2020; Kuettel et al., 2021). This

is an issue because without an explicit definition, the reader is left to infer what is meant based on their own understanding of the concepts (which may differ to what was intended by the study authors).

The way in which wellbeing is defined will also influence the way in which it can, and should be, measured (e.g., MacKenzie, 2003). In relation to measuring wellbeing in sport, some of the studies included in this chapter (e.g., Stander et al., 2017; Kuettel et al., 2021) measured wellbeing using a single scale, such as the Mental Health Continuum Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2009) or the Short Warwick Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale (SWEMWBS, Tennant et al., 2007), whereas other studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Rouquette et al., 2021) used a combination of measures, such as the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS-SF; Thompson, 2007) and the Subjective Vitality Scale (SVS; Ryan & Frederick, 1997) to determine wellbeing in their sample. Other researchers, such as Zhang et al. (2021), have created their own measure of wellbeing altogether, using a self-designed 3-item scale to measure flourishing. However, a lack of explicit definitions makes it difficult to assess whether the chosen measures of wellbeing are appropriate for how wellbeing is being defined. Thus, explicitly defining key terms not only makes it clear to readers how key concepts are being defined but can also help researchers to select the most appropriate measure for their study.

In addition to the issue of consistency in wellbeing terminology and measurement, many of the studies discussed above have used a quantitative, cross-sectional research design. Those that have taken a qualitative approach (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Diehl et al., 2020) have mostly conducted one-off interviews where participants were asked to reflect on their wellbeing experiences. As such, these studies provide a "snapshot" of athlete wellbeing at one moment in time and, although this has helped to highlight some of the specific factors linked to athlete wellbeing, it does not take into consideration how these factors interact and influence each other, how these interactions may affect wellbeing outcomes, or how wellbeing may change over time. This is important as the impact of specific factors on wellbeing may differ depending on the time and place, as well as the presence or absence of other factors. For example, although athletic identity is generally linked to positive wellbeing outcomes such as higher levels of athlete satisfaction (i.e., Burns et al., 2012), it is also associated with poorer wellbeing outcomes in specific situations, such as during periods of injury (e.g., Renton et al., 2021) and retirement (Haslam et al., 2021), as well as after a disappointing performance (e.g., Brewer et al., 1999). Therefore, more longitudinal studies are needed to explore how wellbeing is

affected over time (Kuettel & Larson, 2020). Such studies would move beyond highlighting factors in isolation and provide insight into the underlying process and mechanisms by which athlete wellbeing is affected.

Further, the majority of athlete wellbeing studies have been conducted in western cultures, such as the United States (e.g., Diehl et al., 2020; Jones, 2016; Wahesh et al., 2021), Canada (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2019; Hammond et al., 2013; Pankow et al., 2021), Australia (e.g., Vella et al., 2021; Walton et al., 2021), the European Union (e.g., Kuettel et al., 2021; Lundqvist & Raglin, 2015; Lundqvist & Schary, 2014; Rouquette et al., 2021,) and the United Kingdom (e.g., Biggins et al., 2018; Brown & Arnold, 2019; Jowett & Cramer, 2009), although a small number of studies have explored athlete wellbeing in non-western populations, such as South Africa (Stander et al., 2017), China (Zhang et al., 2021), Iran (Mousavi et al., 2017), Taiwan (Chen et al., 2017), and the Caribbean (Thomas et al., 2021). Even so, the dominance of studies in western cultures means the factors related to athlete wellbeing largely reflect western conceptualisations of wellbeing, that may not be the same across all countries. In addition, some athlete wellbeing studies in non-western countries have conceptualised and measured wellbeing using westernised theoretical frameworks. For example, Stander et al. (2017) measured wellbeing in South African athletes using the MHC-SF (Keyes, 2005) – a measure that was developed in the United States. Although the MHC-SF has been validated for use in South Africa (Keyes et al., 2008), it is still based on a western idea of wellbeing that may not accurately capture how wellbeing is understood and experienced by South Africans.

Finally, similar to studies that have attempted to conceptualise athlete wellbeing, a large number of studies that have explored the factors related to wellbeing have included athletes from a range of sports (e.g., Brown et al., 2021; Diehl et al., 2020, Martin et al., 2021; Kuettel et al., 2021; Pankow et al., 2021). However, given the context-specific nature of wellbeing (e.g., Diener et al., 2003), it is unlikely that the factors related to athlete wellbeing will be the same across all sports, as each sport has unique environmental characteristics (e.g., training environment, training schedule, physical requirements) that will impact on wellbeing in different ways. As such, studies that combine athletes from multiple sports may miss some sport-specific wellbeing related factors. Additionally, such studies also risk overgeneralising wellbeing-related factors across sports when they may be specific to one or two sports.

2.4.5 Section Summary

There is a rapidly growing body of literature that provides a long list of personal (e.g., characteristics, skills, experiences), social (e.g., relationships inside and outside of sport), and environmental factors (e.g., training and competition environment, organisational culture) linked to athlete wellbeing. However, the usefulness of this research is limited by a lack of clarity regarding what is meant by wellbeing and related terminology, as well as the inconsistent use of terminology across studies. In addition, previous studies exploring the factors related to athlete wellbeing have often taken a quantitative, cross-sectional approach, or conducted one-off qualitative interviews. As such, previous studies have highlighted that there are many factors that have the potential to affect the wellbeing of athletes, they do not necessarily tell us anything about the reasons *why* these factors might athlete wellbeing, or how they might change over time.

Related to the idea that the factors that influence athlete wellbeing are not static, the majority of previous studies have tended to focus on specific factors in isolation, yet wellbeing can be considered a process as well as an outcome (e.g., Atkinson, 2013). Thus, as part of the wellbeing process, it is likely that many factors will interact and influence each other to impact wellbeing in different ways at different times. As such, future research is needed to explore the reasons why certain factors influence athlete wellbeing, as well as to identify how the factors related to athlete wellbeing interact and how these interactions might impact on wellbeing. Finally, there is also a need to explore the wellbeing experiences of athletes from non-western cultures, as well as consider whether there are differences in the factors related to athlete wellbeing across sports.

2.5 Athlete Mental Health Interventions

Given the increased risk for some athletes to experience lowered wellbeing and poor mental health outcomes at certain times in their careers (e.g., injury, deselection, retirement), there is a need for sport-specific athlete mental health interventions (Garilova & Donohue, 2018; Purcell et al., 2019). Until recently, the development of interventions targeting athlete mental health has been slow (Donohue et al., 2013; Rice et al., 2016). Over the past five years, however, the number of interventions aimed at protecting and promoting athlete mental health has grown rapidly (Breslin et al., 2022). The following section first provides a detailed overview of the literature on athlete mental health interventions before a critical review of the literature is presented.

Within sport, interventions have taken a variety of approaches to protect and promote athlete mental health. For example, some interventions have focused on

increasing awareness of mental health and knowledge of the symptoms of mental illness, to support early recognition and help-seeking (e.g., Breslin et al., 2018; Breslin et al., 2019; Chow et al., 2020; Gulliver et al., 2012; Liddle et al., 2019; Van Raalte et al., 2015; Vella et al., 2020), whereas other interventions have focused on reducing symptoms of mental illness (e.g., Chervencova et al., 2015; Donohue et al., 2018; Dowell et al., 2020; Haney, 2004; Wood et al., 2019, Davis & Turner, 2020). Athlete mental health interventions have also focused on teaching mindfulness techniques (Ajilchi et al., 2019; Glass et al., 2019; Gross et al., 2018; Mohammed et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2019, Vidic et al., 2018), gratitude practices (e.g., Gabana et al., 2019), or increasing athletes' ability to cope with stress (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2015; Fogaca, 2019; Laureano et al., 2014). Finally, athlete mental health intervention studies have also explored the impact of psychological skills training (Edwards & Steyn, 2008) and imagery (Kouali et al., 2020b) on psychological wellbeing, as well as the effect of acupuncture on athlete's subjective wellbeing (Luetmer et al., 2019).

2.5.1 Mental Health Literacy (MHL) Interventions

Introduced by Jorm et al. (1997), the term Mental Health Literacy (MHL) refers to a person's "knowledge and beliefs around mental disorders which aid their recognition, management or prevention" (p. 182). MHL has been linked to several positive outcomes, such as increased help-seeking behaviour (Gorczynski et al., 2017) and higher wellbeing (e.g., Lam, 2014). Within the sport literature, a number MHL interventions have been developed for and evaluated with athlete populations (e.g., Lawlor et al., 2015; Chow et al., 2020; Gulliver et al., 2012; Van Raalte et al., 2015; Vella et al., 2018). For example, Gulliver et al. (2012) found that an internet-based MHL intervention increased depression and anxiety literacy and decreased anxiety stigma, and these effects were maintained at three-month follow-up. However, no significant effects were observed for help-seeking attitudes, intentions, or behaviours, and wellbeing was not explicitly measured.

In an evaluation of a different online MHL literacy programme, Van Raalte et al. (2015) found significant positive changes related to mental health knowledge and referral efficacy compared to a control group. In a more recent study, Chow et al. (2020) found that a multi-component MHL literacy intervention consisting of four, 60-minute, face-to-face sessions incorporating psychoeducation, group discussion, and video learning led to significant improvements in mental health literacy, help-seeking attitudes and intentions, and decreased self-stigma, although there were no significant differences for other types of

stigma. Again, the effect of these studies (Chow et al., 2020; Van Raalte et al., 2015) on athlete wellbeing is unclear, as neither study included it as an outcome.

Other mental health literacy programmes that have been developed for sport include The State of Mind Ireland (SOMI) programme (Lawlor et al., 2015) and Ahead of the Game (AOTG) (Vella et al., 2018), both of which have received substantial attention in the sport literature.

2.5.1.1 State of Mind Ireland (SOMI). Originally developed by Lawlor et al. (2015), SOMI aims to increase athletes' knowledge around mental health, resilience, wellbeing, and intention to offer help to those around them who may be struggling with their mental health. The SOMI programme is delivered by an experienced mental health and wellbeing tutor as a one-off 75-minute workshop and involves the use of case studies of athletes who have sought help for their mental health, experiential learning and group discussions, an introduction to mindfulness practice, and the promotion of the New Economics Foundation's five ways to wellbeing (connect, give, take notice, keep learning, be active) (New Economics Foundation, 2008).

A pilot study by Breslin et al. (2018) found that participants' knowledge of mental health and intentions to help others significantly increased for the SOMI intervention group compared to the control group, although there were no statistically significant effects on resilience or wellbeing. Subsequently, Breslin et al. (2021) incorporated the Integrated Behaviour Change (IBC) model (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2014) to help explain intervention effects. Breslin and colleagues found that increased intention to self-manage mental health in the SOMI intervention group could be explained by the interventions impact on autonomous and controlled motivation and attitudes towards self-managing mental health. The SOMI has also recently been modified for students in higher education (named the SOMI-HE) (O'Brien et al., 2020).

2.5.1.2 Ahead of the Game (AOTG). AOTG is another MHL intervention that has been developed for the sport context (Vella et al., 2018). Unlike SOMI, which is a single session targeting athletes only, AOTG is a multi-level, multi-component intervention that has been designed for male athletes, their coaches, and parents. AOTG comprises four separate components, as well as a supplementary mental health messaging campaign, involving posters, branded merchandise, and a website containing campaign specific material. Two of the four components – 'Help out a Mate' (HOAM) and 'your path to success' – are targeted at adolescent male athletes and consist of a brief MHL programme and an internet supported resilience intervention respectively. The remaining two

components of AOTG include a one-hour face-to-face MHL workshop for parents and an internet-supported education programme for coaches that comprises two face-to-face workshops (lasting approx. 2 hours each), six 30-minute self-directed online learning modules, and two 1-hour mentoring sessions (mix of online and face-to-face).

With regards to the athlete components of AOTG, the 'help out a mate' programme involves a one-off 45-minute workshop that aims to help adolescent male athletes recognise the signs of depression and anxiety, encourage help-seeking and self-help behaviours, and provide advice on how to support a friend who might be struggling with their mental health. The workshop is delivered face-to-face by volunteers trained in Mental Health First Aid (MHFA), and includes a PowerPoint presentation, facilitated discussions, and role play. The 'your path to success' component of AOTG aims to increase resilience by targeting key psychological skills. It includes a one-off 45-minute workshop, followed by six sequential online modules that take around 15-minutes to complete.

Evaluation studies have been carried out on individual components of AOTG, specifically the HOAM athlete workshop (Liddle et al., 2019) and the parent MHL programme (Hurley et al., 2018; 2020). An evaluation of HOAM with a group of community footballers found that participation in the HOAM workshop increased mental illness knowledge, intentions to help a friend experiencing mental health difficulties, and led to positive changes in attitudes related to problem recognition and help-seeking, as well as reduced stigmatising attitudes towards mental illness (Liddle et al., 2019). However, no significant differences were reported for confidence to provide support, intentions to seek help for personal mental health difficulties, or psychological distress. Evaluations of the parent MHL programme have found increased anxiety and depression literacy, improved knowledge of help-seeking options, and increased confidence to support someone experiencing mental health difficulties (Hurley et al., 2018; 2020). Further, Hurley et al. (2020) found that the intervention group perceived increased social support, reduced distress, and were more likely to seek formal help compared to the control.

Additionally, AOTG has recently been evaluated as a complete intervention (i.e., delivery of the athlete HOAM MHL and online resilience workshops, as well as the parent MHL workshop and coach education programme) where the intervention group showed significant positive changes in anxiety and depression literacy, confidence to seek mental health information, intentions to seek formal help, as well as increased resilience and wellbeing compared to a control (Vella et al., 2020). However, no significant effects were

found for stigma, intentions to seek informal help, implicit beliefs related to adversity, perceived family support, or psychological distress.

2.5.2 Mindfulness Interventions

A growing number of interventions that aim to increase wellbeing have focused on teaching mindfulness techniques (Ajilchi et al., 2019; Baltzell & Alchtar, 2014; Glass et al., 2019; Gross et al., 2018; Mohammed et al., 2018; Shannon et al., 2019; Vidic et al., 2018). For example, Mindfulness Meditation Training for Sport (MMTS; Baltzell & Alchtar, 2014) is an intervention comprising twelve, 30-minute sessions that aims to optimise sport performance through the impact of mindfulness meditation on negative affect, psychological wellbeing, and life satisfaction. Baltzell and Alchtar (2014) evaluated the MMTS with 42 female student athletes found that athletes on the MMTS programme experienced significantly increased mindfulness scores and were protected against lowered negative affect compared to controls. However, the MMTS had limited effects on positive aspects of wellbeing. In contrast, an evaluation of another mindfulness intervention found that weekly 90-minute group mindfulness sessions significantly improved emotional intelligence in a group of basketball players compared to a control group (Ajilchi et al., 2019) and a similarly designed intervention evaluated with a group of student athletes found that the intervention group experienced significantly increased life satisfaction compared to a control group (Glass et al., 2019). Additionally, the control group showed a significant increase in depressive symptoms from pre- to post- intervention that was not seen in the intervention group, suggesting the intervention may also have protected against poor mental health.

Further, a randomised control trial comparing the effectiveness of a psychoeducation and mindfulness intervention and a psychological skills training (PST) intervention in a group of student-athletes showed that the mindfulness group experienced reduced distress, anxiety, and substance use, as well as increased emotional regulation and acceptance compared to the PST group (Gross et al., 2018). Interestingly, however, the PST group experienced increased mindfulness compared to the mindfulness group. Finally, the Athlete Gratitude Group (TAGG) is a multi-session intervention that aims to positively impact mental health by teaching individuals the value of cultivating gratitude (Gabana et al., 2020). TAGG comprises five, 90-minute sessions, with each session focused on one of the following five topics: (1) micro gratitude (appreciation of the little things), (2) gratitude savouring (enhancing intensity or duration of positive feelings), (3) interpersonal gratitude (showing appreciation of others), (4) redemptive gratitude (findings things to be grateful

for during stressful experiences), and (5) macro gratitude (appreciation of the big things in life). An evaluation with student athletes showed that athletes who participated in TAGG experienced significant positive effects of gratitude on mental health that were still present one- and three-months post-intervention. Further, Gabana et al. (2022) found that positive effects of TAGG on athlete mental health were maximised when coaches were included in the intervention.

2.5.3 Symptom Severity Reduction Interventions

In addition to MHL and mindfulness interventions, some athlete mental health interventions have been developed that specifically target the reduction of symptom severity in athletes who are struggling with poor mental health (i.e., low wellbeing and/or subclinical symptoms of mental illness). For example, The Optimum Performance Programme in Sports (TOPPS) is a strengths-based mental health assistance programme aimed at reducing the severity of symptoms related to mental illness (e.g., Donohue et al., 2018; Galante et al., 2019). The intervention consists of 12 one-to-one "performance meetings" held over a period of four months, with each session lasting between 60 and 90 minutes and covering a variety of topics tailored to the needs of the athlete. A randomised control trial with 74 student athletes found that the athletes who participated in TOPPS experienced significantly reduced symptoms of depression compared to those who received services as usual (i.e., college counselling) (Donohue et al., 2018). Additionally, a case study evaluating TOPPS with a female student athlete struggling with disordered eating found TOPPS was effective in reducing binge purge frequency, however the impact on symptoms of anxiety and depression could not be assessed due to low baseline scores (Galante et al., 2019).

Another athlete mental health intervention developed to target symptom severity is the RISE programme (Dowell et al., 2021). Developed using a community-based participatory research framework, RISE is a multi-component intervention, with an integrated mental health programme aimed at reducing symptoms of anxiety, depression, and anger-related misconduct. The intervention includes four 30-minute workshops, online resources, and a tailored individual follow-up with a referral to additional care for high-risk individuals. The RISE programme has been evaluated with a sample of 74 male youth rugby players, who experienced a significant reduction in anxiety and a significant increase in prosocial behaviour, perceived ability to manage negative emotions, and grit from pre- to post-intervention (Dowell et al., 2021). A reduction in symptoms of depression was also reported, although the difference was non-significant.

2.5.3.1 Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT). A few studies have trialled REBT as a way to reduce symptom severity and improve athlete mental health (Wood et al., 2019; Davis & Turner, 2020). First introduced by Ellis (1957), Rational Emotive Behaviour Therapy (REBT) is a type of cognitive behavioural therapy that aims to help individuals identify irrational beliefs that may negatively impacting on their mental health and replace them with rational beliefs. A central tenant of REBT is the ABC(DE) framework, where A refers to the activating event, which triggers B, the irrational belief around the event, which leads to C, the consequent emotional response. The D stands for disputation, which is the process of challenging irrational beliefs and replacing them with more rational and effective alternatives (E).

With regards to how REBT has been used to support athlete mental health, Wood et al. (2019) presented a case study which detailed their successful use of REBT with a Paralympic athlete who was struggling to adjust to life as a full-time athlete. Using REBT, Wood et al. (2019) worked with the athlete to identify, challenge, and replace irrational beliefs around need for approval, demand for fairness, and perception of others as inconsiderate. Quantitative evaluation of the intervention showed that irrational beliefs significantly decreased after one week of REBT and intervention effects were still present 2-months after the intervention had ended. Qualitative feedback from the athlete showed that the athlete felt the intervention had positively impacted their mental health as they felt better able to control their emotions and perceived that the intervention had given them tools to cope with the stressors of sport. Another example of how REBT has been used to support athlete mental health is presented by Davis and Turner (2020) who used REBT to increase self-determined motivation and psychological wellbeing in a group of triathletes. Findings showed that the intervention reduced irrational beliefs and participants experienced increased self-determined motivation, vitality, and sleep. However, the effects on wellbeing are unclear, as it was not explicitly measured.

2.5.4 Stress Management and Coping Interventions

Sport is a highly demanding environment and athletes experience multiple personal, organisational, and competitive stressors (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012). As such, numerous stress management and coping interventions have been developed for athletes. For example, Rumbold et al. (2012) included 64 intervention studies in their review of athlete stress management interventions. However, this review was conducted 10 years ago. As such, the number of stress management interventions has increased since then (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2015; Laureano et al., 2014), but there has not

been a more recent review. Although not designed to target athlete mental health specifically, some studies have found that stress management and coping interventions may have positive impact on athlete mental health.

For example, Dubuc-Charbonneau and Durand-Bush (2015) found that a self-regulation intervention delivered to a group of eight student athletes experiencing burnout successfully reduced levels of stress and burnout, and participants also reported increased wellbeing (measured using the WEMWBS). Further, Laureano et al. (2014) evaluated the effectiveness of an intervention on coping self-efficacy and psychological wellbeing in a group of university rugby players. Compared to a control group, the intervention group reported significantly higher scores for problem-focused coping, ability to manage negative thoughts and emotions and obtain support from family and friends, and higher levels of overall happiness. Similarly, an evaluation of a coping skills intervention with 88 student athletes found that the intervention group showed greater improved coping skills and reduced anxiety levels from baseline, compared to a control group (Fogaca, 2019).

2.5.5 Critical Review of Athlete Mental Health Intervention Literature

The rapidly growing number of sport mental health interventions has led to the publication of several review papers (Breslin et al., 2017; Breslin et al., 2022; Sutcliffe et al., 2021). Such reviews have focused on the overall effectiveness, as well as the methodological quality, of sport mental health interventions. However, existing reviews include interventions that target parents, coaches, and practitioners (Breslin et al., 2017; Breslin et al., 2022) or exclude interventions designed for elite athletes (Sutcliffe et al., 2021). Thus, the following section draws upon and expands the findings of these reviews to provide a critical review of existing *athlete* mental health interventions.

2.5.5.1 Effectiveness of Athlete Mental Health Interventions. Overall, it appears that athlete mental health interventions are effective in facilitating a range of positive mental health outcomes, including increased knowledge and awareness of mental health, decreased stigma relating to mental illness and help-seeking, increased confidence in seeking help for and supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties, increased coping self-efficacy, decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression, and increased wellbeing. In terms of effect sizes, it appears that athlete mental health interventions have moderate to strong effects on knowledge, help-seeking, and stigmatising attitudes towards mental illness, although reported effect sizes for symptom reduction and increased wellbeing are often small to moderate (Sutcliffe et al., 2019). Further, a lack of

longitudinal follow-up across many studies means that it is unclear how long-lasting any effects may be (Breslin et al., 2022).

Additionally, findings across studies are often inconsistent. In relation to stigma for example, Gulliver et al. (2012) found that an athlete MHL intervention reduced anxiety-related but not depression-related stigma, whereas Chow et al. (2020) found that an athlete MHL intervention reduced stigma around help-seeking for personal mental health difficulties, but not public stigmatisation of mental illness. Moreover, inconsistencies are also prevalent across separate studies that have evaluated the same intervention. For instance, Liddle et al. (2019) found that the HOAM component of AOTG was effective in reducing stigmatising attitudes towards mental illness, whereas Vella et al. (2020) found no effect of AOTG on stigma.

Finally, the effects of athlete mental health interventions on wellbeing appear to be limited. For example, Breslin et al. (2018) found no impact of SOMI on athlete wellbeing and Vella et al. (2020) only found small effects of AOTG on wellbeing. Baltzell and Alchtar (2014) found that the MMTS decreased participants' negative affect but had no impact on levels of positive affect. One reason that interventions report a lack of impact on wellbeing may be due to a ceiling effect, meaning that high levels of athlete wellbeing pre-intervention limited the amount of variation in wellbeing scores when comparing pre- and post-intervention scores. Indeed, Breslin et al. (2018) measured wellbeing using the WEMWBS and, although a validation study found no evidence of a ceiling effect in a population sample (Tennant et al., 2007), evidence suggests that the prevalence of flourishing is significantly higher for athlete populations than the general population (e.g., Kuettel et al., 2021; Van Slingerland et al., 2018). As such, this raises the important question as to whether general measures of wellbeing such as the WEMWBS and the MHC-SF are appropriate for use in sport.

2.5.5.2 Methodological Quality of Athlete Mental Health Intervention Studies.

In terms of methodological quality, Breslin et al. (2017) found that the majority of studies included in their review were methodologically weak and had a high risk of bias. Recognising that an increasing interest in protecting and promoting mental health within sport has led to a substantial growth in the number of mental health interventions, Breslin et al. (2022) recently carried out an updated review of the literature to encompass additional studies that had been published since their initial review, as well as the inclusion of mental health and wellbeing intervention studies that targeted parents. The updated review concluded that although quality was higher and there was a lower risk of bias in

more recent intervention studies, certain methodological issues remained that future studies should aim to address. Specifically, Breslin et al. (2022) argued that, aside from the recent adaptation of SOMI to incorporate the IBC model (Breslin et al., 2021), there is a lack of theory driven and evidence-based interventions. According to De Silva et al. (2014), the integration of relevant theory into interventions help ensure that they are effective, sustainable, and scalable. Thus, a lack of theoretical grounding may help to explain the inconsistent findings and small effect sizes across existing athlete mental health intervention studies.

In addition, Breslin and colleagues highlighted that, with the notable exception of AOTG (Vella et al., 2018), the focus of many athlete mental health interventions remains narrow and there is a need for interventions that go beyond the athlete (Breslin et al., 2022). The need for interventions that target multiple levels of influence is also suggested by Purcell et al. (2019; 2022) who argue that athlete wellbeing interventions must consider the wider ecological system that surrounds the athlete to be effective. Illustrating how targeting the wider network that surrounds athletes may support their wellbeing, Sebbens et al. (2016) found that increasing mental health awareness in elite sport staff significantly reduced help-seeking stigma by creating an environment where athletes feel comfortable asking for help. Further, parent interventions can help create a supportive environment to support their child's mental health (e.g., Hurley et al., 2018; 2020). Similarly, interventions aimed at helping coaches deal with stress of sport can help them become better able to support athletes' mental health and wellbeing (Altfield et al., 2015). Additionally, Gabana et al. (2022) found that the inclusion of coaches in a gratitude intervention had significant positive impact on athlete wellbeing outcomes.

In relation to how athlete mental health interventions have been evaluated, most have typically assessed effectiveness via the use of quantitative measures only. This approach to evaluation is limited in that, although quantitative measures indicate whether an intervention has (or has not) been effective in achieving certain outcomes, it provides limited evidence as to why (or why not) these outcomes may have occurred. Further, sole reliance on quantitative evaluation of intervention studies may miss effects that are not captured by the measures that have been chosen. For example, Kouali et al. (2020b) evaluated the effectiveness of an imagery intervention on eudaimonic wellbeing using both quantitative and qualitative methods. Statistical analysis of the quantitative measures showed a small increase in wellbeing for only two of the five participants, however, in the qualitative evaluation, all 5 participants found the intervention to be beneficial and

perceived that it had a positive impact on their wellbeing. Therefore, it may be that the imagery intervention had positive effects that were not captured by measures used.

Finally, there is a substantial lack of engagement with the target population prior to intervention delivery (e.g., Ajilchi et al., 2019; Breslin et al., 2018; Kouali et al., 2020b). This means that interventions are rarely tailored for those who receive the intervention. One exception is the RISE programme (Dowell et al., 2021), which used a community-based participatory research framework to develop an intervention aimed at reducing anxiety and depression symptom severity, as well as anger related misconduct. Evaluation showed that all participants rated the sessions highly on helpfulness, enjoyment, ease of understanding and usefulness. Further, there were extremely low rates of attrition throughout the intervention (only 1 participant dropped out over the 4-month study duration). Thus, it appears that the community-based participatory framework under which the intervention was designed helped to ensure that the intervention was relevant, useful, and enjoyable for the athletes.

2.5.6 Section Summary

Over the past five years, the number of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions being reported within the literature has increased significantly (Breslin et al., 2022). Such interventions have sought to protect and promote athlete wellbeing by increasing mental health literacy (e.g., Breslin et al., 2021; Vella et al., 2018), teaching mindfulness (e.g., Ajilchi et al., 2019; Baltzell & Alchtar, 2014), and stress management (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau & Durand-Bush, 2015; Laureano et al., 2014) techniques, or by reducing symptom severity (e.g., Donohue et al., 2018; Dowell et al., 2021). In terms of their effectiveness, athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions have been shown to facilitate a wide range of positive outcomes, such as increased knowledge and awareness of mental health, decreased stigma relating to mental illness and help-seeking, increased confidence in seeking help for and supporting those experiencing mental health difficulties, increased coping self-efficacy, decreased symptoms of anxiety and depression, and increased wellbeing.

However, particularly in relation to wellbeing, there have been inconsistent findings, reported effect sizes are small, and there is a lack of longitudinal research that means it is unclear how long-lasting any positive effects on wellbeing are. Further, previous athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions have tended to be narrow in scope (i.e., they only target the athlete). There is also a lack of interventions that are theory-driven, evidence-based, and engage with the target population to identify needs and

preferences prior to intervention delivery. Finally, there is a significant lack of qualitative research that has evaluated the effectiveness of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions, which means that additional outcomes to those anticipated may have been missed by quantitative measures, as these will have been selected based on their ability to measure intended outcomes.

2.6 Chapter Summary

Wellbeing is a complex multi-faceted construct that encompasses subjective evaluations of life, positive-negative affectivity balance, and psychological and social functioning (e.g., Huppert & So, 2009; Keyes et al., 2002). However, a lack of a universally agreed theoretical definition of wellbeing has led to the introduction of multiple operational definitions that encompass similar, yet slightly different, components of wellbeing (e.g., Diener et al., 2010; Keyes et al., 2002; Seligman, 2011). Additionally, the wider wellbeing literature indicates that wellbeing can be global (i.e., overall) or domain-specific (e.g., work, sport) (e.g., Diener et al., 2010). Moreover, cultural differences may impact how wellbeing is understood and experienced (e.g., Diener et al., 2018). As such, there is a question as to whether wellbeing is best conceptualised as a process (rather than an outcome), that encompasses the social and environmental context in which an individual is situated (e.g., Atkinson, 2013).

Within sport, there is increasing interest in protecting and promoting athlete wellbeing (Larsen et al., 2021). Reflecting the wider literature, wellbeing in sport has been poorly defined and there is a lack of consistency with regards to how wellbeing is conceptualised (Lundqvist, 2011). A limited number of studies have attempted to conceptualise wellbeing at the sport-level (e.g., Ashfield et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2018; Lundqvist & Sandin, 2014, MacDougall et al., 2016; Pankow et al., 2021), however these studies have chosen to explore wellbeing using different wellbeing-related terminology (i.e., flourishing, thriving, languishing, striving) that may or may not represent the same construct (i.e., high or low levels of wellbeing) and the lack of consistency and clarity in the use of terminology makes it difficult to coherently synthesise the findings of these studies. Further, previous studies have contextualised wellbeing across a range of sports, which may overlook some of the sport-specific nuances that exist within different sports.

In contrast to the limited studies that have attempted to conceptualise and contextualise athlete wellbeing in sport, a large body of work has explored the factors related to athlete wellbeing. Studies highlight a wide range of personal, social, and environmental factors that facilitate, protect, or hinder athlete wellbeing, although the

findings are not always consistent and sometimes contradictory, with some factors (e.g., athletic identity) positively and negatively linked to wellbeing. This may be because many of the studies conducted have been quantitative, cross-sectional, and have looked at the association between specific factors and wellbeing at a single point in time. This approach does not consider that wellbeing can be viewed as a process as well as an outcome, and there is potential for factors to interact and influence each other to affect wellbeing in different ways.

Finally, there is a growing recognition of the need for interventions that aim to protect and promote athlete wellbeing and mental health. So far, extant interventions have mainly focused on improving mental health literacy and encouraging help-seeking behaviours, by increasing awareness of common mental disorders and available support, although other interventions have focused on reducing symptom severity, improving stress management and coping ability, and increasing athlete mindfulness. Studies evaluating the effectiveness of athlete mental health interventions suggest that extant interventions are effective in facilitating a wide range of outcomes, however the findings are inconsistent and effect sizes are often small, particularly in relation to wellbeing and mental health outcomes. Further, although the quality of interventions is improving, there is still a lack of evidence-based, theory-driven interventions. To ensure that interventions are relevant, useful, and effective, there is also a need for interventions that engage the intended recipients prior to delivery, as well as interventions that move beyond the athlete and target multiple levels of influence.

2.7 Thesis Aims

Elite sport is a fast-paced, dynamic environment (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017) and athletes operating within this environment are faced with a wide variety of sport-specific stressors that have the potential to detrimentally impact on their wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Rice et al., 2016). Subsequently, the wellbeing of elite athletes has been highlighted as a key concern (Grey-Thompson, 2017) and research interest in the topic of athlete wellbeing has grown rapidly over the past 5 to 10 years (e.g., Larsen et al., 2021). However, despite the presence of an extensive body of literature, there are several limitations within the extant athlete wellbeing literature that require addressing. In particular, the elite sport environment is unique and, as such, there is a need to contextualise wellbeing within the context of elite sport. Although there is some literature that has attempted to achieve this, there is a need for more studies that explore athlete wellbeing within the context of specific sports. In addition, there is a lack of

research that has explored how athlete wellbeing is understood and recognised within the context of elite sport and few studies have considered athlete wellbeing as a process as well as an outcome. Finally, although a significant number of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions have been presented within the literature, many of these are limited in that they are rarely evidence-based or underpinned by theory. Further, a limited number of interventions have targeted wider than the individual athlete and only a handful of previous interventions have engaged with intended recipients to identify needs and preferences prior to delivery.

With this in mind, the present thesis had two main aims; (1) to gain an in-depth understanding of high-performance swimmers' experiences of wellbeing in terms of how it is understood, recognised, and affected within the context of high-performance swimming, and, (2) to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting high-performance swimmers' wellbeing.

Chapter 3: Understanding and Recognising the Wellbeing of High-Performance Swimmers[1]

3.1 Introduction

Due to the considerable time and emotional commitment required by athletes within high-performance sport, wellbeing in the sporting domain is likely to have a substantial impact on the overall wellbeing of athletes (Lundqvist, 2011). Recognising this, Lundqvist (2011) proposed a theoretical model which integrated global and sport-specific wellbeing and highlighted the various sport-related emotional (e.g., sport satisfaction, sport-related affect), psychological (e.g., purpose in sport, growth as an athlete), and social (e.g., social acceptance in sport) components related to wellbeing in this context. Since then, there has been a substantial increase in research focused on athlete wellbeing. Some studies have sought to contextualise athlete wellbeing, highlighting growth (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), control (Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), and social relationships (Brown et al., 2018) as core components of, or elements that characterise, athlete wellbeing. Other studies have focused on identifying specific protective and risk factors related to athlete wellbeing and mental health, with a review of studies published between 1998 and 2018 highlighting 82 correlates related to the mental health of elite athletes (Kuettel & Larson, 2020). Further, a number of studies have sought to develop sport-specific measures of wellbeing. For example, based on Keyes' (2002) model, Foster and Chow (2018) developed the Sport Mental Health Continuum Short Form (SMHC-SF) and Kouali et al. (2020a) adapted Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Wellbeing (SPWB) to create the Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Sport Scale (EWBSS).

However, despite the substantial growth in research interest into athlete wellbeing, there are a number of areas that still require further consideration. One area in particular is related to the contextualisation of wellbeing within sport. So far, previous studies focused on contextualising wellbeing within sport have mainly looked at the concept in terms of flourishing (e.g., Stander et al., 2017) or thriving (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014) – the highest levels of wellbeing. Yet, wellbeing occurs on a continuum from low to high (e.g., Keyes, 2002) and, within the U.K. for example, only around 20% of

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the population can be categorised as flourishing (Hone et al., 2014). Thus, it is necessary to contextualise wellbeing at all levels to fully understand what wellbeing looks like across the continuum. Such understanding is needed to facilitate a more nuanced and effective recognition of declining wellbeing levels, allowing for earlier intervention if necessary.

In addition, previous studies have tended to contextualise athlete wellbeing across a variety of sports (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Stander et al., 2017), which means particular sport-specific factors that affect how athlete wellbeing is understood, experienced, and recognised may be overlooked. Evidence from the public health literature recommends that understanding wellbeing in specific contexts is key to delivering successful interventions (e.g., O'Cathain et al., 2019). Hence, there is a need to contextualise wellbeing within specific sports to ensure that interventions designed to enhance athlete wellbeing are relevant, well-received, and successful in achieving its aims.

3.1.2 The Present Study

Recognising the importance of considering and developing a sport-specific understanding of wellbeing, the present study sought to understand wellbeing within the context of high-performance swimming. Specifically, the purpose of the present study was to explore the wellbeing experiences of high-performance swimmers, in terms of how wellbeing was understood, experienced, and recognised. The study was guided by two research questions: 1) how is wellbeing understood and experienced by swimmers within a high-performance swimming environment? and, 2) how can different levels of swimmer wellbeing be recognised within this environment?

3.2 Method

3.2.1 Methodological Approach and Philosophical Underpinnings

I used Interpretive Description (ID; Thorne, 2016) as the methodological approach for this study. ID aims to produce findings with real world implications (Thorne, 2008) and is particularly useful for examining topics where there is a need for the generation of meaningful new knowledge, within the context of the wider environment in which it occurs (Thorne, 2016). ID is situated within an interpretivist paradigm, underpinned by a relativist ontology and a constructivist epistemology. That is, people construct their own subjective and multiple realities (e.g., Sparkes & Smith, 2014). However, there may be shared experiences across these multiple realities which may only be known through the co-creation of knowledge, because of the interactions between the participants and the researcher. As such, ID acknowledges the important role that the researcher plays in shaping and constructing the meaning of these shared realities (Thorne, 2016). Reflecting

the ontological and epistemological underpinnings of ID, it is accepted that any claims made via the use of ID, do not represent a definitive truth, rather a 'tentative truth claim,' that is open to future revision and modification (Thorne, 2004).

Although initially developed to give credibility to qualitative nursing research which did not fit the rigid guidelines of other qualitative methodologies (e.g., grounded theory, ethnography), the use of ID has become increasingly popular in sport and exercise psychology research (e.g., Clark et al., 2011; Neely & Holt, 2014). ID draws on certain elements of ethnography, grounded theory, and naturalistic enquiry; however, it has the ultimate aim of producing findings with real-life implication, which differentiates it from these other qualitative methodologies (Thorne, 2008). Ultimately, ID aims to produce findings that both advance theoretical understanding and have practical applicability for the setting in which the data were collected. As such, it was considered to be an appropriate methodology for the present study, to enable the conceptualisation and contextualisation of wellbeing within a high-performance swimming setting and generate knowledge that would be of benefit to coaches, practitioners, and swimmers.

3.2.2 Procedure

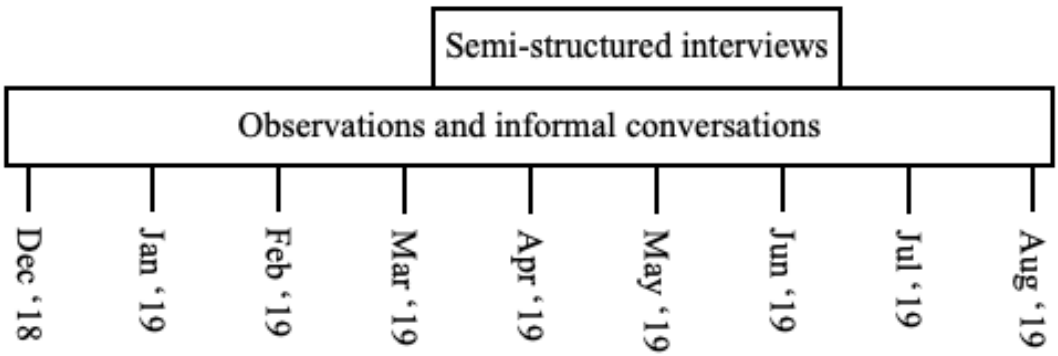
The study was primarily conducted across two high-performance swimming clubs within the United Kingdom, although observations and informal conversations occasionally took place at other clubs (n=3) during the study to provide further context to the interview data. High-performance swimming clubs are those in which swimmers on the performance pathway complete their training, while accessing full-time coaches and additional resources such as physiotherapy, psychology, and performance lifestyle support. The performance pathway is run by the National Governing Body (NGB) and involves a programme of training that aims to support swimmers on their journey into elite swimming. The pathway includes various stages that reflect the swimmer's current level of competition and their training and development needs. Typically, swimmers enter the pathway around age 12 years and, depending on their progress, remain on the pathway throughout their swimming career.

Institutional ethics approval was gained and permission to attend the various swimming clubs was granted from the relevant NGB prior to starting data collection. Subsequently, I collected data using observations, informal conversations, and formal interviews which allowed for methodological triangulation – a technique that is recommended in ID research to help overcome the limitations of a single data collection method (Thorne, 2016). To achieve this, I was embedded within swimming environments

for a total of nine months; three months prior to starting the formal interviews and a further six months during the formal data collection and analysis phase (see Figure 3.1 for a timeline schematic). During this time, I collected observational data during morning and evening training sessions, squad training days, competitions, staff training courses and monthly team meetings. Observations and informal conversations also continued for approximately six weeks after the completion of the formal interviews. Thus, the data collection process was an iterative one, where the initial observations and informal conversations informed the interview questions, which in turn influenced the focus of future observations and conversations, which then influenced further interviews.

Figure 3.1

Timeline Schematic of Study 1



3.2.3 Participants (Formal Interview)

Maximal variation purposeful sampling was used to ensure that formal interview data were collected from a range of individuals with rich experience of wellbeing within high-performance swimming. This type of sampling is recommended for ID studies because the inclusion of multiple perspectives should enhance the credibility of any claims of 'probable truth' which may be identified from the data (Thorne, 2016). In addition to swimmers, I made the decision to collect data from coaches, parents, and practitioners, as I felt they would be able to provide further insight into swimmers' wellbeing, particularly around how swimmers' wellbeing could be recognised within a high-performance environment. Thus, individuals were considered for the study if they were: (a) a swimmer currently or previously part of the performance pathway, (b) a current coach working within the performance pathway, (c) a member of support staff regularly working with

swimmers on the performance pathway (see below for further detail), or, (d) a parent of a swimmer currently on the performance pathway. To ensure heterogeneity within the sample, swimmers and coaches from all levels of the performance pathway were invited to participate in the study. I approached swimmers, parents, and support staff directly (either face-to-face or via email) to ascertain their interest in participating in the study, while coaches received an email from the NGB's Performance Director. To maintain confidentiality, all interested individuals were asked to contact me to arrange a date, time, and location for an interview.

In total, I conducted formal interviews with eight swimmers, five coaches, five support staff, and three parents. Of the swimmers, five were male and three were female, with an age range of 16-22 years. The swimmers could be categorised as competitive-elite or successful-elite using the criteria suggested by Swann et al. (2015). Of the coaches, four were male and one female. Three coached swimmers at the early stages of the pathway, and two coached swimmers in the later stages. However, the higher-level coaches also had previous experience of working with swimmers lower than the level they currently coached. With regard to the support staff, three were female and two were male and they held various sport science roles within the NGB (i.e., psychology and sports science practitioner roles[2]). They worked with swimmers at least once a week and had been in their current role for at least a year. All parents were female and related to swimmers who were in the earlier pathway stages.

3.2.4 Data Collection

3.2.4.1 Formal Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were completed with 21 participants, with the content of the interviews guided by the existing wellbeing literature (Dodge et al., 2012; Keyes, 2002), which acted as a theoretical scaffold (Thorne et al., 2004). The use of a theoretical scaffold is in line with recommendations from Thorne et al. (2004), who encourage researchers to be aware of the existing literature, and use it to shape and guide a study, while remaining open to any new and novel information.

Prior to conducting any interviews, I piloted an interview guide with a former swimmer to verify the relevance of the questions, ascertain whether they addressed the necessary areas, and ensure the questions were clear. The purpose of using a semi-

[2] For confidentiality reasons, the specific roles of the support staff who participated in the study cannot be revealed.

structured interview guide was not to prescribe the direction of the interview entirely, but to serve as a prompt for the interviewer when necessary to ensure all key questions were asked. Following the pilot interview, I made several amendments to the interview guide. Specifically, after the pilot interview, I felt the main questions placed specific focus on low levels of wellbeing and thus did not provide sufficient information regarding moderate or high levels of wellbeing. Thus, amended interview questions focused on participants' wellbeing experiences at all levels.

Written consent was obtained from each participant before they took part in the interview. Within our institution, parental assent is only required for those individuals aged under 16 years and, as there were no participants under this age included in the study, there was no requirement for parental assent. Once consent had been gained, interviews began with introductory questions to help participants relax and build rapport (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; e.g., "Tell me about your swimming career so far") before moving on to the main questions. For swimmer participants, main questions focused on their own wellbeing experiences within their sport. For example, swimmers were asked questions such as "Tell me about a time when you feel you have experienced high levels of wellbeing", with follow-up questions such as "How were you feeling at that time?" and "What thoughts did you experience at that time?". For coaches, support staff, and parents, main questions were focused around how they identified and judged wellbeing levels of the swimmers they worked with or parented. For example, participants were asked "What type of behaviours do you notice in swimmers who you perceive to be experiencing low levels of wellbeing?", with follow up questions including "How do you feel this affects their performance?" and "How do feel this affects their social interactions?". A copy of the interview questions for each participant group can be found in Appendix A. Both verbal and non-verbal probes (e.g., asking for clarification, head nodding, smiling) were used to encourage the participant to continue talking and maintain the flow of the conversation.

During the interviews, I used a responsive interviewing style (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which allowed the participant some control over the direction of the conversation, and exploration of novel areas not included in the interview guide. As such, the direction of each interview was led by the participants' responses, and I choose to follow up on responses that I perceived to be relevant to the research question. Where follow-up questions produced insightful answers, the interview guide was amended to include this question. Once all the topics contained in the interview guide had been covered, as well as any novel areas that had arisen, I asked participants if there was anything else they wanted

to discuss with regards to the research topic. The recording was then stopped and participants were thanked for sharing their experiences. Interview length ranged from 26 to 76 minutes (M = 50 min; SD = 13.77).

3.2.4.2 Observations and Informal Conversations. According to Thorne et al. (2004), observations can help contextualise findings and avoid an overemphasis on interview data. In total, I spent approximately 200 hours observing swimmers, coaches, and practitioners within the swimming environment. All formal interview participants were included in the observations, as well as other swimmers, coaches, and practitioners who did not participate in the formal interviews. The majority (approximately 160 hours) of observations took place at training sessions, with the remaining hours at squad education days and competitions. An additional 40 hours of observation was conducted at specific staff training courses (e.g., mental health first aid) and monthly team meetings where swimmer wellbeing formed part of the meeting agenda. As such, observing these situations was beneficial to gaining an understanding of how wellbeing was being discussed within the environment by coaches and the wider support team.

Throughout the study, I used an 'unstructured' approach to observation (e.g., Mulhall, 2003). However, as Mulhall (2003) notes, the use of the term 'unstructured' may be misleading. Indeed, the use of unstructured observations did not mean there was a lack of structure to the way in which I recorded observations, rather it meant that I did not enter the field with a pre-determined list of behaviours to observe and/or record. Instead, I documented all behaviours, interactions, and elements of the environment considered relevant to the research topic (e.g., social interactions, body language). For example, I noted how swimmers' social interaction levels changed from day to day, and at times, between morning training sessions and afternoon training sessions. This information was used to contextualise interview data, act as a trigger for subsequent interview questions, and test and refine the themes generated during the interview analysis. Further, the observations provided the opportunity to engage in informal conversations, which facilitated understanding of participants' experiences more clearly.

As Silverman (2015) argued, the use of observation is suited to studies that focus on organised social groups, due to the ability to record information regarding how individuals behave within the wider context of the social setting in which they are situated. Therefore, given that performance swimming involves multiple and frequent social interactions, and is governed by an organisational framework (NGB), I considered observations a useful data collection method for this study. In particular, the use of

observation allowed me to consider how the perceptions expressed by participants in the interviews may have been *influenced* by the performance swimming environment, whilst simultaneously allowing for consideration of how the perceptions expressed by the participants may be *influencing* the environment. In addition, observations provided me with the opportunity to test and refine the themes generated during the data analysis phase of the study. Further, as Byrne (2004) suggested, interviews do not produce a factual account of a person's experiences, rather a representation of those experiences as interpreted and communicated by the interviewee (and also as interpreted by the interviewer). Therefore, by combining the formal interviews with observational data, I was able to better understand how the environment shaped the participants' recall of events, how they interpreted some of their experiences, and in some cases, how I had interpreted the same experience differently.

Throughout the observation period, my role as an observer changed from one of 'complete observer' to one of 'observer as participant' (Gold, 1958). Initially, I entered the field with the expectation of remaining on the side-lines, recording fieldnotes during each period of time I spent within the environment. However, I quickly became aware that this approach would not give me the information I needed. In particular, recording observations whilst in the field hindered opportunities for informal conversations. As such, my role shifted, and I spent my time participating in activities (e.g., helping coaches keep times for swimmers), whilst also keeping a mental note of any significant events, interactions, or incidents that I documented as soon as possible after leaving the environment (e.g., Thorpe & Olive, 2016).

During the observation period, I had numerous informal conversations with swimmers, coaches, and sport science staff which took place before, after, or during training sessions. The specific topics of the conversations were broad and wide-ranging, but they encouraged participants to reflect on their previous and current experiences within the high-performance swimming environment (e.g., how they were feeling today, thoughts around upcoming and previous events). These conversations were not recorded and transcribed, but relevant information was written as fieldnotes or reflections, and included in the data analysis. I made all individuals aware that they were being observed as part of a research project and that information from these observations and any informal conversations may be recorded via fieldnotes and used as data. Everyone I interacted with had an opportunity to indicate if they did not want any of their information to be included in the study, although none indicated any concerns aligned with the ethical approval for

this study. Only quotes from the formal interview participants (i.e., participants who have consented for their data to be used in this way) are presented in the results. Data from the informal conversations are presented in excepts from field notes and are integrated with researcher reflections.

Extensive fieldnotes were collected throughout my observations and informal interviews, written at the end of each period of time spent in the environment. The use of fieldnotes play an essential role within observational studies, acting as both a record of who, what, where, and when, as well as a record of how the observer interprets and responds to these factors (Emerson et al., 2001). In addition, Maharaj (2016) argued the use of fieldnotes may facilitate 'critical reflection'. During the present study, the use of fieldnotes enabled me to recognise and identify any biases I held, as well as reflect on how my attitudes towards people and events changed throughout the study. For example, when I first entered the field, I initially recorded feeling unwelcome when I had interactions with a particular individual. However, throughout the study, I became aware that this individual did not appear to hold a personal dislike for me, rather they simply interacted in a manner that was different to the one I was used to. This was an important reflection for me, as it subsequently changed how I interpreted their interactions with me (and others) during the later stages of the study.

Within the literature, there is substantial variation in how fieldnotes may be recorded and used as data (Emerson et al., 2001). In the present study, I wrote fieldnotes in the form of reflections, including information such as the location, date, time, as well as observational data about interactions with and between the swimmers, coaches, staff, and parents. Rather than keeping separate fieldnotes for observations and reflections, I chose to combine my notes about what individuals did and said, together with my thoughts and reactions. This approach has been endorsed by various scholars (e.g., Emmerson et al., 1995; Lofland & Lofland, 1995), who argue that observations reflect an interaction between the environments and the observer and as such, they cannot be separated from how they are interpreted by the observer. Furthermore, this combined approach to observation and reflection fits with my interpretivist approach to research that underpins the present study.

3.2.5 Data Analysis

I recorded all formal interviews electronically and transcribed them verbatim. The transcription process began shortly after each interview, and where possible, before the next interview. This data collection and transcription process was chosen for two reasons.

Firstly, it allowed for data immersion, and thus formed the first stage of the data analysis process. Secondly, it enabled me to reflect on the interview questions and amend the interview guides where necessary, for example, to include additional questions around common themes that participants discussed. When formal transcription was not possible due to limited time between interviews, I listened to the audio file of the interview and initial analysis was conducted based on this data (e.g., Holt et al., 2012).

In relation to data analysis, Thorne (2016) presents readers with some guidance, but acknowledges that there are other existing data analysis methods that are suitable for use within an ID framework. For the present study, I analysed interview data using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2013; 2019) - a method that is theoretically flexible and suited to analysing data from multiple data sources (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Moreover, RTA seeks to generate patterns of shared meaning organised around a particular theme or 'central organising concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, as the aim of an ID study is to explore shared meaning within individual experiences (Thorne, 2016), the use of RTA as an analysis method was considered a good fit for this study.

The data analysis process involved moving through the six main phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2019). The first stage, familiarisation, began during the transcription process described earlier and continued throughout the analysis process, where I read and re-read the transcripts, as well as returning to the audio recordings at times. The second stage, data coding, involved me reading the transcripts line-by-line whilst highlighting and assigning descriptive codes to parts of the transcripts which were relevant to the research questions. For example, during this stage, I used codes such as "smiling as a sign of + wellbeing," and "withdrawal indicative of low wellbeing." Generating initial themes was the third stage, which involved the grouping together of related codes under a 'central organising concept' that captured the essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

The fourth stage, reviewing and developing themes, involved me taking the themes back to the raw data and checking whether they were a good reflection of the data. The fifth stage involved refining, defining, and naming themes with titles that adequately reflected the sub-themes within them. For example, I originally labelled the second theme, "Wellbeing characterised by change" as "Wellbeing characterised by consistent changes." However, this suggested that there were universally consistent changes by which various wellbeing levels could be recognised and, although there was some consistency, the specific changes that participants experienced were individual. As such, I removed the word consistent.

Finally, themes were written up and presented in a coherent way, which addressed the research questions. Although this process is described step-by-step, the process was an iterative one, which involved moving between phases until the research team were satisfied the themes were sufficiently developed. For example, throughout the analysis process, I initially used observational and informal interview data to contextualise the themes as they were being developed. Then, as the analysis progressed, informal conversations were used to discuss the themes with participants to see if they made sense and reflected swimmer wellbeing within this context. Where there was conflict (e.g., tensions between interview and observational data), swimmers' perspectives were prioritised, and the iterative process between data collection continued to encourage a fuller exploration of these experiences. Individual differences were accounted for in the analysis and included in the presented results.

3.2.6 Positionality

Reflexivity is a core component of RTA that distinguishes it from other types of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019). According to Alvesson and Skoldberg (2017), engaging in reflexive practice involves 'turning inwards' to understand how researcher positionality may have influenced the study. This is important as researcher positionality influences the entirety of the research process, from motivations for conducting the research, the relationships that are formed between the researcher and research participants, as well as the impact of the researcher on data collection, analysis, and presentation (Folkes, 2022). As such, the purpose of this section is to provide a brief insight into my motivations for conducting athlete wellbeing research, as well as a brief overview of my personal characteristics and previous sporting experience. However, as Folkes (2022) notes, positionality statements should involve more than presenting readers with a "shopping list of characteristics and stating if these are shared or not with participants" (p.1). This is because positionality is not fixed, rather researcher positionality (and therefore how the research is influenced) is fluid and transient, changing over time and depending on the situation and people who are present (Reyes, 2020). As such, I will also share how my positionality changed over the course of this study and how I perceived this to have impacted the research.

With regards to my motivations for choosing to pursue a PhD in athlete wellbeing, a positive psychology module I took as part of my undergraduate degree sparked an interest in the topic of wellbeing. Subsequently, I undertook an MSc in clinical psychology which, combined with paid work supporting individuals with complex mental illnesses,

furthered my interest in the potential of wellbeing as a way to protect against and help individuals recover from mental illness. Prior to enrolling on the PhD, I had little knowledge of competitive sport, apart from some vicarious knowledge that I had gained through a friend who previously swam competitively. However, after working with individuals whose mental illnesses often left them largely unable to participate in society, I was intrigued by the idea that successful athletes might struggle with their mental health. This led me to apply for a funded PhD exploring the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers, for which I have written this thesis.

In terms of my personal characteristics and previous sporting experience, I am a white, British, female, with no prior experience of competitive swimming (or sport in general). Further, before beginning this study, I had very little knowledge of swimmer wellbeing beyond what I had previously read in the literature since I started the PhD. Therefore, at the outset of the project, due to my lack of knowledge and experience related to competitive swimming, I could be considered an 'outsider.' However, in some aspects, I could also be considered an 'insider.' Specifically, I was white, British, and female – characteristics that I shared with the majority of participants who took part in the study.

In relation to how my positionality changed and the impact this had on the research, my positionality presented initial challenges in that it took some time to understand and become familiar with swimming-related terms, although at times I felt that my position as a non-swimmer led to some swimmers being more open with me about times when they struggled with their wellbeing, as I was not seen as a threat to their career. In addition, my initial position as a non-swimmer also meant that my observations were not clouded by personal experience and, as such, I was open to seeing a wider perspective (Fay, 1996). However, through being embedded within the high-performance swimming environment, my position over time changed to 'knowledgeable outsider' and, gradually, more of an 'insider.' Again, this shift came with both benefits and challenges – as I became familiar with certain terminology and the structure of the sport (i.e., competition season, training schedules), I spent less time asking for clarification and as a result, my data became richer. However, during participant recruitment and interviews, some participants felt that sharing their experiences might impact their selection opportunities and so it became even more pertinent that I emphasised that I was not involved in team selection processes.

In addition to data collection, my positionality also influenced how I engaged with the data during analysis. Specifically, my own wellbeing experiences influenced my interpretation of participant's experiences. For instance, in seeking to understand the

internal and external changes related to wellbeing, I reflected on the changes that I notice in myself and how these may be similar and/or different to changes participants talked about. For example, I reflected that when my own wellbeing is low, I tend to withdraw from social situations. In analysing the data, I found that this was similar for many swimmers included in the study, however, I noticed there were swimmers who, when their wellbeing was low, would seek social interaction and become 'louder', in order to distract themselves from their thoughts and feelings.

3.2.7 Ethical Considerations

When conducting the present study, there were a number of ethical considerations specific to the study design that extended beyond those typically required for institutional ethical approval (e.g., informed consent, data storage). In particular, there were specific sensitivities that needed to be considered in relation to data collection in the field setting. For instance, I would be conducting observations and interviews across numerous swimming pools, where there would sometimes be children under the age of 18. In addition, some of the building layouts required me to enter the changing rooms to gain poolside access. To mitigate any risks related to these points, the NGB conducted a DBS check prior to granting me access to the pool settings. Where possible, I did not enter changing rooms and in settings where accessing changing rooms was unavoidable (i.e., to gain poolside access), I did not conduct any observations, informal conversations, or interviews in these areas. With regards to the observations, all observations were in the form of written reflections based on my recollection of the events – I did not take any photographs or videos during the study. Further, I tried to conduct interviews and informal conversations in areas where there were other people nearby, such as poolside, in quiet corners of cafes, or in meeting rooms with glass walls, to safeguard both myself and the participants. However, to protect participant confidentiality and anonymity, all participants had the final choice as to where they wanted like the informal conversation or interview to take place (with the aforementioned exception of changing rooms).

In addition to ethical sensitivities regarding the physical environment in which the study was conducted, there were also ethical considerations related to the research topic. Specifically, there was a risk that sharing wellbeing experiences (particularly reflecting on periods of low wellbeing) may have brought up difficult and unpleasant emotions, which had the potential to cause participants distress. Although I had extensive experience of providing emotional support to distressed individuals through previous volunteer work with two mental health charities, I attended a Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) course

early in the research process, to refresh my knowledge, skills, and confidence in supporting participants, if the need arose. Further, to reduce the likelihood of the research causing participants distress, I made sure to confirm with all participants that they felt comfortable talking about their wellbeing experiences (both positive and negative) at the beginning of each interview. In line with the idea that fieldwork involves the continuous implicit and explicit (re)negotiation of informed consent (see e.g., Klykken, 2021), I reconfirmed with participants that they were still happy for me to ask about their negative wellbeing experiences prior to asking those questions (explicit consent) and I also verbally checked in with participants throughout the interviews (e.g., asking "do you still feel comfortable sharing your experiences with me?"). In addition, I looked for non-verbal signs that participants may be uncomfortable or distressed (e.g., less eye contact, reluctance to answer questions), which may have indicated implicit dissent (e.g., Bourke & Loveridge., 2014). If participants became distressed during the interview, I followed the procedure located in Appendix B, which included pausing or stopping the interview, signposting and referral, and guidelines for debriefing and documentation of the incident.

As well as participant distress, there was the potential for the research to also negatively impact on my own wellbeing. For instance, at the more extreme end, there was potential for me to experience vicarious trauma (i.e., trauma experienced as a result of empathetic engagement with trauma victims) (e.g., Camacho, 2016). However, even if participants did not share traumatic experiences with me, discussing sensitive topics can be emotionally draining (e.g., Jackson et al., 2013; McGarrol, 2017) and there was the potential for the research to highlight my own vulnerabilities, which I may not have previously been aware of or ready to explore (e.g., Emerald & Carpenter, 2015). Thus, to minimise the potential negative impact of the research on my own wellbeing, I employed numerous strategies. Specifically, I tried not to schedule back-to-back interviews, and I rearranged interviews if I felt I would not have the capacity to take on the emotional labour of others, or manage participant distress. After each interview, I scheduled in time for self-care (e.g., going for a run, reading, socialising), as this has been shown to limit the negative impact of emotionally demanding research on researchers and also positively impact participants and the quality of the research findings (e.g., Kumar & Cavallaro, 2018). Similarly, during the data analysis phase, I checked in with myself each morning to ensure I had the mental capacity to re-visit transcripts. On days where I felt I lacked the capacity to do so, I rearranged my work to focus on a task that required less emotional labour. I also had regular supervisory contact where I was able to discuss how the research

was progressing and draw on their support if needed (e.g., to debrief after difficult conversations, ask advice on how to handle specific situations).

Lastly, it is important to acknowledge that researchers often hold multiple roles (e.g., researcher, practitioner, lecturer) (Bell, 2019). This means that it is possible that researchers and participants may have a relationship that extends beyond the research itself. With regards to the present study for example, I was employed as a teaching assistant during my PhD. As part of this role, I helped to deliver sport psychology seminars, and a number of the swimmers were students in this class. Although in some ways it was easy to make the distinction between my roles as researcher and teaching assistant (i.e., they took place in different settings, and I was not observing or interviewing during seminars), there were instances where I would engage in informal conversations with swimmers before or after the seminars. This posed an ethical dilemma related to which interactions were within the scope of the research, and which were not. For the present study, I did not record any of these informal conversation in my reflections, although I acknowledge that these interactions may have still influenced the research, as I may have subconsciously drawn on interactions when interpreting data, or constructing themes.

3.2.8 Methodological Rigour

Rather than employ a universal set of criteria for judging all qualitative research, it has been argued the rigour of qualitative research should be judged against criteria that are relevant to, and appropriate for, the philosophical and methodological frameworks within which the research is conducted (Sparkes & Smith, 2009; Smith et al., 2014). For this study, the four criteria that Thorne (2016) proposed for evaluating the quality of ID studies are considered. First, *epistemological integrity* is demonstrated, as the research question and my underlying philosophical beliefs led to the choice of ID as a suitable methodological framework. Subsequently, I made all research and analytical decisions within the guidelines of interpretive description to ensure methodological coherence. Such decisions included the study design, participant sampling method, data collection and analysis methods and the write-up of results.

Second, I ensured *representative credibility* via maximal variation sampling, methodological triangulation of data collection methods, and prolonged engagement within the environment, which allowed for rapport to be built with participants and encourage responses which were rich, descriptive, in-depth, and authentic (Harrison et al., 2001). Further, I actively sought contradictory examples during data analysis and included these

within the results, to acknowledge individual differences within the shared experience. I also discussed the ongoing results and observations with people in the environment, who were able to indicate the extent to which they appeared to fit with what they had witnessed.

Third, the use of examples of methodological and analytic decisions throughout the manuscript provide a clear *analytic logic*, by providing the reader with transparency regarding how decisions were made and how these may have influenced the findings which have been reported. Further, I have presented the results of the study using supporting data from the formal interviews, informal conversations, and researcher reflections, allowing the reader to see how different data collection methods may have been used in the construction of the results.

Finally, Thorne (2016) argues for *interpretive authority* to be made clear, in order to achieve trustworthiness. To achieve this, I completed a reflexive journal throughout the research process, which served to prompt recognition of how my own beliefs and prior understanding of wellbeing may have shaped the data collection and analysis. In addition, the research team acted as *critical friends* during the analysis, to challenge thinking, encourage reflexivity, and ensure findings were grounded in the data rather than, as Thorne (2016, p. 196) described, an 'over inscription of self.'

3.3 Results

The purpose of the present study was to explore the wellbeing experiences of high-performance swimmers, in terms of how wellbeing was understood, experienced, and recognised. Two main themes were developed: (1) wellbeing understood and experienced in relation to personal values and goals, and; (2) wellbeing characterised by change.

3.3.1 Theme 1. Wellbeing Understood and Experienced in Relation to Personal Values and Goals

Participants' interpretation of wellbeing varied and appeared to be influenced by their personal values (e.g., being in control and feeling supported) and goals (e.g., making a qualifying time), although there were some similarities in what participants understood wellbeing to mean. In particular, many participants associated wellbeing with happiness, as most participants associated high levels of wellbeing with feeling "happy", although feelings of happiness were related to personal values and goals. Reflecting the above, this theme comprises two sub-themes: (1) variation in the values and goals that underpin swimmers' understanding and experience of wellbeing, and; (2) the role of happiness in evaluating wellbeing in relation to personal values and goals.

3.3.1.1 Variation in the Values and Goals that Underpin Swimmers' Understanding and Experience of Wellbeing.

When asked what wellbeing meant, each participant defined wellbeing slightly differently. Emphasising this point, Support Staff 1 mentioned, "no one really understands [wellbeing], everyone kind of has their own definition." Indeed, although there were similarities, many swimmers had different beliefs about what comprises wellbeing. For example, Swimmer 1 felt, "wellbeing is like happiness really, and health" whereas Swimmer 7 felt that wellbeing was "physical as well, not just mental." For many, wellbeing was considered to be multi-faceted and listed multiple components that characterised wellbeing for them as individuals. For example, Swimmer 2 felt that wellbeing was, "the state of mind you're in" and "how you deal with things" and Swimmer 4 thought that wellbeing included, "being like happy mentally, physically, and maybe like emotionally."

In developing their understanding of wellbeing, swimmers tended to draw upon their own personal values. That is, things that they as an individual perceived as important, such as being in control, winning, or having good relationships with others, influenced how they understood and evaluated their own wellbeing. For instance, one swimmer indicated that their interpretation of wellbeing was one of feeling in control of a situation. Therefore, low levels of wellbeing were associated with "not being in control." Subsequently, this swimmer reiterated the consequences of feeling out of control:

> It makes you feel powerless, because you lose everything, it's like hitting a wall, it's like racing cars running out of grip, you hit the brakes, they lock up and you just go sliding off the track, that's what it feels like, it's not fun (Swimmer 5).

Contrastingly, Swimmer 3 identified that their meaning of wellbeing was "the support and stuff that I get from other people, like my coaches, my peers, and my family." As such, they commented that, "I think generally, the whole way through [my wellbeing] has been good because I do, like I've got a lot of support from my family." Additionally, fieldnotes describing an informal conversation between them and myself indicated that the swimmer valued hard work, and so although managing a job alongside swimming was challenging, they found it positive for their wellbeing. The fieldnote recorded:

> Spent some time chatting with [Swimmer] – talked about how they were tired from work. I asked how they managed to juggle work and swimming. [Swimmer] told me they find it hard sometimes but 'hard work is always worth it'... also said they'd struggle if they were just 'swimming, swimming, swimming.'

Moreover, in addition to personal values, it was clear that swimmers also understood and experienced wellbeing in relation to their goals. For example, one swimmer had been trying to qualify for a major games for a number of years, noting, “I’m still chasing that time that I’ve been after for three years, I’m still trying to do it” (Swimmer 2). As such, they felt that their wellbeing was closely linked to how well they performed in relation to that time. Speaking about this, the swimmer recalled how their wellbeing was negatively affected even though they had achieved personal best times, as they had still not made the qualifying time, “[I] swam best times, but obviously missed it [qualifying time], um, and obviously I was very upset” (Swimmer 2). Indeed, changes in wellbeing related to goals (especially performance goals) was something that was commonly observed during the study. One fieldnote recorded:

> First session back for all of the swimmers after trials and nearly a week of rest. Most swimmers seemed in a good mood, probably due to some really good performances... Only exception was [Swimmer]... had a quick chat with [them] after the session and said [they were] “disappointed” with performance... didn’t seem to want to chat too much about it but I could sense [they were] quite down compared to usual.

3.3.1.2 The Role of Happiness in Evaluating Wellbeing in Relation to Personal Values and Goals. Despite individual differences across participants’ interpretation of wellbeing, happiness was a consistent characteristic of wellbeing for most participants. For example, Swimmer 8 felt that wellbeing was, “just being happy in general,” while Coach 2 considered their role in relation to swimmer wellbeing to be, “managing them so that they feel happy” and Parent 3 indicated that their child’s wellbeing is, “just that she’s happy, really.” Furthermore, many participants used happiness as an indicator of their own wellbeing levels, and when talking about experiences of high levels of wellbeing, simply referred to “feeling happy,” whereas when talking about experiences of poor wellbeing, participants often referred to feeling “bad.” For instance, Swimmer 1 shared an experience of low wellbeing as “I felt bad like within myself. I know that’s a bad word, but I felt bad within myself.”

However, the role of happiness in relation to wellbeing was complex, and not all participants considered happiness to be a good way to judge wellbeing. In particular, Support Staff 4 thought that wellbeing was a balancing point between positive and negative emotions and cognitions, rather than simply an amount of happiness:

> Like I said, it's not about being happy, you can't be 100% happy, you could be happy with your performance but know actually along the way you might have achieved um, a higher result if you'd have done other things better throughout the way so yeah, it's not, it's not happy, but I think, it's just a balance of everything negative and positive.

Indeed, rather than a general feeling of happiness, it appeared that it was how happy participants felt in relation to personal values that determined their overall wellbeing levels. For example, if an individual valued social support and believed this was important for their wellbeing, they judged their wellbeing based on how happy/satisfied they felt with their social network. As Swimmer 6 suggested, they felt their wellbeing was good if, "I'm happy emotionally with my parents and my friends." In contrast, Swimmer 5, who judged their wellbeing in relation to control, mentioned that when things felt out of control, "you don't feel happy, because you're having to work harder and harder every day, just to maintain."

3.3.2 Theme 2. Wellbeing Characterised by Change

Participants felt that there were various affective, cognitive, and behavioural indicators that suggested a change in wellbeing. However, these indicators were often specific to each individual. For example, whereas one individual may withdraw from social interactions due to low levels of wellbeing, another may become overly talkative. Additionally, swimmers' ability to recognise changes in themselves was dependent upon each individual's level of self-awareness. These ideas are encapsulated within three sub-themes: (1) internal changes, (2) external changes, and (3) the role of awareness.

3.3.2.1 Internal Changes. Internal changes refer to the unobservable changes associated with varying wellbeing. Internal changes fell into two main categories: affective and cognitive. Considering the affective changes, participants often noted a change in feelings of motivation, particularly regarding training, because of their wellbeing. At times, a lack of motivation led to swimmers missing training sessions or not putting as much effort in as they usually would. During my time in the field, I observed this on numerous occasions. For example, during the initial observation period, I documented that one swimmer was inconsistently attending training. Later, when interviewing them, that same swimmer said, "from December like, until the middle of January, I was like, 'nah, I don't want to do it anymore'." In contrast, some swimmers felt that higher wellbeing made them more motivated to train. For instance, when experiencing high wellbeing, Swimmer 3 felt "really motivated... really looking forward to getting in the pool and having a good

session." Similarly, Swimmer 1 mentioned, "I'm more motivated to do something if I'm, if I'm happier, and I want to be there".

Participants also identified variation in feelings of enjoyment, related to increasing or decreasing wellbeing, again particularly regarding training. For example, when discussing training during periods of high wellbeing, Swimmer 3 mentioned, "it's fun, it's hard but it's a good hard like you feel like you're accomplishing something rather than just slaving away up and down the pool." Conversely, Swimmer 8 said, "when you're not in the best state of mind and all that, the sessions drag, it's not as fun, you're there and you feel like you're swimming up and down for no reason." Related to this, Swimmer 1 noted how, when they had low wellbeing, other swimmers' behaviour could affect their wellbeing further, saying, "it doesn't even have to be something that annoys me but like, I'll find a way to get annoyed by it." During my observations, I also noted the potential for the wellbeing of others to impact on swimmer enjoyment. For example, one fieldnote described, "[coach] not as upbeat as usual, very quiet... this seemed to put everyone on edge... not too much talking between staff or athletes."

With regards to cognitive changes, participants identified two main ways in which changing wellbeing affected them cognitively, specifically by impacting their ability to focus and their ability to rationalise. For instance, speaking about focus during periods of low wellbeing, Swimmer 2 said, "you're not a 100% focused or committed on what you should be doing…10, 20% could have wandered off somewhere else, that's going to affect your performance." In contrast, high wellbeing was associated with an increased ability to focus. For example, Swimmer 4 mentioned they would be, "really looking forward to getting in the pool... [because] you can just focus on going up and down swimming."

Beyond focus, some participants reported an inability to rationalise when experiencing low wellbeing. For example, Swimmer 6 said, "when I'm having a hard day I'm just like, it's that session, that's the one that is going to make me so rubbish." However, as Support Staff 3 mentioned, when experiencing high wellbeing, swimmers were perceived to be better able to "recognise this [a bad session] is not the end of the world." Reiterating this point, Coach 4 said, "they [swimmers] can think about things in a bit more of a logical way, instead of reacting emotionally." During the times when they found it difficult to rationalise, swimmers felt that the people around them could help. For example, Swimmer 2 explained how, when they had not made the times to qualify for a squad, the coaches helped them to rationalise the situation, saying:

> I was like what am I doing now, there's nothing, I haven't got anything to aim for so they sat me down and they were like yeah, obviously we know your situation, like you haven't qualified but, they were still the best times you've ever done so they were like, it's like you haven't become a shit swimmer overnight.

3.3.2.2 External Changes. Participants referred to a number of noticeable behavioural changes that were considered to occur as a result of changing wellbeing. These were identified by swimmers themselves, as well as coaches, support staff, and parents. Behavioural changes were most commonly observed via social cues, namely, through social interactions and body language. Specifically, higher wellbeing was often associated with more interaction with others, whereas lower wellbeing was associated with reduced interaction. Swimmer 3 highlighted this point, "On a day when I'm feeling good in the pool, I'll talk to anyone in my squad . . . whereas if I'm not [feeling good], I'll just talk to my close circle and sort of exclude everyone else." Additionally, participants reported noticing changes to the language used in interactions while experiencing lower wellbeing. Swimmer 1 noted, "I feel like I swear a lot more if I'm not happy… a lot more bad words come out."

Participants also considered changes to body language to be an indicator of varying wellbeing. For example, some of the participants felt the way swimmers walked onto poolside provided a useful indicator of their wellbeing, as Swimmer 1 explained:

> People walk up like on pool side, like chest out you know head up, having a bit of a laugh and smiley, that sort of stuff um, but if you're having a bad day it's like head down, bit slumped, bit sad, miserable face.

In addition, participants spoke about changes to facial expressions related to wellbeing, including smiling, frowning, and eye contact and numerous observations related to this point were recorded. For example, one fieldnote noted, "I tried to smile if I caught [staff member's] eye but no response," whereas another observed "[swimmer] had a vacant look in his face." Finally, participants felt that body posture was a consistent indicator of wellbeing and many coaches believed that changes to body posture and movement could also be recognised in the water. Speaking about this, Coach 2 noted, "I mean…, you can see them in the [water], you're thinking goodness me, it's just like have you ever swam before (laughs), what's happened, do you have arms and legs?"

Although there were commonalities in the behavioural changes perceived to indicate wellbeing, the specific changes observed were dependent on the individual's typical behaviour. As Support Staff 2 commented "the kind of the main thing with the

athletes I work with is they become a different person." Indeed, as the study progressed, comments regarding changes to typical behaviour were often recorded in the observational fieldnotes. For example, one entry stated, "one swimmer ignored me which is not unusual but also seemed very quiet even with other swimmers" and another entry observed that a swimmer was, "much more relaxed than normal." However, despite the individuality in the changes observed, there appeared to be within-person consistency, as Support Staff 3 noted, "there's one athlete who very much disengages from the coach when they're not in a state of great wellbeing."

3.3.2.3 The Role of Awareness. Within the context of this study, awareness referred to an individuals' ability to recognise changes, either in themselves or in others. In particular, participants felt that swimmers needed a certain level of self-awareness to be able to recognise both internal and external wellbeing related indicators, though not all participants considered swimmers to have the level of self-awareness required. Specifically, some participants considered that self-awareness was age related, and developed over time. As such, compared to other swimmers, more experienced swimmers were perceived to be more able to identify changes associated with their wellbeing. Discussing this, Coach 2 said, "I think, as an adult, you kind of learn to know yourself a little bit better in that way, but I think that's where the swimmers are still learning about themselves a bit." Some swimmers felt that they could not always identify changes to their own wellbeing, rather, it was only when others noticed, or they reflected, that they became aware of them. Swimmer 1 explained, "I think it takes a while for me to realise when I'm in peaks or troughs or whatever like, with how I'm feeling."

Participants felt that, in particular, coaches had a good awareness of the wellbeing of their swimmers, with Swimmer 8 noting, "he [coach] will notice, it's a bit creepy actually!" Reiterating this point, Parent 3 said, "I think sometimes [the coach] recognises more in my daughter than what I do." However, given the individual nature of behavioural changes related to wellbeing, coaches, support staff, and parents felt it took extended time with each swimmer to observe their responses in a range of situations and establish a baseline for future comparison. Discussing this, Coach 4 explained, "it's that change in their day-to-day emotions, that you've learnt over a period of time."

However, coaches noted that changes to behaviour were harder to spot in individuals who did not display large variations in their day-to-day social interactions and body language. For example, Support Staff 1 felt it was difficult to notice changing wellbeing in a certain swimmer because they appeared to be constantly cheerful, noting,

"he looks so cheerful all of the time... I think people like him are probably the worst ones to try and like pick up on subtle signs." Similarly, Coach 5 felt that it was harder to recognise changes in wellbeing in swimmers who were quieter because, "they're so neutral all of the time, you don't know, there's not very many changes in their, their everyday characteristics... they're the harder ones to figure out."

3.4 Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to understand and recognise high-performance swimmers' wellbeing. Overall, the findings point to a close association between participants' personal values and goals in both their understanding and experience of wellbeing. That is, findings suggest that wellbeing of high-performance swimmers is a highly subjective experience, and that swimmers understand wellbeing in relation to their own personal values and goals, and experience wellbeing in terms of happiness related to those values and goals. Further, the findings indicate that wellbeing can be recognised via various cognitive, affective, and behavioural indicators and that changes in wellbeing levels may be recognised via changes in these indicators, although the manifestation of these changes differ between swimmers. Related to this, the present study highlights the variation in levels of self-awareness that meant not all swimmers were able to recognise their own wellbeing indicators, and instead relied on others (i.e., coaches, parents, peers) to notice these for them.

Generally, participant's understanding of wellbeing was aligned with Lundqvist's (2011) model of wellbeing, in that participants characterised wellbeing using both hedonic (e.g., feelings of happiness) and eudaimonic (e.g., functioning and social) aspects. However, the present study extends our understanding by highlighting the individual differences in the value that participants placed on certain aspects of wellbeing over others (i.e., emotional, psychological). For example, some participants viewed social aspects as critical to wellbeing, whereas others felt that emotional functioning was more important for their overall wellbeing. Consequently, these findings suggest that to understand an individual's wellbeing it is necessary to delve below the categories of hedonic and eudiamonic functioning, to consider the personal factors that underpin each individual's experience of these.

The individuality in participants' understanding of wellbeing found in the present study offers a novel contribution to the literature as, with the notable exception of Ashfield et al. (2012) whose findings emphasised the individual nature of the flourishing experience, previous studies have tended to approach the conceptualisation of wellbeing

from a “one size fits all” perspective that views wellbeing as a common experience. As such, previous studies have aimed to identify shared aspects of wellbeing that characterise the experience for all (e.g., Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014; Brown et al., 2018). This endeavour has proved challenging and, despite increased research focus in this area, researchers have struggled to reach a consensus with regards to what characterises athlete wellbeing. In light of the present study’s findings, it seems that such challenges will remain while attempts to define wellbeing in terms of a generalised set of characteristics continue.

Instead, future research may benefit from redirecting its focus towards more fully understanding the underpinning values and goals related to wellbeing, and how they may influence, or are influenced by, wellbeing. Indeed, this shift would reflect that of the broader psychology literature, where studies have begun to consider individual differences in the wellbeing experience (e.g., Wissing et al., 2021). For example, a recent study by Wissing et al. (2021) that examined differences in the goals of individuals with high and low levels of wellbeing found that those who had lower levels of wellbeing (i.e., languishing) were more likely to have self-focused and hedonic goals, whereas those with higher levels of wellbeing (i.e., flourishing) were more likely to have other-focused and eudaimonic goals. Such insights within the context of sport would allow researchers to better understand what factors might affect wellbeing, how they might impact on wellbeing, and in what situations.

Further, the subjective and personal nature of wellbeing emphasised by the findings of the present study have implications for how athlete wellbeing is measured. Previously, studies have looked to develop sport-specific measures of wellbeing, such as the Sport Mental Health Continuum Short Form (SMHC-SF; Foster & Chow, 2018) and the Eudaimonic Wellbeing in Sport Scale (EWBSS; Kouali et al., 2020a). However, these instruments take a criterion-based approach to measuring the construct and, given that wellbeing appears to be closely tied to personal values and goals, this approach may not provide an accurate or appropriate way of measuring wellbeing as it does not account for differences in how wellbeing may be understood and judged by the individual; nor does it incorporate an individual’s aspirations and goals. Based on the current findings, to provide useful and useable results, any measure of athlete wellbeing would need to account for variation in a respondent’s personal values and goals that underpin their understanding of wellbeing. In practical terms, this might mean including additional questions regarding identifying personal values and goals and/or amending the wording of items to encourage respondents to answer in relation to their own specific values and goals, rather than global

or societal norms. Another option may be to administer wellbeing measures to the same person multiple times to form a baseline against which further within-person comparisons may be made.

Despite the individual variation in how wellbeing was understood, the association of wellbeing with feelings of happiness was similar across participants. This is consistent with the wider psychological literature on subjective wellbeing, in which happiness is considered a core component (Diener, 1984). However, the findings demonstrate that there is another layer of complexity underpinning this, with feelings of happiness related to satisfaction with, and progress in, personal values and goals. One explanation may be that swimmers who achieve their goals and live a life consistent with their values may experience more happiness. This aligns with the self-concordance model (Sheldon & Elliot, 1999) which suggests that autonomously motivated goals are more likely to be attained. Within sport, Smith et al. (2011) found that, for athletes who had goals that were intrinsically regulated and of personal value, goal attainment has been linked to increased positive affect and life satisfaction. Thus, it appears important that athletes set goals that are meaningful to them, as they will be more likely to achieve these and, thus, may experience higher wellbeing.

In addition to how wellbeing was understood and experienced, the present study provided insight into how the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers might be recognised and, importantly, findings highlighted that swimmers' ability to recognise their own wellbeing indicators was often poor, with swimmers noting that they rarely thought about their own wellbeing, unless it became problematic. The lack of awareness around mental health and mental illness related symptoms is not new within sport and is already starting to be addressed through the delivery of Mental Health Literacy (MHL) interventions (e.g., Van Raalte et al., 2015; Liddle et al., 2021). Such interventions have shown to be useful in increasing knowledge around symptoms and signs of common mental disorders, as well as increasing intentions to seek help for a mental illness. However, these interventions are pathology-oriented in that they focus on the identification of, and help-seeking for, mental illness. Although it is critical that athletes are able to recognise and seek support for mental illnesses, it is equally important that they are also able to recognise the signs and symptoms of mental health (i.e., wellbeing). By being aware of what wellbeing "looks like" for them, athletes will be better able to recognise and intervene when their wellbeing is declining. In addition, if athletes are aware of what high

wellbeing looks and feels like for them, they may be better able to reflect on situations that foster and facilitate their wellbeing.

3.4.1 Applied Implications

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical implications, there are a number of applied implications related to the findings of the present study. First, the findings highlight the need for coaches and practitioners to spend time learning about each swimmer's personal values and goals that may underpin their understanding (and experience) of wellbeing. This is an essential first step in being able to protect and enhance the wellbeing of swimmers as, by doing this, coaches, practitioners, and other support staff may be able to anticipate when and how a swimmer's wellbeing might be impacted, as well as being able to create an environment that supports swimmer wellbeing. This can be achieved through regular conversations that are not just focused on swimming-related goals, but also swimmers' wider lives, alongside continual observation and reflection by coaches and support staff.

Second, the findings emphasise the importance of developing an awareness of each swimmer's typical behaviours as this may provide an informal way for coaches to assess swimmer wellbeing. For coaches within a high-performance swimming setting, who often spend around 4+ hours a day with their swimmers, it is likely that they already have a good understanding of the typical behaviours of each swimmer. By encouraging coaches to look for changes in these behaviours and use these as a signal to ask the swimmer about their wellbeing, then declining wellbeing may be identified earlier.

Related to wellbeing indicators, increasing self-awareness should be a key focus for sports organisations looking to protect the wellbeing of their athletes. Self-awareness may be developed through the process of self-reflection, and so coaches and practitioners should encourage and provide opportunities for this behaviour. However, it is important to note that reflection can lead to rumination, which is associated with lower wellbeing (e.g., Harrington & Loffredo, 2010). As such, athletes should be encouraged to reflect on positive experiences and previously effective strategies, rather than ruminating on negative memories.

3.4.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The present study is the first known attempt to conceptualise high-performance swimmers' wellbeing, and the findings provide a unique insight into how wellbeing is understood, experienced, and recognised within a high-performance environment. In conceptualising the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers, the study has produced

some novel findings that would benefit from further investigation. In particular, it would be beneficial to establish whether increased levels of self-awareness are related to earlier help-seeking behaviours for declining wellbeing. Additionally, a more in-depth examination of the factors that influence wellbeing, with a specific focus on how these relate to an individual's values and goals would be useful, as it is only by understanding *how* wellbeing is affected within specific contexts that we can develop targeted interventions, aimed at protecting and promoting wellbeing within high-performance sporting environments (Lundqvist, 2011).

The findings of the present study should be considered within the limitations. Specifically, the study design consisted of one-off interviews with participants and, as such, they offer a snapshot of how wellbeing was understood at that particular time. However, the observational data collected throughout the study did allow for contextualisation of the interview data and provided an insight into how participants' understanding of wellbeing was affected within the environment. Nevertheless, future research may wish to adopt a longitudinal focus to explore how swimmers' understanding of wellbeing may change over time.

3.5 Conclusion

The present study sought to understand and recognise high-performance swimmers' wellbeing, with the findings encapsulated within two main themes: wellbeing understood and experienced in relation to personal values and goals, and wellbeing characterised by change. Taken together, these findings suggest that wellbeing is a subjective and dynamic experience which is understood in relation to a swimmer's values and goals, experienced via happiness in relation to these values and goals, and recognised via numerous affective, cognitive, and behavioural indicators. In addition to providing some support for the limited extant research in this area, the findings offer novel insights into athlete wellbeing, specifically regarding the role of personal values and goals in how wellbeing may be understood, and the important role of self-awareness for being able to recognise the person-specific indicators of changing wellbeing.

Chapter 4: Exploring the Process Through Which Engagement in High-Performance Swimming Influences Athlete Wellbeing

4.1 Introduction

The findings of the previous chapter indicated that wellbeing was understood and experienced in relation to personal values and goals. Due to the nature of competitive swimming (e.g., frequent training sessions and long seasons), high-performance swimmers often dedicate their life to achieving success in their sport. Because of this, their values and goals are likely to be related to their sport and, subsequently, their wellbeing is likely to be closely tied to their sporting experiences. In general, the extant literature suggests that sport participation appears to have a positive impact on wellbeing across all ages and is associated with numerous positive psychological outcomes, such as improved mood and increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-efficacy (see e.g., Eime, 2013; Kim et al., 2020 for reviews). However, at the elite level, athletes face multiple personal, competitive, and environmental demands that have the potential to negatively impact on wellbeing, increasing the risk of experiencing negative psychological outcomes, such as burnout, anxiety, and depression (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Rice et al., 2016). Yet not all elite athletes experience detrimental effects on their wellbeing, rather some individuals thrive in an elite sports environment (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), although the reasons why some athletes are able thrive whereas others struggle are unclear.

Previous studies have highlighted a wide array of personal (e.g., identity, performance), social (e.g., relationships, support), and environmental (e.g., leadership, culture) factors linked to athlete wellbeing (see Chapter 2, Section 2.4 for a review). However, the ways in which these factors influence athlete wellbeing are not always straightforward. For example, whereas some studies have found athletic identity to be linked to positive wellbeing outcomes such as sport satisfaction (e.g., Burns et al., 2012), other studies have highlighted the negative impact of high levels of athletic identity on wellbeing, specifically during retirement (Haslam et al., 2021) and periods of injury (Renton et al., 2021). Therefore, to fully understand how athlete wellbeing is impacted within high-performance sport, it is important to not only identify specific factors that affect athlete wellbeing (i.e., what), but also understand how (i.e., positively or negatively), why (i.e., for what reasons), and when (i.e., at what times) these factors affect wellbeing.

Many previous athlete wellbeing studies have taken a quantitative, cross-sectional approach (e.g., Burns et al., 2012; Haslam et al., 2021; Renton et al., 2021) and those that

have used qualitative methods (e.g., Brown et al., 2017) have mostly conducted one-off interviews where participants were asked to reflect on their wellbeing experiences. As such, these studies provide a "snapshot" of athlete wellbeing at one moment in time (Kuettel & Larson, 2020). Although this approach has been useful for identifying specific factors that are linked to athlete wellbeing, it does not consider that wellbeing is a process that is continually evolving as a result of interactions between the person and the social and environmental contexts in which they are situated (e.g., Atkinson, 2013; Fattore et al., 2007). Consequently, there is a lack of understanding of how individual, social, and environmental factors might interact and influence each other to impact on athlete wellbeing in different ways at different times (e.g., Purcell et al., 2019). To overcome these gaps in knowledge, there is a need for further research to explore athlete wellbeing as a process, paying particular attention to the interactions that occur between various individual, social, and environmental factors. Subsequently, such information can be used to inform the development of evidence-based interventions that aim to protect and promote swimmer wellbeing, thus maximising the chances they will thrive within a high-performance environment.

4.1.1 The Present Study

To fully understand what affects athlete wellbeing, as well as how, why, and when athlete wellbeing is affected, there is a need for further research that explores wellbeing as a process. As such, the aim of the present study was to explore how participation in high-performance swimming may affect athlete wellbeing.

4.2 Method

4.2.1 Methodological Approach and Philosophical Underpinnings

Grounded Theory (GT) (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was the methodological approach that I chose to guide the present study. GT refers to a group of methodologies with the main aim of developing a theory of a phenomena that is grounded within the data (Weed, 2017). As such, GT is best suited to newer areas of inquiry where there may be few existing theories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Given the relatively recent emphasis on athlete wellbeing, there are currently no known theories specifically on this topic within sport, which makes it suitable for a GT study. Furthermore, as Benoliel (1996) suggests, GT studies are particularly useful in the investigation of research topics that involve change and adaptation, as well as those that involve social interactions and environmental influence. In other words, GT is best suited to research questions that focus on 'process' (Holt, 2016). As I was interested in exploring

the process through which engagement in high-performance swimming affected individual's wellbeing, I deemed GT to be the most appropriate methodology for this study.

The original version of GT (now termed Glaserian GT; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was introduced during a period when research was dominated by quantitative methodologies and allowed for qualitative exploration within a positivist paradigm. As such, Glaserian GT is concerned with seeking the 'truth' that is thought to exist within the data. However, since this initial introduction of GT (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), several alternative types of GT have been developed, most notably, Straussian (e.g., Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; 2015) and Constructivist GT (e.g., Charmaz, 2006). Straussian GT was developed in response to Strauss' acknowledgment that the researcher(s) could not be fully separated from the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As such, Straussian GT differs from Glaserian GT in that, rather than the researcher maintaining separation from the research, it is acknowledged that the researcher plays a significant role within the research process, from determining appropriate research question(s) to deciding which elements of the data are relevant and important for the final GT (Corbin & Strauss, 2012).

Taking this further, Constructivist GT (Charmaz, 2006) suggests that the researcher and the researched are intertwined and together they co-construct knowledge and reality. However, despite these differences, Glaserian, Straussian, and Constructivist GT have many similarities. Specifically, all three approaches focus on understanding a process, emphasise the importance of theory being grounded in the data, and advocate for simultaneous data collection, analysis, and theory construction, as well as the use of constant comparison, memos, and theoretical sampling (Rieger, 2019). Thus, the differences between the separate strands of GT largely reflect differences in the underpinning ontological and epistemological beliefs, rather than differences in the way the methodology is applied (e.g., Weed, 2017; Rieger, 2019).

In terms of the characteristics of GT, Holt et al. (2022) suggest 11 key components that are individually necessary, but must also be collectively applied, to define the use of GT as a total methodology. Specifically, Holt and colleagues argue that all GT studies should: (a) select a specific variant of GT and articulate the reasons for their choice (e.g., alignment with philosophical principles), and (b) demonstrate methodological congruence in their use of the chosen variant (i.e., do not mix and match between variants). Further, Holt et al. (2022) emphasise that GT studies should: (c) clearly report an iterative process,

and explicitly discuss their approach to: (d) theoretical sensitivity, (e) theoretical sampling, (f) coding, and (g) theoretical saturation. Finally, studies claiming to use a GT methodology should also: (h) produce a substantive level theory, (i) report how they assessed the grounded theory throughout the development of the theory, and (j) select and report an approach to evaluate the rigour of the use of GT within the study.

For the present study, I chose to use Straussian GT (Corbin & Strauss, 2015) due to its underpinning philosophical assumptions of symbolic interactionism (e.g., Blumer, 1969) and pragmatism (e.g., Dewey, 1917; Mead, 1956), which propose that an individual's understanding of the world is created and influenced through their interactions with their environments and the people in them. Although earlier versions of Straussian GT were considered to be post-positivist (Charmaz, 2006), more recent versions have begun to adopt a more relativist and interpretivist ontology and epistemology (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008; 2015; Holt et al., 2022). This viewpoint suggests that reality is multiple, subjective, and influenced by participant's interpretations of their world. These assumptions fit with my own interpretivist approach to research, where rather than considering myself as separate from the research I conduct, I believe that I am an integral part of the research process and any research outputs represent a collaboration between each individual participant's views and interpretations and my own interpretation of those views. I acknowledge that my approach to research also aligns with Charmaz's version of GT. However, as a relatively new qualitative researcher, I found the comprehensive guidance provided by Corbin and Strauss (2015) helpful and this ultimately influenced my choice to use a Straussian GT methodology.

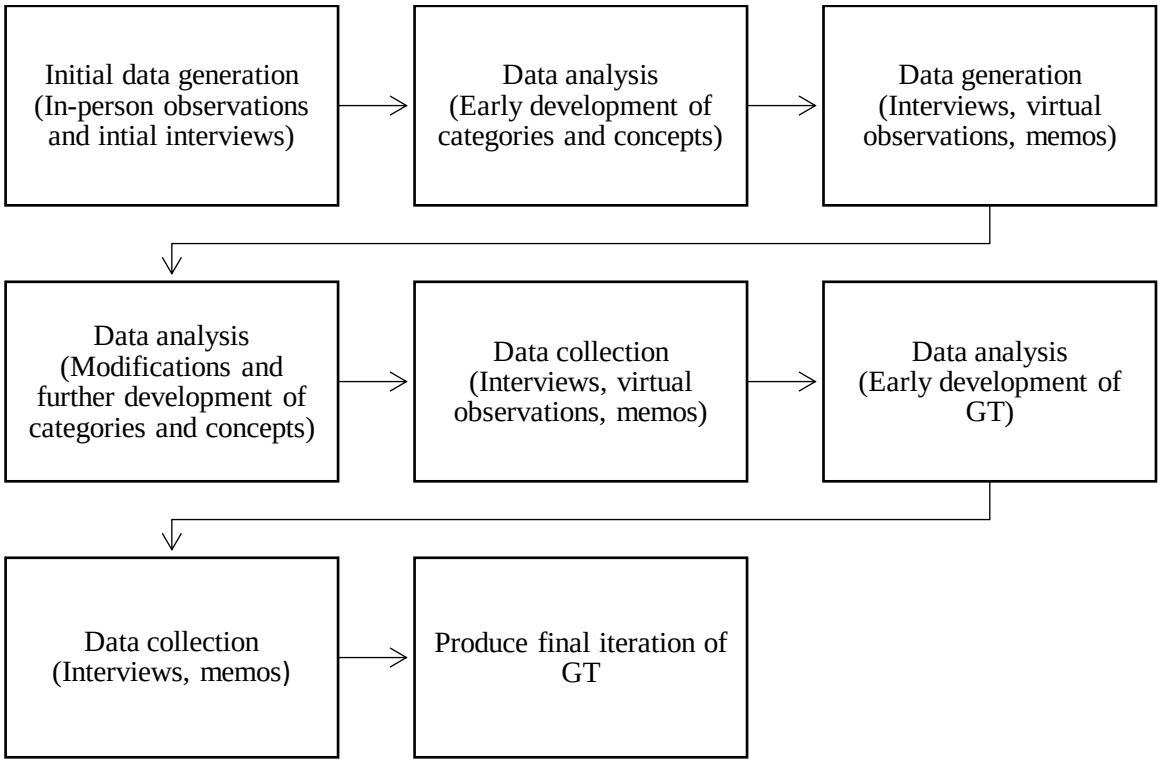
Aligned with the above philosophical perspectives, it is acknowledged that any theory produced using a GT methodology is only one interpretation of the data, but this is not perceived to be problematic if the theory is useful in explaining the phenomenon under investigation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). According to Glaser and Strauss (1967), GT methodology can be used to produce a substantive theory (i.e., within a specific context) or a formal theory (i.e., across different contexts). Yet, as Heath and Cowley (2004) suggest, the purpose of grounded theory is "not to discover *'the'* theory but *'a'* theory that aids understanding and action in the area under investigation" (p. 149). As such, the aim of the present study was to produce a substantive theory of the process through which participation in high-performance swimming affects athletes' wellbeing, while acknowledging (and encouraging) that this theory should be refined and changed through further study.

4.2.2 Study Overview

The present study took place across several high-performance swimming centres in the United Kingdom. Permission to enter various swimming centres was provided by the NGB, and institutional ethical approval was granted prior to the start of the study. Data were primarily collected via individual semi-structured interviews, although observational data was also collected and used to help contextualise the interview data. In addition, published swimmer biographies and relevant academic literature were also used as contextual data, as recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008) to enhance theoretical sensitivity. Consistent with a GT methodology, the collection and analysis of data was an iterative process, with analysis starting as soon as the first data were collected to allow for future data collection to be guided by the developing findings (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). The study began in October 2019 and data collection and analysis occurred in tandem throughout the duration of the study (see Figure 4.1 for an overview).

Figure 4.1

Iterative Process of Data Collection and Analysis

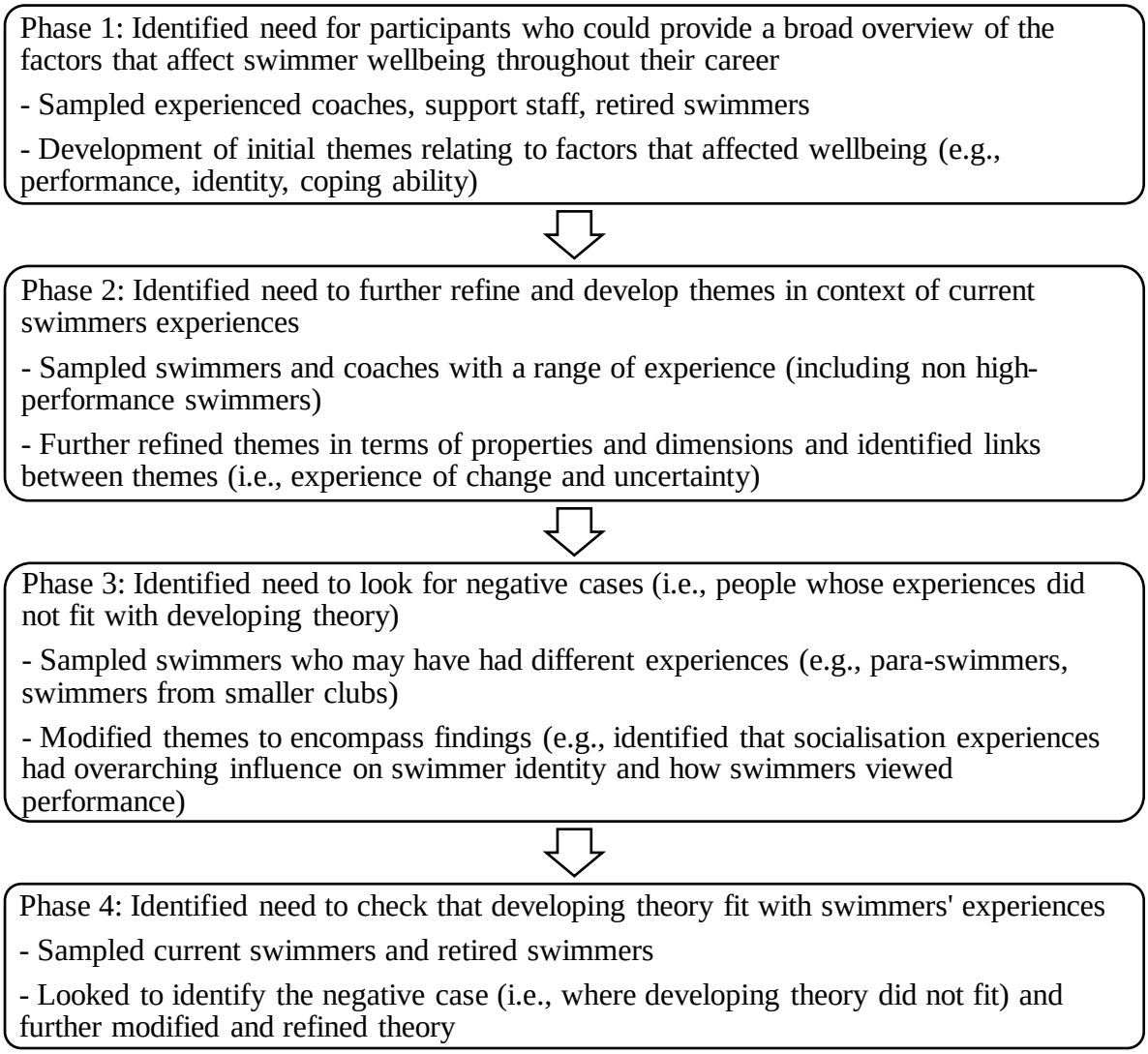


4.2.3 Interview Participants

Initially, I purposefully sampled participants who were deemed to be 'information-rich' (Patton, 2015). Specifically, I sought individuals who were able to provide an overview of how wellbeing may be affected throughout the entire performance pathway. Reflecting this, initial participants included high-level coaches and retired swimmers. In line with GT methodology, theoretical sampling was employed as the study progressed (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) and I recruited participants based on their ability to provide further information regarding concepts I had identified in the earlier stages of data collection and analysis. Figure 4.2 shows a diagram of the theoretical sampling process.

Figure 4.2

Overview of the Theoretical Sampling Process



In total, 42 participants took part in interviews: 27 swimmers, eight coaches, and seven support staff. The demographics of participants can be found in Table 4.1. Of the swimmers, five were retired and 22 were currently swimming. Swimmers ages ranged from 12 to 31 years (mean age 20.48 years). Most of the current swimmers (n=12) had been selected for the National Squad – a talent development pathway aimed at producing world-class athletes. For these swimmers, there was an expectation to train between 14 and 20 hours a week in the pool (excluding an additional 15 to 30 minutes pre- and post-training warmup/cool down per session), as well as strength and conditioning for between one and five hours a week. Two of the swimmers were part of the university high-performance squad and trained for 18 hours per week in the pool (excluding an additional 15 to 30 minutes pre- and post-training warmup/cool down per session), as well as two hours of strength and conditioning per week. The remaining eight swimmers were club swimmers who trained between six and 14 hours per week, with some swimmers completing up to two hours of additional strength and conditioning training. In total, all the swimmers trained for at least six hours a week, up to a maximum of 30 hours per week.

Coach participants were all currently coaching and had a range of experience (three to 38 years), with an average of 21.25 years' experience. Of the coaches, one was female and seven were male, and their ages ranged from 23 to 59 years (mean age 41.5 years). Five of the coaches were head coaches, two coached in high performance centres, and one coached at local club level. All but the local club coach currently coached swimmers who were currently part of the National Squad, although the club coach had experience of coaching swimmers who had previously been part of the National Squad. All coaches were employed full-time, although the number of hours spent coaching poolside varied depending on the level of swimming that they coached. When not coaching, working time was spent planning training sessions, attending meetings, and undertaking training courses.

Support staff participants included sports scientists, psychologists, and performance lifestyle advisors, four of whom were female and three were male. The age of the support staff participants ranged from 25 to 41 years (mean age 35.85 years), with an average of 11 years' experience in their relevant professions. The amount of time spent working within swimming ranged from 1.5 to 22 years, although the number of hours per week spent working in the sport varied; four were employed by the NGB to work within the sport full-time, whereas the remaining three were employed by the national organisation for sport and were contracted to work across a range of sports with around four hours per week dedicated to swimming.

Table 4.1

Demographic Breakdown of Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	Experience (years)
Swimmer 1	20	Female	10
Swimmer 2	23	Male	15
Swimmer 3	31	Male	22
Swimmer 4	19	Male	7
Swimmer 5	20	Male	12
Swimmer 6	18	Female	10
Swimmer 7	19	Male	14
Swimmer 8	30	Male	20
Swimmer 9	18	Male	10
Swimmer 10	14	Female	7
Swimmer 11	12	Female	4
Swimmer 12	15	Female	10
Swimmer 13	19	Female	7
Swimmer 14	18	Male	12
Swimmer 15	15	Female	7
Swimmer 16	15	Female	7
Swimmer 17	15	Female	7
Swimmer 18	15	Female	8
Swimmer 19	18	Female	6
Swimmer 20	17	Female	5
Swimmer 21	20	Male	12
Swimmer 22	24	Male	15
Retired Swimmer 1	27	Female	15
Retired Swimmer 2	26	Male	15
Retired Swimmer 3	29	Female	18
Retired Swimmer 4	28	Female	15
Retired Swimmer 5	28	Female	14
Coach 1	40	Female	25
Coach 2	57	Male	38
Coach 3	46	Male	27
Coach 4	44	Male	24
Coach 5	59	Male	25
Coach 6	23	Male	3
Coach 7	29	Male	15
Coach 8	34	Male	13
Support Staff 1	40	Male	22
Support Staff 2	41	Female	16
Support Staff 3	30	Male	1.5
Support Staff 4	41	Female	17
Support Staff 5	25	Female	2
Support Staff 6	33	Female	1.75
Support Staff 7	41	Male	20

4.2.4 Data Collection

As indicated, data collection occurred primarily through semi-structured interviews, but observations, published swimmer biographies, and relevant academic literature were also used as contextual data. The use of multiple data collection methods is recommended for GT studies, to facilitate methodological triangulation of the data (e.g., Flick, 2019). Furthermore, the use of existing literature helped to guide future interview questions, as well as inform the developing concepts in terms of their properties (i.e., characteristics that define/describe a concept) and dimensions (i.e., variation within properties that give range and depth to a concept). In addition, observational fieldnotes allowed for contextualisation of the interview data, and memos allowed me to identify relevant concepts and keep track of the developing grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

It is important to note that although the present study began prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, data collection was ongoing throughout the pandemic and this presented some challenges regarding data collection. Specifically, from March 2020, I was no longer able to interview participants face-to-face or spend time observing in the field. A lack of day-to-day engagement made it more difficult to complete extensive observational fieldnotes, identify potential future interview participants, and contextualise the data I was collecting. However, to address the COVID-19 associated challenges, I conducted interviews using Skype/Zoom and I attended numerous virtual meetings and social events with swimmers and coaches, where I had the chance to observe and write fieldnotes. This enabled me to continue to collect useful contextual data, despite the ongoing pandemic. In addition, I was also able to observe how the COVID-19 situation affected the wellbeing of the swimmers I had access to.

Although virtual interviews are often considered inferior compared to face-to-face interviews (e.g., Rubin & Rubin, 2011), an analysis of over 300 interviews by Johnson et al. (2021) found that face-to-face and online interviews did not significantly differ with regards to substantive codes produced, or in terms of interviewer ratings. Indeed, I found virtual interviews to be both convenient and useful in providing rich, in-depth information. However, it is worth mentioning that poor internet connection and technical issues did make it difficult to communicate on occasion, although this was rare (n= 3).

4.2.4.1 Observations. Prior to the recruitment of interview participants, I was embedded within a high-performance swimming environment where I carried out numerous observations (face-to-face and virtual) of training sessions and team meetings, as

well as informal conversations with swimmers, coaches, and practitioners. Although I was unable to observe training sessions after March 2020 due to the restricted numbers allowed in the training environment, I continued to observe various meetings and planning sessions online throughout the study. I also attended several online social events with swimmers and coaches, which included quizzes, games, and informal conversations. In total, I completed around 150 hours (approximately 50 hours of which were face-to-face and 100 hours were virtual) of observations.

The observations were useful because, during my early observations (face-to-face and virtual), I noted how various situations or scenarios appeared to affect swimmers' wellbeing and then, as the study progressed, these observations were used during data analysis. As an example, on 4th Feb 2021, I observed a training session where there was no coach present. During my time spent observing I noted "although there was no coach present, all swimmers were still ready and in the pool on time." This observation helped me when developing the concept of 'socialisation into the norms of swimming' as it clearly shows how the swimmers had been socialised to display attributes valued in the high-performance swimming environment (i.e., discipline) despite there not being a coach present.

4.2.4.2 Individual Interviews. For the semi-structured interviews, participants were approached directly or via email to ascertain their interest in participating. Recruitment emails were sent out by me or via a gatekeeper (i.e. coach for athlete participants). To protect confidentiality, interested individuals were asked to contact me directly to organise a suitable time and date to take part. Interviews were conducted face-to-face (pre-COVID) or online via Skype or Zoom (during lockdown). Prior to each interview, participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the aims of the study, as well as details regarding data protection. If participants were happy to proceed, they were then asked to sign a consent from. For athlete participants under the age of 16, parental assent was sought prior to seeking consent from the athlete. In total, 42 semi-structured interviews were conducted, ranging from 31 minutes to 83 minutes, and lasting an average of 53 minutes.

To facilitate the interviews and ensure all relevant questions were covered, an interview guide was used. Initially, interview questions were based on the findings of Chapter 3 and focused on the range of factors that participants perceived to affect wellbeing. Separate interview guides were developed for swimmers, retired swimmers, coaches, and practitioners. As new concepts emerged, the interview guides were revised

and questions were amended, consistent with the principle of theoretical sampling (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). For example, in the first interviews conducted, the questions were quite general and athlete participants were asked question such as “what factors do you feel affect your wellbeing?”, while coach participants were asked, “how do you perceive that swimmers’ wellbeing is affected within high-performance swimming?”. During later interviews, the questions became more focused on exploring concepts that had emerged in earlier interviews. For example, swimmers were asked questions on the concept of performance, such as “how is your wellbeing affected by your performance?” and “what would you say makes a good performance?”, whereas coach participants were asked questions such as “how do you feel that swimmers’ wellbeing is affected by their performance?” In total, 20 interview guides were developed over the duration of the study. Example interview guides can be found in Appendix C.

4.2.5 Memos

In addition to observational fieldnotes and interviews, I also created memos during the data collection and analysis period. Within the present study, memos and diagrams were a key component that helped to identify properties and dimensions of concepts, as well as relationships between concepts. In addition, memos served as an audit trail of thinking and decision making throughout the study. I created 46 memos throughout the study, ranging from a couple of sentences to over a page in length. Early memos tended to be shorter, often a couple of sentences about topics that had seemed interesting during interviews and areas to follow-up on (either in future interviews, by reading the available literature or both). As an example, an early memo entitled ‘Routine’ written on the 27th March 2020 read:

> Having a lot of conversations about routine with everything going on. But I’m wondering what does routine mean? For swimmers it means same thing every day, week, month, year (cycles). But for some routine might look different. Some people might routinely like to try new things. So I don’t know if it’s routine, or structure, or repetition... What is it about routine that affects wellbeing? Are there times where routine changes that do not affect wellbeing? (yes - I guess during season focus is different and routine changes in terms of type of sessions). Need to follow up on this.

During the later stages of the study, my memos became longer and I used them as a way to speculate how different concepts might link together, drawing on the interview data, existing literature, previous memos, as well as my observational fieldnotes to

influence my reasoning. These memos also served to highlight concepts and categories that were not fully formed, and therefore needed further exploration. To illustrate, an excerpt from a memo entitled 'Striving for continuous improvement?' and dated 18th August 2020 read:

> Within my study (and perhaps within life in general), I am finding that everyone is striving to be the best person they can be and improve on who they were yesterday. For swimmers, this seems to be their motivation within their sport (and outside for some) and so periods or events that threaten to (or are perceived to threaten) that sense of improvement (e.g., plateaus, poor performance, negative social comparisons) also threaten wellbeing. When this happens, swimmers must go through a period of coping and adapting which may be adaptive or maladaptive, successful or unsuccessful, and lead to various psychological (e.g., wellbeing) and performance outcomes. For example, a swimmer who experiences a plateau in their performance may see this as a threat to their wellbeing as it disturbs their ultimate goal of continuous improvement, however how the athlete copes with or adapts to that period will lead to different wellbeing outcomes? Also, may link to expectancy theory? Put in effort and so expect to improve?

4.2.6 The Use of Literature

In contrast to traditional GT, Straussian GT does not discourage the researcher from reading the extant literature before the study, rather it is suggested that at least a basic knowledge of the existing literature is necessary to develop a strong rationale for the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Furthermore, it is acknowledged that the use of literature at appropriate points during the data collection, analysis, and theory generation process can increase theoretical sensitivity and avoid 'reinventing the wheel' (Charmaz & Thornberg, 2020). For the present study, I had a broad understanding of the literature regarding athlete wellbeing, which led me to identify a lack of studies that have explored the process of how wellbeing is affected within a high-performance sporting context.

In addition, after the first phase of data collection and analysis, I used the extant literature to help explore concepts that had been developed to guide the questions I asked future participants and ensure that each concept was fully formed with regards to its properties and dimensions. For example, initial interviews indicated that transitions appeared to be critical periods where swimmer wellbeing had the potential to be negatively affected. Subsequently, I drew on the relevant sport transitions literature (e.g., Stambulova, 2017; Wylleman & Lavellee, 2004) to help me understand the different types of transitions

(i.e., normative, non-normative, non-event), as well as the different levels (e.g., physical, psychological, psychosocial) and domains (e.g., athletic, academic) where transitions might occur. This knowledge helped me to develop future interview questions to ensure that I explored participants' experiences of a range of different types of transitions, across a range of levels and domains.

4.2.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis began after the first interview and continued throughout the data collection process. Where transcription of the data was not possible (due to short time period between interviews), I conducted the initial analysis while listening to the audio files (Holt et al., 2012). Where this was the case, interviews were transcribed as soon as possible and further analysed using the stages of coding recommended by Corbin and Strauss (2008), which were; open, axial, and theoretical integration. First, open coding involved coding of the data for concepts that were relevant to the research question, as well as for characteristics and defining features of the concept (i.e., properties) and variations within each concept (i.e., dimensions). For example, some of the codes that I used during early analysis included "high-performance environment," "performance valued above all else," and "sacrifices show dedication." Second, axial coding involved re-reading the data and coding for relationships between the concepts identified during the initial coding process. Examples of some of the axial codes I used were "performance focus is encouraged by high-performance swimming environment" and "declining performance affects wellbeing as it challenges identity as a swimmer."

Finally, once all concepts were fully developed in terms of properties and dimensions (known as "theoretical saturation"), context and process had been considered, and relationships between categories had been identified, I began the process of theoretical integration (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This involved organising the concepts around the "core category" - an overarching category that links all other categories. During analysis, it became apparent that swimmers are socialised into the high-performance sporting environment and, as a result, they often developed a strong swimmer identity and focused on performance above all else. Consequently, when faced with a period of change or uncertainty, swimmers' wellbeing was likely to be affected depending on how performance and/or identity was impacted, as well as how well swimmers were able to manage and adapt to the changing situation. Thus, it was clear that the results were centred around the experience of change and uncertainty and, as such, this concept became the

basis of the core category “questioning or reaffirming swimmer identity in response to performances during periods of change and uncertainty.”

During data analysis, I employed various analytic tools and strategies to aid with the process (see Corbin and Strauss, 2008 for a complete list of recommended tools and strategies). The main strategies I used included asking questions of the data, making constant comparisons, waving the red flag, and the flip-flop technique. Asking questions such as who, what, when, where, how, and with what consequence, enabled me to identify key properties and dimensions of the developing concepts, while constant comparison (i.e., comparing incident with incident) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) allowed me to discover patterns and variation within those concepts. For example, several participants mentioned that their wellbeing was affected by competitions, so I compared participants’ responses for similarities and differences to the follow-up questions of who, what, when, where, how, and with what consequence. In doing so, I learned that performances during key competitions were more likely to affect wellbeing and, within these competitions, various events would affect swimmers’ wellbeing differently, depending on which events swimmers perceived as “their events.” Additionally, I looked for words such as always and never within the data (waving the red flag), and asked participants about incidents where the opposite occurred (the flip-flop technique). For example, if a participant mentioned they always felt anxious before competitions, I would ask them if there were any times where they have not felt that way. Again, this technique allowed me to explore the variation within the patterns that I was finding, as well as identify significant properties of the concept of “competition anxiety.”

As well as coding for concepts, properties, and dimensions, I also coded for context and process. According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), context refers to "the sets of conditions that give rise to problems or circumstances to which individuals respond by means of action/interaction/emotions.” Subsequently, process refers to “ongoing responses to problems or circumstances arising out of the context” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 229). The inclusion of process and context is a key element of any GT study, as it ensures that concepts are grounded in the data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 229). Within the present study, the concept of “the swimming bubble” illustrates the context within which swimmers are situated, where early specialisation and intense training schedules are considered the norm and swimmers are ranked in terms of performance times. Similarly, the category ‘ability to successfully manage the impact of change and uncertainty on performance and identity’ refers to the process that swimmers went through when faced

with periods of change and uncertainty. This was a process that appeared to be either active or passive and resulted in either positive or negative changes in wellbeing.

To assess the grounded theory, I sought feedback on the GT from participants throughout its development and I used this feedback to help shape and modify the developing theory. In addition, I discussed the developing theory with my supervisors and my peers who acted as critical friends (e.g., Smith & McGannon, 2018) by challenging my interpretations and acting as a "theoretical sounding board to encourage reflection on, and exploration of, multiple alternative explanations and interpretations" (p.113).

4.2.8 Positionality

Researcher positionality is ever-changing; it is continually influenced by the social contexts in which the researcher is embedded, as well the interactions that the researcher has with others both within and outside of the research setting (e.g., Reyes, 2020). As such, the purpose of the following section is to reflect on how my positionality had changed up to this point in the PhD and consider how my evolving positionality may have impacted upon the data collection, analysis, and representation in the present study.

One of the main differences regarding how my positionality changed throughout the research relates to the amount of time I spent embedded within high-performance swimming environments. Specifically, being embedded helped me to develop good working relationships with many swimmers, parents, coaches, and practitioners. This meant that I had a good understanding of individuals' backgrounds, skills, and past experiences, which was particularly beneficial for theoretical sampling. Further, having an existing relationship with potential participants also increased buy-in and positively impacted the quality of the data I was able to collect.

In addition, being embedded in the environment since late 2018 meant that I had gained a substantial amount of knowledge about high-performance swimming, particularly compared to during Study 1. In Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.6), I highlighted how being embedded for 3-months before conducting interviews helped to improve my knowledge of swimming, which meant I asked less clarification questions and gained richer data. At the outset of the present study, I had been embedded within high-performance swimming environments for approximately 27-months. In this time, the new terminology I had learnt during Study 1 (Chapter 3) had now become part of my everyday vocabulary (e.g., kick set, negative split, RPE) and certain competitive swimming norms that I had once found strange had now begun to seem normal (e.g., training twice a day, early specialisation). I reflected on this shift in my reflexive diary, which was used as a data source when

developing the grounded theory. Specifically, these reflections prompted me to think about how a person can be socialised into an environment such as elite sport, which ultimately influenced the development of the category titled "socialisation into a high-performance swimming environment."

4.2.9 Ethical Considerations

Due to the similarity of data collection methods, many of the points discussed in relation to Study 1 (Chapter 3, Section 3.2.7) were also relevant to the present study. However, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic introduced a number of additional ethical considerations to this study. In particular, national lockdowns meant that swimmers and coaches had to stay at home and were no longer able to train in the pool as usual. Thus, it was likely that many participants would be feeling socially isolated and increasingly vulnerable to lowered wellbeing and poor mental health (e.g., Carnevale Pellino et al., 2022; Kubosch et al., 2021; Mehrsafar et al., 2020). Recognising this, I made sure to plan extra time to complete the interviews and spent more time at the beginning of each interview on rapport building and general chit-chat (i.e., asking how the person was, getting to know them better, asking how they were managing lockdowns). As with the previous two studies, I made sure that I was feeling mentally capable to manage the emotional burden of others on the day of each interview, and familiarised myself with the procedure for managing distressed participants.

In addition, the COVID-19 lockdowns meant that interviews and observations went from in-person to online. This meant that I was often interviewing participants in their own homes, which presented a number of ethical challenges. For example, conducting interviews over Zoom meant that I received information about their lives that I would not otherwise have had access to (i.e., information related to their living situation), and that some participants may not have felt comfortable sharing (e.g., Kozar, 2016). Likewise, as I had my camera on during the interviews, there was also the potential for participants to see certain aspects of my life that I may not have typically chosen to share. Fortunately, I had a dedicated space in my house where I could work which I felt comfortable for participants to see. However, a number of participants took part in the study from their bedrooms, whereas others were in shared spaces (e.g., kitchens, living rooms) in which other members of the household were sometimes present. As such, there was also the potential that our conversation would be overheard, which may have impacted participants responses. To address these issues, I made sure to tell each participant that although I had my camera on, there was no expectation for them to turn theirs on. Where participants

chose not to turn their camera on, I also offered to turn mine off if it would made them feel more comfortable. In terms of being overheard, I checked with participants at the beginning of each interview that they were in a place where they felt comfortable to talk openly, and let participants know that I was in a separate room in my house with the door closed, so our conversation would not be overheard by anyone in my household, other than me.

4.2.10 Methodological Rigour

According to Smith et al. (2014), the most appropriate way to judge the quality of a qualitative study is by how well the chosen methodology is employed. The issue of quality related to GT studies in sport and exercise have been extensively discussed (see Weed, 2009, 2010; Holt & Tamminen, 2010a, 2010b; Holt et al., 2022). In their recent paper, Holt et al. (2022) emphasise that all GT studies should select and report an approach to evaluate the rigour of the use of GT within the study. For the present study, rigour was judged against the criteria proposed by Holt and Tamminen (2010b) that infer the quality of a GT study using the concept of 'methodological coherence.'

First, Holt and Tamminen (2010b) suggest that the *epistemological and ontological underpinnings* and that *the research question* should match *the variant of GT that is used* (i.e., Glaserian, Straussian, Contructivist). For the present study, the philosophical underpinnings and choice of research question influenced the selection of Straussian GT as an appropriate methodology. Moreover, once the choice had been made to adopt a Straussian GT approach, all subsequent research decisions were made in line with this approach. For example, during data analysis, I used analytic tools that are specific to Straussian GT, such as waving the red flag and the flip-flop technique, to enhance theoretical sensitivity (Corbin and Strauss, 2015). I also engaged in axial coding, a key feature of Straussian GT (Rieger, 2019), to identify links between concepts and/or categories.

Second, the guidance addresses the issues of *participant sampling* and *sample size*. In contrast to other methodologies, core components of GT are the use of theoretical sampling and theoretical saturation when determining suitable participants and deciding when to stop collecting data (e.g., Corbin & Strauss; 2015). Within the present study, I engaged in theoretical sampling by purposively sampling participants who would provide insights into the developing concepts. For instance, I sampled swimmers at various stages in their careers to fully explore the concept of socialisation into a high-performance swimming environment. I also recruited swimmers who were not part of a high-

performance team or any formal development pathway, as well as retired swimmers, for comparison. This sampling strategy allowed me to fully develop the concept of socialisation into high-performance swimming in terms of its properties and dimensions and enabled me to identify links between concepts.

Third, methodological coherence should also be apparent throughout *the planning and execution of data collection and analysis*. In line with Holt and Tamminen's (2010b) recommendations, the present study was designed as an iterative process, with data collection and analysis occurring concurrently throughout the study duration. Moreover, during the data analysis process, several methods were utilised that are congruent with a GT methodology (i.e., memos, diagrams, constant comparison).

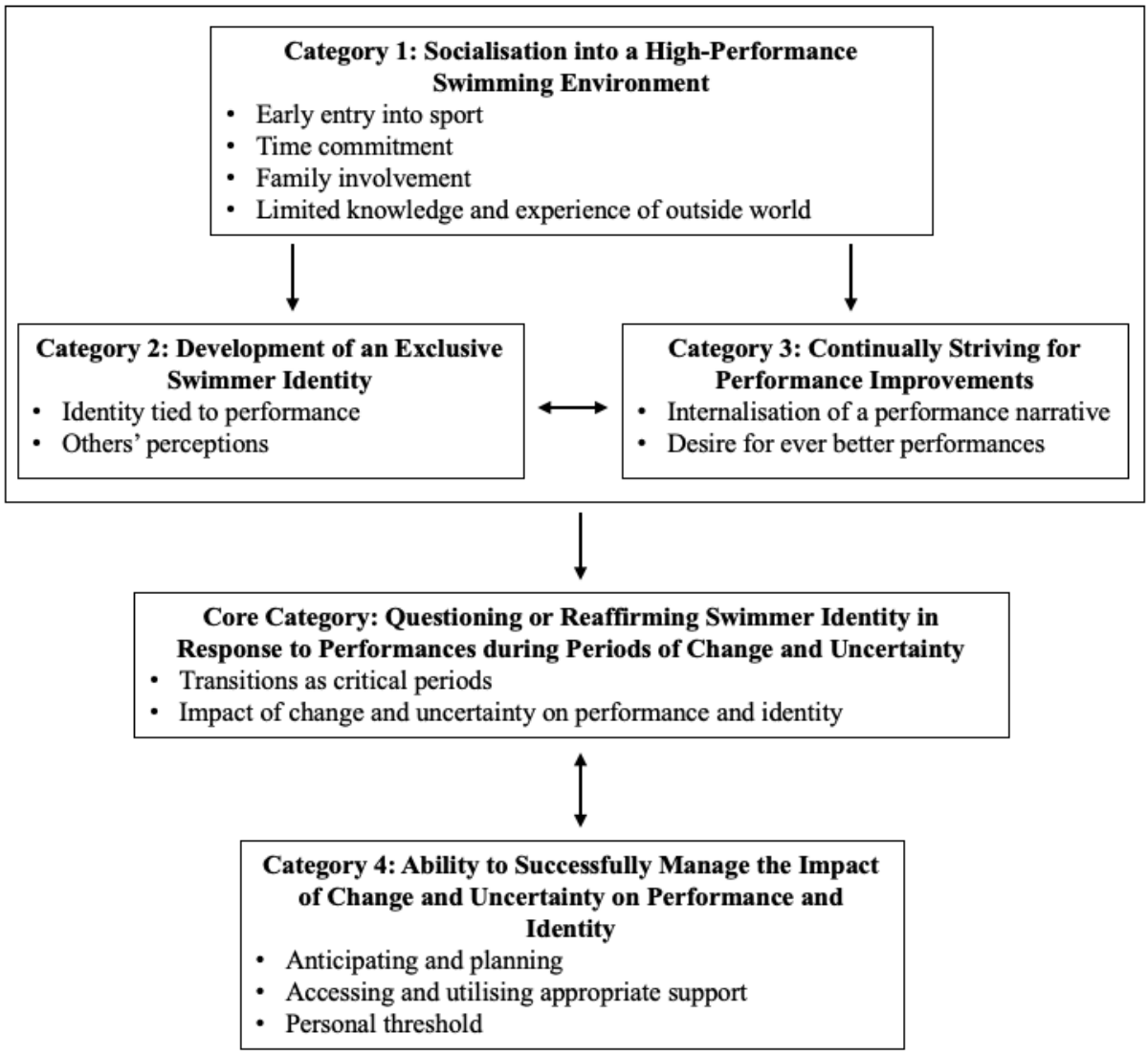
Finally, Holt and Tamminen (2010b) note that a key component of any GT methodology is *theory generation*, and it has been suggested that the generation of theory should be the aim of any GT study (e.g., Corbin and Strauss, 2008). Theory can be thought of as a framework of interrelated categories that explain a phenomenon (Hage, 1972, p. 34). As such, I have presented the results of the present study as a set of related categories, rather than a descriptive set of themes. Taken together, the categories and their relationships with each other provide a substantive theory of the process through which participation in high-performance swimming affects athlete wellbeing, that is open to future exploration and modification.

4.3 Results

The purpose of this study was to explore how participation in high-performance swimming may affect athlete wellbeing. Through an iterative process of data collection and analysis, I constructed the GT detailed in Figure 4.3 which illustrates the four categories (and the underlying concepts) that are centralised around the core category of 'questioning or reaffirming swimmer identity in response to performances during periods of change and uncertainty.' The arrows show the links between the categories. An explanation of the overall theory, including the relationships between categories, is provided immediately following the figure. Subsequently, each of the categories are then explained in more detail, with data excerpts to provide further insights from the perspective of the participants.

Figure 4.3

A Grounded Theory of the Process through which Participation in High-Performance Swimming Affects Athlete Wellbeing



The proposed theory suggests that the swimmers involved in this study had been socialised into a high-performance swimming environment (category 1) from a young age. Through this socialisation process, swimmers learnt that swimming requires a substantial time commitment, with training in the mornings and the afternoons. As a result, they came to believe that, if they want to become elite swimmers, swimming needed to be a central focus in their life. In buying into these norms, the swimmers developed a very strong, and oftentimes exclusive, swimmer identity (i.e., they saw themselves only as a swimmer) (category 2). While this identity development was occurring, the swimmers often spent time in competitive environments where they were continually striving to demonstrate

improvements in their performance (category 3) – through improved personal best times, beating select rivals, being selected for certain teams and events, or achieving places in specific competitions.

Against this backdrop, swimmer wellbeing was perceived as most likely to be affected in situations where performance was impacted, because of the impact of performance on swimmer identity. In particular, transitions were highlighted as critical points when wellbeing might be affected, because of the potential for the change and uncertainty that characterised these periods to affect swimmers' performance and their identity (core category). Specifically, changes in performance during these times led swimmers to either question their identity as a swimmer (which negatively affected wellbeing), or reaffirmed their identity as a swimmer (which positively affected wellbeing). For example, if swimmers were injured, or experiencing difficult times at school, or relationship issues, this could negatively affect their performance and lead them to question their identity as a swimmer, which had a detrimental impact on wellbeing. In contrast, if swimmers experienced a positive performance during such a time, it reaffirmed their swimming identity and correspondingly enhanced wellbeing.

However, the effects of transitions on wellbeing could be mitigated depending on how successfully swimmers were able to cope with the impact of change or uncertainty on performance and identity (category 4). In particular, if swimmers were able to anticipate and prepare for the impact that change and uncertainty might have on performance and/or identity then the consequences for their wellbeing were reduced. For example, swimmers who knew that there may be a period of decreased performance (actual or relative) during the junior-to-senior transition could mentally prepare for this, meaning declines in performance during this time were less likely to threaten their identity as a swimmer and, in turn, less likely to negatively affect their wellbeing. Further, if swimmers could access and use appropriate support to cope with the change and uncertainty, the impact on their wellbeing was reduced. For example, the emotional and practical support that some swimmers received from their peers, coaches, and family members helped them to feel reassured that they were good enough even when they felt disappointed with their performances.

4.3.1 Category 1: Socialisation into a High-Performance Swimming Environment

It was apparent that the swimmers who took part in the study had been involved in swimming from a young age. Illustrating the early age that swimmers started in the sport, Swimmer 8 mentioned that they had, "literally always been swimming" and Swimmer 19

noted, “I haven’t really known a time where I haven’t swum.” Additionally, Retired Swimmer 2 reflected, “my life was swimming and that’s all I did, I just went to the pool, trained my hardest, went home, had food and went to bed, that’s what I just did.” As a result of swimming from such a young age, many swimmers felt that they had, “grown up in swimming.” As Retired Swimmer 2 highlighted, “I think I’ve experienced every stage [of the performance pathway].”

In addition, the substantial amount of training required by the sport meant that swimmers had limited opportunities for experiences outside of swimming. For example, Support Staff 4 observed that, across the sports they worked with, swimming was “one of the sports that has the most hours associated with it.” Indeed, the swimmers I observed regularly trained twice a day on most days of the week, which meant they often missed out on other experiences. This point was highlighted by Swimmer 21, who noted, “[be]cause of like the time restraints with the hours of training, you miss out on things.” Similarly, Swimmer 5 explained, “it’s like if ever [friends] are like ‘oh do you want to come and do this?’, [I’m] like ‘no I’m swimming’ like, ‘oh what about this?’, like ‘no I’m swimming’… I can’t do any of that stuff.” Retired Swimmer 2 mentioned, “I felt like I missed out on a lot growing up.”

Further, several swimmers also had parent(s) and/or siblings that had previously been, or currently were, involved in swimming. For instance, Swimmer 6 noted, “my dad used to swim, he was very good like he went [abroad] on a swimming scholarship.” Similarly, Swimmer 11 mentioned, “my mum and my dad, they’ve been swimming coaches all their life and my mum started swimming when she was quite young as well I just sort of got into it like my mum did.” For Swimmer 15, they felt that swimming was something that the whole family was involved in. They stated, “my mum coaches in swimming… she coaches my sister… and then my dad officiates.”

Consequently, it was perceived that many swimmers had little knowledge of the world outside of swimming. As Support Staff 5 highlighted, “a lot of them, I think, don't really know that much about the outside world apart from swimming.” Indeed, participants often referred to “the swimming bubble” when talking about high-performance swimming. Coach 4 described this concept, explaining:

> We live in a bubble, you know, we live in that elite sport bubble where, the things that we take as you know, these are essential, they don’t even come onto the radar of a normal human being… we talk about you know, marginal gains and all this

stuff and tweaking your position a little bit... we just do live in a confined fenced of little community that other people will never get to experience or ever understand.

As a result of the amount time spent in a high-performance swimming environment coupled with a lack knowledge of the outside world, swimmers became socialised into a high-performance swimming environment and learnt to think, feel, and behave in ways that were socially accepted and encouraged within this context. For example, Retired Swimmer 2 explained that they learnt to modify their behaviours to, "fit into the mould of what their perfect one [swimmer] needed to be [because] if you didn't fit that, you were pushed aside." Specifically, the high-performance swimming environment was perceived to promote a focus on performance above all else. For example, when describing the high-performance swimming environment, Support Staff 5 stated, "it's so performance driven." Similarly, Retired Swimmer 2 recalled, "it [the environment] was all about performance." This focus on performance often meant that swimmers were expected not to engage in any activities that might their affect ability to train. For example, Retired Swimmer 2 explained, "my funding got cut, so I had to get a job, and they said to us, if your job affects your training hours then you shouldn't be a performance swimmer." Further, this swimmer also noted how the high-performance swimming environment meant they did not think about their wellbeing before they retired because, "it wasn't promoted, at all... it just wasn't really seen as a factor to improve performance."

4.3.2 Category 2: Development of an Exclusive Swimmer Identity

As a result of starting swimming at a young age combined with their limited engagement in activities outside of swimming, many swimmers felt that they had developed an exclusive swimmer identity – i.e. they saw themselves and their worth as being solely related to swimming. For example, Swimmer 14 emphasised that swimming, "[is] an inseparable sort of thing from my character" and Retired Swimmer 1 recalled, "identity-wise, [I] always wanted to swim, always wanted to be an Olympic athlete, always wanted to actually have that future career in swimming." Thus, it was clear that many identified strongly with being a swimmer and, consequently, took the role of being a swimmer seriously. Swimmer 19 emphasised this point, stating, "I take [swimming] seriously, it's not like a little bit of fun like on the side."

Further, it appeared that swimmers' identity was closely tied to their performances in the pool. The link between performance and identity appeared to be linked to swimmers' early experiences in the sport, as many swimmers recalled achieving multiple successes at competitions. For example, Swimmer 8 recalled, "I used to win a lot so when I was that

young age, I just used to win everything." These early experiences of fostered the belief that "being a swimmer" and "performing well" were one and the same - if you want to be a swimmer you must perform well and if you perform well you can call yourself a swimmer. Later, the link between performance and identity was further reinforced by the high-performance swimming environment itself, as swimmers found they were treated differently depending on how they had performed. In relation to wellbeing for instance, Retired Swimmer 2 explained, "if you're performing well, your wellbeing is their number one priority and then, if you're not performing well, it's not."

Not only did those within the swimming environment influence and encourage swimmers to develop an exclusive swimmer identity, participants explained that it was also emphasised or reinforced by others outside of swimming. In particular, many swimmers recounted how other people (particularly those outside of swimming) would often refer to them as "the swimmer." For example, Swimmer 13 mentioned, "I'm always known as the swimmer, the [person] that swims, and I think I'm pretty sure most of the people at my, at my school will remember me as the swimmer, not anything else." For some, this perception that they were solely a swimmer was frustrating, as Swimmer 2 explained:

> Some people don't know me as [name], they just know me as the swimmer and I'm just like, come on, like I've got a name do you know what I mean… that affects me massively when people don't ask me about me, they just ask about swimming... I'd say that bothers me because I think to myself, I'm so much more than just a swimmer.

Indeed, a number of swimmers highlighted that, although swimming was a large part of their identity, there were other aspects that were just as important. Speaking about this, Swimmer 21 indicated, "I don't like to be named as, if someone's talking about me, 'oh yeah, the swimmer', I'd like to think that they say like other things about like me as a person." Nevertheless, even though Swimmer 21 wanted to be recognised by others as having interests outside of swimming, they still identified as a swimmer. They explained:

> I've kinda realised I am a swimmer, and that's not going to change for a good while because I have an overriding goal that I'm working towards, you know, be it a world university games or Commonwealth games, Olympic games, like that's where I want to be three, four years down the line.

4.3.4 Category 3: Continually Striving for Performance Improvements

The combination of being in an environment that focused on performance above all else and having a swimmer identity that was closely tied to their performances in the pool

meant that many of the swimmers had internalised a “performance narrative.” That is, swimmers were constantly seeking ever-better performances, to the exclusion of everything else in their lives. Illustrating this point, Retired Swimmer 1 remembered, “the importance of performing well in swimming outweighed everything, shamefully.” They elaborated, “my identity and my goals and everything was shaped around the sport, that meant that when I was succeeding in sport and I was happy in sport, would be reflected in every area of my life.” Similarly, Swimmer 14 recalled, “I was like, kind of in a way obsessed with trying to perfect my swimming and my performance.” In seeking to achieve performance improvements, many swimmers prioritised swimming over other life areas. For example. Swimmer 7 noted that, “Uni work will take a massive back seat... it shouldn’t be like that but in my head, my swimming is coming first.” Similarly, Retired Swimmer 2 recalled, “all my life, [it] has never been swimming that has had to give, it’s always been my priority.” In an attempt to explain why they prioritised swimming, Swimmer 16 noted, “I feel like I put so much more time into it that it's kind of more important.”

In relation to what characterised a “good” performance, participants had differing views. For some, a good performance meant beating others and winning. Reflecting this, Swimmer 2 stated, “obviously I swim to win.” Similarly, Swimmer 7 explained:

> I can’t lose at anything, well I can, it’s probably very possible, I do lose at a lot but, I don’t take it well, I don’t like losing at anything... I don’t like losing more than I enjoy winning... by inference though I would always want to win because I don’t want to come second because that’s still losing, but I’d rather not lose to anybody, I don’t like anyone being better than me at anything... I really couldn’t care less about medals or winning things or anything like that, even prize money, it doesn’t bother me at all, I just don’t want anyone to be better than me.

For others, a good performance was related to personal development and becoming better than they were before. As Swimmer 14 indicated, “for me, a good performance would be a performance that I can say reflects my work… like, your performance reflects your training.” Regardless of how swimmers characterised a good performance, swim times were considered to be the best indicator of performance. This focus on time as an indicator of performance reflected the nature of competitive swimming, where progression in the sport and support opportunities often depend on swim times. Emphasising this point, Support Staff 2 explained, “you can perform the very best to your ability but actually if two people go quicker than you at Olympic trials, you won’t get selected.”

However, it appeared that no matter how well swimmers performed, they often felt

that they could do better. For instance, speaking about how they felt when they achieved a new personal best, Swimmer 16 noted, “I think, yeah, I've done it, but could I have done better? Like, what if I take my PB, and gone faster again?” Similarly, Swimmer 17 indicated that, if they achieved a personal best, they would, “be happy for about a week and then I would set myself another goal or find out if there's another competition.” Indeed, it was clear that for some swimmers, their desire to keep performing better led to them feeling “not good enough” even when they had achieved life-long goals. As Retired Swimmer 3 recalled:

> When I was young I was like ‘oh if I ever get to the Olympics, that will be amazing’ and then you make it and after that it’s like you’re not good enough, you want to get a medal... looking back, the fact that I actually went anyway, twice, is amazing but, you lose sight of that.

Making a similar point, Swimmer 9 explained, “I always have quite high expectations of myself as well. So, even if I do race well, I always think, I can do better. I don’t think I’ve ever raced and thought, that’s the best I can do, if that makes sense.” In addition, Swimmer 6 noted how continually striving to achieve better performances had negatively affected how they felt about competitions. They explained, “[I] don’t like racing, because it got to the point where like, even when I swam well and PB’d, I still felt like I should be doing better.”

4.3.5 Core Category: Questioning or Reaffirming Swimmer Identity in Response to Performances During Periods of Change and Uncertainty

Because swimmers were continually striving for ever better performances, their wellbeing was most likely to be affected in situations where performance was impacted. For example, talking specifically about one swimmer they coached, Coach 3 described, “it certainly affects his wellbeing when he doesn’t train well, his mood changes quite drastically, he starts to doubt whether it’s all worth doing, yeah he starts to doubt himself quite a lot.” Retired Swimmer 1 made a similar point, noting how a plateau in performance led to them, “questioning if I was good enough to actually make the transition to an elite level, to an Olympic level and [I] really struggled with confidence issues.” Conversely, wellbeing was perceived to be positively influenced when swimmers performed well, because it positively reflected on how they thought of themselves and reaffirmed their identity. Illustrating this, Swimmer 11 remembered, “I got a gold medal in I think it was 100 back or something... I felt really good about myself then. I felt like ‘oh yeah, I did really well’ and I felt everything was going really good.” Similarly, Swimmer 21 noted

how, “Getting medals helps to show that [swimmer identity] off and shows like, why I get up at 5:00 AM three times a week, swim seven sessions a week, while going to school, doing GCSEs.”

In seeking to understand in which situations performance (and consequently perception of identity and wellbeing) might be impacted, participants typically described experiences involving various normative (e.g., junior to senior transition, retirement, starting university), non-normative (e.g., adapting to a new coach, change in funding), and non-event types of transitions (e.g., not being selected for a squad, cancelled competitions due to COVID-19) that occurred both inside and outside of the swimming environment. For example, Retired Swimmer 3 recalled how their wellbeing was negatively affected when they retired from the sport. They noted, “I was all over the place.” Similarly, Swimmer 8 described the negative affect that a new coach had on their wellbeing, saying, “[Coach] retired and a new coach came in. She wasn’t great...I just had a terrible year...It was depressing.” For Swimmer 10, they felt that their wellbeing was negatively affected when they started a new school after moving to a new house. They recalled, “that was hard… that was like a down point for me.” Conversely, Swimmer 5 felt that the transition to a new club had a positive impact on their wellbeing, due to the increased support they received from their new club. They explained:

> Actually having a support network from the swimming [has had the biggest impact on wellbeing], because I had nothing at [old club], like if ever I had a problem and went to the coaches about it, nothing happened...there was just no support anything...like here, if ever I’ve got any problems, they get sorted and I get help for them.

Although the specific experiences participants spoke about varied, they all shared certain characteristics, namely, they all involved change and/or uncertainty. With regards to uncertainty, Support Staff 2 noted, “uncertainty could be anything. It could be uncertainty around what they think their coach is thinking, their training programme, what they think somebody else is thinking.” Indeed, uncertainty was a pertinent factor for one swimmer when speaking about the effect of the current COVID-19 pandemic on their wellbeing. Swimmer 15 explained, “it’s quite stressful because we don't know what's going to happen yet. Cause like it's not certain… they've given us like what they think could happen, but it's not like exactly what is going to happen.” Similarly, Coach 1 reflected that many swimmers they coached struggled with the transition to the university high-performance squad as they were often uncertain about what was expected of them. They

commented, “those first two, three weeks, most swimmers have some form of meltdown.” However, Coach 1 also noted “by the time they get to second or third year, they’ll have adapted and coped and know what everything is about.”

Although situations associated with change or uncertainty had the potential to impact swimmers’ performances, it was the influence of these performances on identity that affected wellbeing. For example, swimmers noted how declines in performance resulted in them feeling their identity as a swimmer was threatened which resulted in decreased wellbeing. This was highlighted by Swimmer 22, who explained, “when you have like [a] few months of bad swims, you sort of do sort of think about, um, whether you would identify as a swimmer or not. And it is quite a difficult time.” Similarly, Retired Swimmer 2 stated, “you start to doubt yourself.” In contrast, if swimmers experienced an improvement in their performance as a result of a changing situation, this reaffirmed their identity as a swimmer and a positive impact on wellbeing was noted. Illustrating this point, Swimmer 1 recalled how their wellbeing was positively affected by an unexpectedly good performance that confirmed their identity through recognition by others and the opportunities that this gave them. They described:

> I went from 24 to like 7 [in the country] so people were like, she was in heat number 1, now she’s in the final... I remember I got recognised to go on this [swim camp] and then I got into [performance centre] from those swims I did.

4.3.6 Category 4: Ability to Successfully Manage the Impact of Change and Uncertainty on Performance and Identity

Despite the potential for situations characterised by change and uncertainty to affect wellbeing because of their impact on performance and identity, it did not occur in every situation. Rather, whether wellbeing was affected and in which direction (i.e., positively or negatively) ultimately depended on a swimmer’s ability to successfully manage the impact of said change and uncertainty on their performance and identity. Illustrating this point, Coach 2 stated, “all life has uncertainty and stress, it’s just about how you deal with it and how you manage it.” For those who were able to successfully manage the impact of change and uncertainty, wellbeing was positively affected, whereas for those who struggled, wellbeing was negatively impacted. Illustrating the negative impact of not managing successfully, Coach 3 described:

> It all piles up and they don’t manage themselves as well as they possibly could do... it would start to affect how they’re thinking and, and their wellbeing and their levels of stress and the rest of it... it just spirals out of control.

In terms of being able to successfully manage the impact of change and uncertainty on performance, identity, and wellbeing, participants perceived this could be facilitated by anticipating and preparing for the potential impact of change and uncertainty, in combination with accessing and utilising appropriate support strategies during periods of change and uncertainty. Further, participants felt that each swimmer had a personal threshold with the amount of change and uncertainty they were able to cope with, influenced by age and experience.

In relation to anticipating the impact of change and uncertainty, Swimmer 1 explained how anticipating the impact of moving squads on performance helped to mitigate the negative effects of a plateau in performance on their wellbeing, as it was something they were expecting. They said, “I already know that when I go to a new club, you start with new training, new coaches, new facilities and stuff, you’re never going to go forwards straight away.” In addition, anticipating when periods of change and uncertainty may occur in the future allowed swimmers to prepare for the potential impact of these and ensure that they had support in place. As Support Staff 7 explained, “[you can] start to map out and identify some of the challenges that are going to come ahead. Cause then you can design strategies around that can’t you? You can put plans in place.”

The first stage of anticipating and preparing for the impact of change and uncertainty involved planning, which helped swimmers by reducing uncertainty. Talking about this, Swimmer 22 mentioned how they would plan and the impact that planning has had on their wellbeing. They explained:

> I plan my entire year out, in a book, month by month. So I sort of predict what I think will happen over the months, um, what I need to do. And, um, sort of make a plan as it goes along, it might change, but the outline of everything will still be the same... It’s really useful. it is massive help, especially like, especially at times like this now where you don't know what's going on.

As a result, Swimmer 22 recalled how their wellbeing was positively affected, as planning reduced uncertainty, and gave them a sense of control. They explained, “I was struggling with anxiety. I didn't feel like I had a grip on anything. And then when I started to do this [planning], I started to get sort of a hold on things again.” In addition, planning also helped swimmers to be able to communicate with those around them. As Support Staff 4 highlighted, “[planning is] quite a practical tool for them but it’s that tool that enables them to go and have a conversation... and have something that they can refer to when they're

trying to have that conversation." Coach 3 emphasised, "I think communication is key and the more they communicate about things, then the things don't look as bad."

Linked to anticipating and preparing, it was important that swimmers were also able to access and utilise appropriate support, as this helped to mitigate the impact of change and uncertainty on performance, as well as the impact of poor performance on identity. Social support appeared to be particularly important, and swimmers highlighted a range of sources of social support that they felt were helpful. For example, Retired Swimmer 2 reflected on the importance of peer support, saying, "the friendship which you get from swimming is something which you couldn't get in many other sports." In addition, Swimmer 20 felt that the support their coach provided improved their confidence and belief in their abilities. They explained:

> So, if say I've done a really good set in swimming and I've worked really hard and my coach has then said to me afterwards, well done, that was a really, really good set. That will sort of like solidify the fact that I had a good set.

Further, participants also highlighted how the social support they received outside of swimming helped them to manage during periods of change and uncertainty. For example, Swimmer 11 highlighted how family support was helpful when they had not performed as well as they had hoped, mentioning, "my gran... she's always there for me... she will just be there and be like yeah, you did really well. Don't worry about it. We'll do even better next time and she'll like believe in me." In addition to family support, Retired Swimmer 2 recalled how support from their school helped, noting, "I did get a lot of support from school which I'm lucky to have... they were really, really helpful... I went all over the shop to sit exams, and the school were really facilitating in that."

However, not all swimmers felt fully supported by everybody around them. For example, Swimmer 9 stated, "a lot of the time at school, other people, other students, or even teachers sometimes would think it's not a particularly worthwhile pursuit, that I should probably give it up." Similarly, Retired Swimmer 1 recalled how they did not feel supported by their coach, noting, "I almost felt like actually rather than kind of like building me up to be the best swimmer I could be, they were almost like, like restricting me, of my potential, which mentally that was really tough." Furthermore, some swimmers felt that their access to certain support depended on their performances in the pool. This was highlighted by Retired Swimmer 2 who mentioned:

> If [performance] drops off a little bit then the support is still there, then if you continuously up and down, up and down, up and down, it's kind of like they get

> frustrated with you... so yeah, that support which you get from all the staff, not just the coaching staff but the welfare staff, and the psych staff, that gets slowly taken away from you.

For other swimmers, even though their performances were better than their teammates, they were not able to access support because they were not funded. As Retired Swimmer 1 recalled, “My PB was faster than them but ultimately, they were getting all the physio, the sport science support, the psych support because they were on [national] funding.”

Finally, when considering what influenced swimmers’ ability to manage successfully, participants also indicated that there was individual variation in relation to the amount of change and uncertainty swimmers were able to manage at any one time. Coach 4 emphasised this point, stating:

> Everyone, if you like, has probably got a threshold, you know, if there’s one thing gone on, we can deal with it, we can carry on as normal but for some people two things going on that’s too much and they start to break, for other people it may be six.

In relation to what influenced the amount of change and uncertainty a swimmer was able to manage, age and experience were highlighted as key factors. For example, related to age, Coach 1 highlighted how younger swimmers often found it harder to manage, due to their (lack of) psychological development. They explained, “it’s really hard for them to understand, so they get upset then, so you’re managing that emotional reaction then, because you get an emotional reaction off them rather than a sit down, logical reaction.”

Similarly, Coach 8 mentioned, I think the older the swimmers, I think they manage that [performance plateaus] better because they understand it’s part of the process.” With regards to experience, it was thought that swimmers who were able to draw on similar past experiences were often better able to manage as they knew what to expect. Highlighting this point, Swimmer 8 mentioned how races no longer affected their wellbeing, because “I’ve done it enough times now to understand what I need to do to race well with everything really, diet, timings and warm up and everything.” Further, Coach 4 felt that those who had experienced difficulties in their life previously had a higher threshold than those who had not. They explained, “Some of the guys have had to go through stuff and adversity in their lives, others haven’t you know, some of them have had a silver spoon... maybe that influences where the threshold is.” Coach 2 made a similar point, stating, “quite often it’s the kid who, do you know what, has had to struggle a little bit all the way [who manages better].”

4.4 Discussion

The aim of the present study was to explore how participation in high-performance swimming may affect athlete wellbeing. In achieving this aim, I created a substantive GT, which draws together a range of different concepts to illustrate the interactions between individual, social, and environmental factors that subsequently impact on swimmer's wellbeing. The proposed theory illustrates the substantial and sustained influence of the culture within high-performance swimming on identity formation and highlights how the dominance of a performance narrative can lead to a focus on continual performance improvement which influences the development and maintenance of a swimmer identity. Against this backdrop, the theory suggests that swimmer wellbeing is most likely to be affected during periods of change and uncertainty, due to the potential for these periods to impact on swimmers' performance (and subsequently identity). However, the GT indicates that the effects of change and uncertainty on wellbeing can be mitigated if a swimmer is able to effectively manage the impact of change and uncertainty on performance and identity, and highlights the key role of planning and social support in this process.

Many of the elements of the proposed theory have previously been linked to athlete wellbeing within the extant sport psychology literature. For example, supportive environments (e.g., Kuettel et al., 2021), access to social support (e.g., Coyle et al., 2017), and the use of effective coping strategies (e.g., Pankow et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) have been positively linked to athlete wellbeing and mental health, whereas extreme athletic identity (e.g., Doherty et al., 2016). sporting failure (e.g., Newman et al., 2016), and dysfunctional coping strategies (e.g., Nixdorf et al., 2013) have been highlighted as risk factors related to athlete mental illness. However, what is unique about the present study is that, through the development of a grounded theory, I have been able to identify how these individual factors interact and influence each other to explain when, why, and how the wellbeing of swimmers is likely to be affected. In doing so, it is possible to explain why swimmers who are in seemingly similar situations may experience differing effects on their wellbeing.

Specifically, the proposed grounded theory indicates that transitions represent critical periods where swimmer wellbeing is likely to be affected. Given that transitions are defined by change (Anderson et al., 2011) and often characterised by uncertainty (Stambulova, 2009), it is perhaps unsurprising that swimmer wellbeing was perceived as most likely to be affected during transitions. Indeed, previous studies have extensively documented the impact of various transitions on athlete wellbeing, including the junior-to-

senior transition (e.g., Drew et al., 2019; Stambulova, 2017), returning from a major games such as the Olympics (e.g., Bennie et al., 2021; Howells & Lucassen, 2018), and retiring from sport (e.g., Cosh et al., 2021; Jewett et al., 2019). However, the findings of the present study further our understanding of why transitions affect wellbeing by suggesting that it is not necessarily the transition itself that impacts swimmer wellbeing. Instead, findings suggest that it is the potential for change and uncertainty (i.e., the characteristics of transitions) to impact on performance and, subsequently, the influence of changes in performance on athletic identity, that affects wellbeing.

For example, the proposed GT illustrates how sporting performances during transitions can affect swimmers' wellbeing positively or negatively depending on whether performance goals are achieved (or not), because of the impact of those performances on identity. The findings illustrate how, when performance goals are not achieved, swimmers' identities become threatened. Alternatively, if performance goals are achieved, swimmers' identities are confirmed and reinforced. Within the extant sport psychology literature, findings from previous studies that have explored the association between athletic identity and wellbeing are inconsistent. For example, some studies suggest that a stronger athletic identity is positively associated with several psychological outcomes that are linked to wellbeing, including increased self-esteem (Stephan & Brewer, 2007), motivation to train (Van Raalte et al., 1992), and sport satisfaction (Burns et al., 2012). However, other studies indicate that higher levels of exclusivity (a sub-facet of athletic identity) and identity foreclosure (i.e., where one identity is prioritised to the exclusion of all others) are linked to poorer wellbeing and mental health outcomes at certain times, such as during retirement (e.g., Diehl et al., 2020; Haslam et al., 2021) and periods of injury (e.g., Renton et al., 2021). In light of the present study's findings, it may be suggested that having an exclusive athletic identity is not necessarily an issue for wellbeing in itself, rather the problem occurs when an athlete develops an identity that is solely tied to performance outcomes and that athlete is unable to perform in a way that is satisfactory to them. In this situation, their identity becomes threatened which, in turn, negatively affects wellbeing.

Linked to above, the findings of the present study highlight the important role that sport culture has in facilitating and maintaining the development of an athletic identity closely tied to performance outcomes. Within the extant sport literature, culture has been defined as "a dynamic process characterized by the shared values, beliefs, expectations and practices across the members and generations of a defined group" (Cruikshank & Collins 2012, p. 340). With regards to the present study, it was clear that the culture of high-

performance swimming was largely centred around the *performance narrative*, a story of determined and unwavering dedication to sport performance to the exclusion of all other areas of life and self (e.g., Douglas and Carless, 2006). As part of this narrative, success and achievements are highly valued and become closely tied to self-worth, identity, and wellbeing (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006; 2009; Carless & Douglas, 2013).

Research suggests that the performance narrative is dominant across elite sport (e.g., Douglas & Carless, 2006) and more recent studies indicate that performance narratives are also common within youth sport (e.g., Haraldsen et al., 2021; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2020; Tamminen et al., 2017). However, despite its dominance, the performance narrative is not the only narrative that is available to athletes. Indeed, previous studies have highlighted that success in elite sport is possible even for athletes who reject the performance narrative. For instance, based on the experiences of seven professional golfers, Douglas and Carless (2006) proposed two alternatives to the performance narrative through which success in sport can be achieved: *the discovery narrative,* where sport is viewed as an opportunity through which to discover and experience life and *the relational narrative,* where sport is seen as an activity through which a person can meaningfully connect and relate to others. Given the negative consequences associated with the performance narrative, these alternative narratives and approaches to elite sport are appealing.

However, it is important to note that a lack of alignment between the individual athlete's narrative and the dominant narrative promoted by the sport can increase the risk of an athlete experiencing identity challenges and poor mental health (Haraldsen et al., 2021). As such, given that the findings of the present study indicate that the performance narrative is ingrained within the culture of high-performance swimming, the adoption of an alternative narrative by individual swimmers may actually hinder their wellbeing. Instead, rather than placing the emphasis on the need for individuals to change, a substantial culture change to introduce an alternative narrative within high performance swimming (and sport more broadly) should be the priority. Unfortunately, culture is complex and there are likely multiple subcultures that exist within the broader culture (McDoughall et al., 2020). Therefore, this process is unlikely to be a simple step-by-step process, rather it will be a challenging and time-intensive task, requiring an ongoing process of exploration, reflection, and negotiation to re-construct beliefs (Cruikshank et al., 2015).

In addition to culture change, the findings of the present study suggest that swimmers can mitigate the impact of transitions on wellbeing, by minimising the impact of

change and uncertainty on their performance and identity. Such impact can be reduced through the use of various strategies such as anticipating and planning for transitions and accessing and utilising appropriate support. In seeking to understand why anticipating and planning for transitions may mitigate potential negative impacts on wellbeing, it may be the case that anticipating and planning for future transitions reduces some of the uncertainty surrounding the transition. Given that uncertainty is an underlying property of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), anticipating and planning for transitions may help the athlete to perceive the transition as less stressful and alleviate some of the anxiety associated with stress through increased feelings of control over the situation. As high levels of anxiety coupled with low perceived control can have debilitative effects on performance (Jones, 1995), it is likely that this strategy will help to alleviate some of the negative impacts that the transition may have on performance, meaning that athletic identity is unlikely to be threatened and, subsequently, wellbeing is less likely to be affected negatively.

In relation to support, the findings highlight that swimmers who have access to and make use of social support networks are better able to cope with the demands associated with the change and uncertainty, resulting in more favourable wellbeing outcomes. Specifically, the findings suggested that, to manage the impact of transitions on their performance and identity (and therefore wellbeing), swimmers drew on their social networks provide a range of emotional (e.g., friends and family listening, empathising, and reassuring), tangible (e.g., teachers allowing time off for competitions), and informational (e.g., coaches providing feedback on what went well and what could be improved) support. This fits with the current literature on social support in sport suggests that athletes seek support from a wide range of sources (e.g., coaches, parents, peers) throughout their career (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Further, the literature suggests that social support is generally associated with positive wellbeing outcomes (e.g., Gagne, 2003; Rees & Hardy, 2000). However, not all support is associated with positive outcomes; some studies have shown that support that is perceived as unavailable, inconsistent, or incompatible with the athlete's needs is associated with lower levels of wellbeing (Felton & Jowett, 2013). Indeed, this was the case in the present study, where swimmers noted the detrimental impact of inconsistent support on their wellbeing. Thus, to foster positive wellbeing outcomes, it is important to ensure that any support offered is reliable, consistent, and matches the needs and preferences of the athlete (Hassall et al., 2010; Rouquette et al., 2021).

4.4.1 Applied Implications

There are several applied implications that should be considered in light of the present study's findings. First, given the influence of early sporting experiences on identity development, sports organisations should be mindful of the culture that they promote within their sports. Importantly, those involved in designing and delivering developmental pathways should seek to foster an environment that is not dominated by a performance narrative, instead ensuring that alternative narratives are promoted and encouraged. This can be done by encouraging those who work with athletes (e.g., coaches, support staff) to change how they talk about sport so that it is less focused solely on performance outcomes, instead focusing on enjoyment and personal growth alongside performance, and actively encouraging the pursuit of interests outside of sport. Some sports organisations are already taking steps in this direction, for example, in 2019 New Zealand removed their junior representative rugby teams in their North Harbour province and their junior club rugby is now run "in a non-competition format, meaning that while individuals, teams and clubs may record tries, conversions, wins, losses and points tables, the Union does not collect and collate scores, keep tables or team placing" (North Harbour Rugby, 2022, April 28). However, it is important that organisations realise that even though they may not be emphasising winning or losing, a focus on achieving personal bests still emphasises performance. As such, organisations should also look to promote enjoyment of the process of learning and developing, rather than achievements.

Second, the findings of the present study suggest that athletes who are experiencing a transition are most likely to experience changes in their wellbeing, with those who have a strong athletic identity that is tied to performance as most at risk of negative wellbeing outcomes. Coaches, practitioners, and those working with high-performance athletes should be aware of the potential impact that transitions can have on athlete wellbeing and should endeavour to support transitioning athletes to anticipate and prepare for these where possible. In combination with culture change and the promotion of alternative narratives of athletic success, workshops where athletes are educated around the different types of transitions and encouraged to think about and plan for some of the transitions that they might face during their career may help to lessen some of the uncertainty surrounding many transitions. Additionally, talks from retired athletes about their experiences of different transitions may provide athletes with a better understanding of how these transitions might impact them and how they might cope. Further, sports organisations should ensure that support is available to athletes who may be going through a transition or

experiencing uncertainty in their lives and encourage athletes to seek support when needed. Organisations should be mindful of creating barriers to support and access to support should not be withdrawn on basis of poor performance, as it is likely that this is when it will be needed the most.

Finally, the findings of the present study have important implications for anyone interested in developing interventions that target the wellbeing of high-performance athletes, an endeavour that is gaining increasing interest because of the substantial number of publications highlighting the potential negative effects that elite sport can have on athlete wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Newman et al., 2016; Rice et al., 2016). So far, most interventions targeting athlete wellbeing and mental health have focused on improving mental health literacy and awareness (e.g., Breslin et al., 2017, Vella et al., 2018). Although increasing awareness and knowledge surrounding mental health is an important and worthwhile pursuit, the findings of the present study suggest that interventions should also seek to increase coping ability, as athletes who are better able to cope during transitions can mitigate the negative effects of transitions on wellbeing. Additionally, future interventions should also intervene at the cultural level, to reduce the likelihood of athletes developing an exclusive athletic identity that is tied to performance.

4.4.2 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings should be considered within their limitations. First, it should be noted that the proposed GT is a substantive theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), meaning that it is specific to the context in which the data were collected. As such, some elements of the theory may not be relevant to other contexts. However, it is likely that the proposed theory will have naturalistic generalisability (Smith, 2018), where some elements of the proposed GT may resonate with other contexts. For example, given that the performance narrative is the dominant narrative in most elite sporting environments (Carless & Douglas, 2006), athletes from a range of sports should be able to find similarities between the proposed GT and their own experiences, in relation to how their sporting performances impact on their athletic identity. However, future research might benefit from using the findings of this study as a starting point to explore the similarities, and nuances, of different environments, both inside and outside of swimming and across other high-performance sports.

Second, the present study focused exclusively on the impact of high-performance swimming on athlete wellbeing. However, it is not only swimmers who operate within this environment. Coaches, sport scientists, and other practitioners such as physiotherapists and sport psychologists are also likely to experience significant demands that have the potential

to negatively affect their wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Arnold et al., 2019; Hill et al., 2021; Norris et al., 2017). Future research should consider exploring this area further, to understand the process through which the wellbeing of coaches and practitioners is affected and the mechanisms that underpin this process, so that interventions that aim to protect and promote the wellbeing of these individuals can be developed. Ensuring the wellbeing of coaches and practitioners may also have a knock-on effect for athlete wellbeing (e.g., Fowler & Christakis, 2008).

Finally, in terms of methodological limitations, Nathaniel (2020) suggests that grounded theories should be delimited to include only categories and concepts that are directly related to the core category. Therefore, it is important to be aware that, with regards to the present study, there may have been other factors that impacted swimmer wellbeing that were not covered by the proposed theory. Further, triangulation of data from different sources (e.g., interviews, observations) is recommended within GT studies to provide a broader understanding of the phenomenon being studied (e.g., Flick, 2019). However, the lockdowns associated with COVID-19 limited the amount that I was able to interact with participants and substantially reduced the amount and type of observations I was able to conduct. As such, the proposed theory has been largely informed by the formal interview data, although data from early observations and informal conversations have influenced the theory development where relevant.

4.5 Conclusion

The present study explored the impact of high-performance swimming on athlete wellbeing. Using a GT methodology, I developed a substantive theory of the process through which engagement in high-performance swimming affects athlete wellbeing. Taken together, the findings of the present study provide context and a deeper understanding of the mechanisms that underpin how high-performance swimmer wellbeing is affected. In particular, the findings indicate that the process by which swimmer wellbeing is affected is highly contextualised and illuminates the substantial and sustained influence of culture on identity formation. Specifically, the proposed GT illustrates how the dominance of a performance narrative can influence the development and maintenance of an exclusive swimmer identity that is tied to performance and threatened when performance goals are not achieved. Subsequently, the theory suggests that transitions represent critical periods where wellbeing is likely to be affected, due to the increased potential for change and uncertainty to impact on performance (and therefore identity). During these periods, the use of key strategies, such as anticipating and planning, as well

as accessing and utilising appropriate support can help to minimise the impact of change and uncertainty on performance and identity. However, to effect the greatest change, there is a need for a cultural shift away from the performance narrative towards more sustainable narrative that sees fluctuations in performance as a normal part of what it means to be an elite athlete.

Chapter 5: Designing, Implementing, and Evaluating an Intervention Aimed at Protecting and Promoting High-Performance Swimmers' Wellbeing

5.1 Introduction

On top of the demands of everyday life, elite athletes experience a range of additional competitive, organisational, and personal stressors related to their sport that have the potential to negatively affect their wellbeing and mental health (Arnold & Fletcher, 2012; Rice et al., 2016). However, the win-at-all-costs culture that dominates many elite sports means that athlete wellbeing is often deprioritised in favour of an unrelenting focus on performance (e.g., Mountjoy, 2019). Yet, wellbeing and performance are not mutually exclusive, rather evidence suggests the two are highly correlated (Van Yperen, 1998). Specifically, high levels of wellbeing are associated with a variety of mental, physical, and social benefits, such as higher resilience, increased immunity, and higher quality relationships that can both directly and indirectly affect performance (Kanksy & Diener, 2017). Thus, it appears that improving wellbeing may facilitate the achievement of performance goals at the same time as improving the experience of athletes who participate in elite sport.

Despite the potential personal and performance benefits, elite athlete wellbeing has continued to be overlooked in elite sport. However, an increasing number of elite athletes are beginning to speak out about their struggles with mental health. For example, Olympic gold medallists Ian Thorpe and Michael Phelps have both publicly spoken about their experiences of depression while swimming (Phelps & Cazeneuve, 2016; Thorpe & Wainwright, 2012). More recently, tennis player Naomi Osaka withdrew from the French Open after facing financial penalties for choosing not to speak to the media in order to protect their mental health (Scott-Bell & Kennedy, 2021). Such high-profile cases have bought the topic of athlete wellbeing and mental health to the fore and several consensus, expert, and position statements have called for the development of targeted athlete mental health interventions that intervene at multiple levels of influence (e.g., coaches, parents) (Chang et al., 2020), are evidence-based (Breslin et al., 2017), and tailored for the context in which they are delivered (Van Slingerland et al., 2019).

Aligned with these calls, numerous athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions have been developed and evaluated within the extant sport psychology literature (see Chapter 2, Section 2.5 for a review). The majority of these interventions aim to protect and promote athlete wellbeing by improving mental health literacy and

awareness (e.g., Breslin et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2018), reducing symptom severity (e.g., Donohue et al., 2018; Dowell et al., 2021), or teaching strategies for stress management (e.g., Dubuc-Charbonneau and Durand-Bush, 2015; Fogaca, 2019). However, these interventions report varying levels of effectiveness (e.g., Sutcliffe et al., 2019). One reason for this may be related to the tendency for extant interventions to target areas related to athlete wellbeing in isolation. For example, although mental health literacy and awareness interventions show moderate to strong effect sizes for increased knowledge (Sutcliffe et al., 2019), this in itself may not be sufficient to improve wellbeing unless athletes are also taught strategies for managing their mental health. Similarly, teaching strategies for stress management on their own may not be useful if athletes are unable to recognise when they are experiencing stress. Thus, when designing interventions, it is essential to keep in mind that athlete wellbeing is complex, with multiple interacting factors that determine how it is influenced and as such, it is likely that interventions will need to target multiple areas to be most effective.

In relation to swimmer wellbeing, the findings from the preceding two chapters of this thesis suggest a number of areas that may be beneficial to incorporate within a wellbeing intervention to maximise effectiveness. For example, the findings from Study 1 (Chapter 3) suggested that the people around the swimmer (e.g., coaches, parents) play an important role in recognising and supporting swimmer wellbeing, although they sometimes lack confidence in their abilities. As such, working directly with these individuals to enhance their understanding of wellbeing and confidence in supporting wellbeing seems pertinent. Further, the findings from Study 2 (Chapter 4) suggest that swimmer wellbeing is most likely to be impacted during transitions, because of the potential for change and uncertainty to impact on performances in the pool. In particular, swimmers with an exclusive athletic identity may be most at risk of experiencing changes in their wellbeing during transitions, due to their identity being closely linked to their swimming performance. As such, interventions should help swimmers to understand the importance of developing a broader identity, that is not exclusively tied to sport performances. Providing swimmers with suggestions regarding how they can do this will likely be particularly useful. Finally, Study 2 (Chapter 4) also indicated that, even for swimmers with an exclusive swimmer identity, the effects transitions have on wellbeing could be mitigated through the use of proactive coping strategies, such as anticipating and planning for transitions, as well as accessing and using appropriate social support. Thus, also

helping to “upskill” swimmers across these areas seems like it may be beneficial, to have the greatest positive impact on wellbeing.

5.1.1 The Present Study

Consequently, the purpose of the present study was to design, implement, and evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of a multi-component intervention that aimed to protect and promote the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers. In line with the suggestions of Breslin et al. (2022) who recommended that athlete wellbeing interventions should be evidence-based and theory driven, the intervention was primarily informed by the findings of the studies described in Chapters 3 and 4 (in particular the substantive theory presented in Chapter 4), with the content of the intervention further influenced by the relevant academic literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2019; Douglas & Carless, 2006; Schlossberg, 1984).

5.2 Method

5.2.1 Methodology and Philosophical Underpinnings

The present study used an Action Research (AR) methodology (e.g., McNiff, 2017; McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). AR is the process of using collaborative working to create change in order to address meaningful substantive issues (Reason & Bradbury, 2007). It involves the use of systematic enquiry to introduce and evaluate change, whilst also generating new knowledge in relation to that change (Koshy et al., 2011). The purpose of the present study was to design an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers, implement the intervention within a high-performance swimming setting, and evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of the intervention. Thus, as the study aimed to create change (via the development and implementation of the intervention) whilst also producing knowledge about that change (via the evaluation of the intervention), AR was considered an appropriate methodology to achieve this aim.

The origins of AR are unclear and although acknowledgement is often given to the work of Lewin (1944) – one of the first researchers to publish work using an AR methodology – there is some evidence that suggests AR was being used as early as 1913 (Tripp, 2005). Today, AR is a widely recognised and commonly utilised methodology across many disciplines including, nursing and healthcare (e.g., Williamson et al., 2011), business and management (e.g., Coghlan et al., 2016), and sport and exercise science (e.g., Schinke & Blodgett, 2018). Within sport psychology, AR has been used in the development, implementation, and evaluation of various interventions, such as those

targeting injury rehabilitation (Evans et al., 2000a), choking under pressure (Hill et al., 2011), performance environments (Pain et al., 2012), emotional abilities and strategies (Wagstaff et al., 2013), sport based after school programmes (Holt et al., 2013), and sport parent education (Thrower et al., 2017).

Rather than a discrete methodology, AR has been described as "a family of approaches" (Reason & Bradbury, 2007, p. 7) with differences between the specific approaches typically centred around political perspectives and researcher-practitioner positioning (McNiff, 2017). However, despite these differences, a defining characteristic of all AR is the combination of action and research (Koshy et al., 2011; McNiff, 2017), with the primary aim being to create change and generate new knowledge about that change, which has practical value and makes meaningful contributions to real-world personal, social, and/or environmental development (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011).

To achieve this aim of simultaneously creating new practices and generating knowledge, AR blurs the line between traditional researcher-practitioner boundaries (McNiff, 2017). Further, AR celebrates "the capacity of people to think for themselves as they work together and find ways to create new futures that are right for them" (McNiff, 2017, p.1). This means that participants are an integral part of the change process and seen as people to do research "with" rather than "on". Reflecting this point, a major component of AR is the inclusion of the recipients of the changes within the research process, championing them as active agents of change who are experts in their own lives (McNiff, 2017). Given that the foundations of the intervention for the present study had been developed based on the findings from previous work with those who would receive the intervention, using AR for this current study allowed for natural progression from the earlier findings and ensured that I was able to include participants in all stages of the intervention.

The choice to use an AR methodology was further influenced by my ontological and epistemological beliefs. I approached the study from an interpretivist perspective, underpinned by a relativist ontology and a subjectivist epistemology. That is, I believe reality to be subjective and multiple, with each person creating their own reality that cannot be separated from their personal values, goals, and interpretations. AR is not bound by any specific philosophical paradigm and can be carried out by researchers of various ontological and epistemological positions (e.g., realist, interpretivist, constructionist) (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). Having said that, AR blurs the boundaries between the 'knower' and the 'known', the researcher and the researched, theory and practice, and is

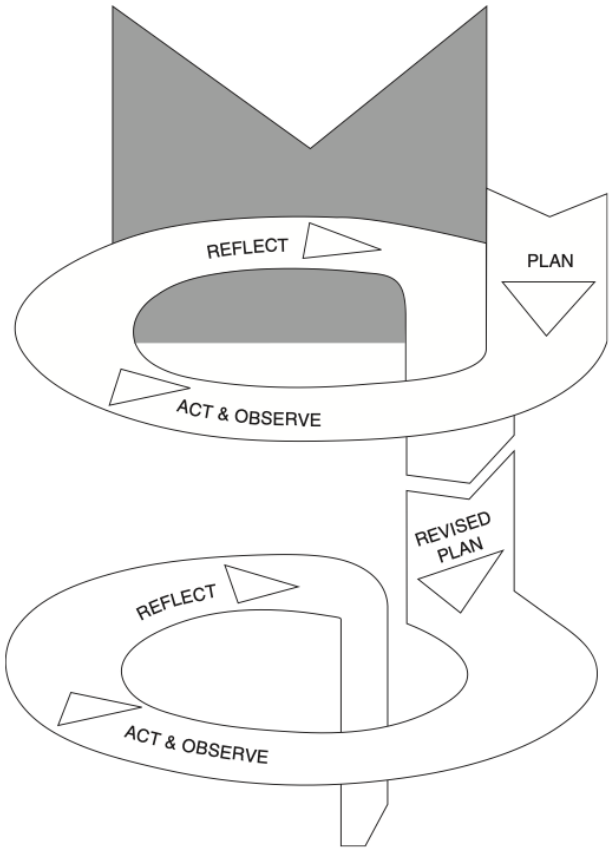
concerned with working collaboratively to understand, change, and shape the reality of those involved (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). As such, AR fitted with my own ontological and epistemological beliefs of reality and knowledge.

5.2.2 The Action Research Process Used in this Study

Conducting AR involves using continual cycles of planning, action, observation, reflection, and modification to create and evaluate change (e.g., see Figure 5.1), whilst producing useful knowledge related to that process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). An AR study may involve one full cycle or include multiple cycles, however, due to the continual nature of the cycles, there is always the potential for further cycles. Further, as McNiff (2017) highlights, many AR studies are rarely conducted as clean cycles, rather in reality, AR is messy and often includes tangents and sub-cycles.

Figure 5.1

The Action Research Cycle

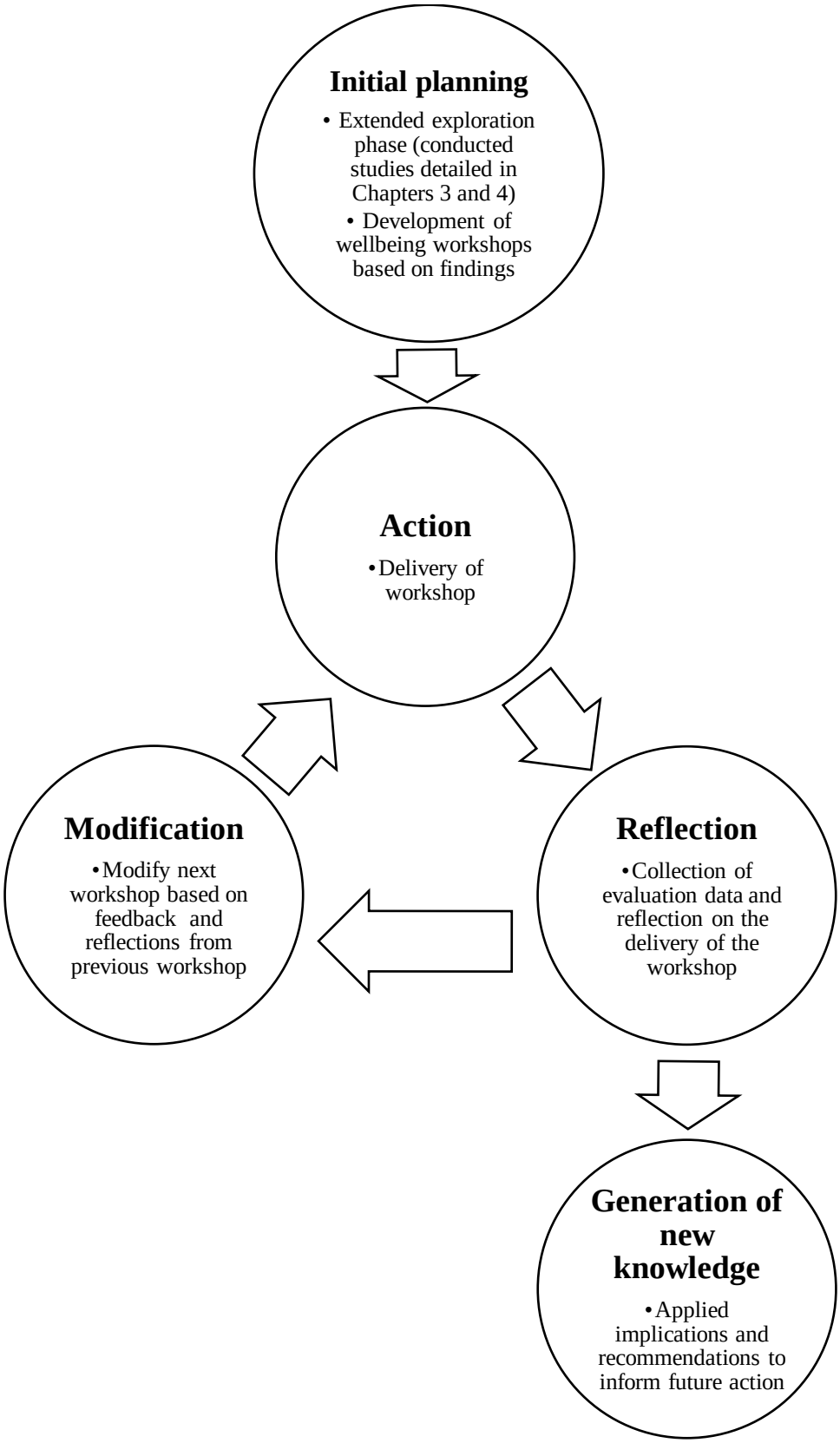


Note. Reprinted from Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (2000). Participatory action research. In Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln Y. S (2000), *Handbook of qualitative research* (second edition), p. 278. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

In relation to the present study, it could be said that I conducted one full AR cycle that consisted of planning the intervention, delivering the intervention, reflecting on and evaluating the intervention, and making recommendations for future interventions. However, similar to McNiff's (2017) description of AR, I would also argue that within this full cycle, observing, reflecting, planning, and acting took place between each of the swimmer workshops, meaning that five mini-cycles of AR took place within the full cycle. A visual representation of the AR process for the present study is displayed in Figure 5.2.

Figure 5.2.

The Action Research Approach used for Study 3



5.2.3 Intervention Development

Approval to deliver and evaluate an athlete wellbeing intervention was sought from the NGB's performance director before institutional ethical approval for the study was granted in November 2020. The study began in January 2021 and, at the outset of the study, I had been embedded within a high-performance swimming organisation for approximately 27 months. With regards to the AR, this time period could be considered the initial observation and planning phase (e.g., McNiff, 2017). During this time, I carried out the studies described in Chapters 3 and 4, to identify the needs of the swimmers in relation to their wellbeing. From spending an extended period of time embedded within the environment and by conducting the two studies detailed in the previous chapters, I identified that there was a need for an intervention that aimed to improve swimmers' self-awareness, increase the ability of significant others to recognise and support wellbeing, provide knowledge and information on transitions so that swimmers could anticipate and prepare for them, promote the development of a holistic identity, and support athletes to develop strategies for managing change and uncertainty. Subsequently, I used these findings alongside my observations and reflections from the previous 27 months to design an intervention that comprised a series of workshops covering each of the aforementioned topics.

Between January and March 2021, I spent time preparing the content of the workshops and engaging in informal conversations to seek feedback and advice on the design and delivery of the workshops. First, I engaged in informal conversations with various swimmers who would be receiving the intervention, to check that the topics that I had identified were relevant to them and to gain feedback on any additional needs that the swimmers felt the workshops could support, in relation to their wellbeing. For example, although I had already planned a workshop on emotions, the content was largely focused on understanding and recognising emotions. However, it became clear that many of the swimmers I spoke to were keen for the workshops to also include practical information and advice on how they could best manage their emotions during certain times (e.g., nerves during competitions, exams), as they felt this was key for protecting their wellbeing. As such, I incorporated a section containing practical strategies for managing emotions into the emotion workshop.

In addition to swimmers, I actively sought practitioners who had previously delivered workshops to the swimmers who would be invited to participate in my workshops. I asked them questions regarding at what level to pitch the workshops, and

how best to engage the swimmers. I also checked whether they had delivered any similar content to swimmers previously. Through these conversations, I learnt that I should not include too much content and instead focus the session around one or two key points that I wanted participants to take away. I was also advised to engage swimmers in a variety of ways, such as by using word clouds, quizzes, and group discussions. I was informed that previous in-person swimmer workshops had used technology such as Mentimeter, which had worked well and it was suggested I use the same application as the swimmers would already know how to use it.

Finally, I also engaged with the Performance Director (PD) to ensure that they were happy with the proposed topics and content of the workshops. They approved the proposed plan and asked for me to deliver the workshops as part of the NGB's National Squad training and development programme. Given the substantial amount of training required of swimmers on the National Squad, I also sought advice on when would be the best time to deliver the workshops. The PD suggested that all swimmer workshops should be scheduled for Saturdays between 11am and 12noon, as this was considered to be unlikely to clash with swimming or school commitments.

5.2.4 Intervention Design

The final intervention design comprised eight workshops; six of these were delivered to swimmers, one to coaches, and one to swimmers' parents. Although the topics were influenced by the findings of Study 1 and Study 2, as well as feedback from the swimmers themselves, the specific content of each workshop was further informed by relevant literature (e.g., Brewer & Pepitas, 2017; Jorm, 2000; Lazarus, 2000; Schlossberg, 1981). A detailed overview of each of the workshops, including the purpose, content, activities, rationale, and supporting literature can be found in Table 5.1.

Table 5.1

Overview of the Swimmer, Coach, and Parent Workshops

Session	Aims	Content & Activities	Supporting Evidence from Previous Studies	Underpinning Research
Swimmer Workshop 1: Understanding and Recognising Wellbeing	To increase awareness of wellbeing, its benefits, and learn to recognise signs of declining wellbeing.	Define wellbeing and benefits associated with high levels of wellbeing. Educate around what wellbeing looks like in relation to cognitive, affective, and behavioural indicators. Emphasise individual nature of wellbeing and importance of knowing yourself. Activities: word cloud – what is wellbeing? quiz on benefits of wellbeing, reflection on own indicators of declining wellbeing and discussion in break out rooms.	Each person has different understanding and indicators of wellbeing (Study 1) Not all swimmers able to recognise signs of declining wellbeing before it becomes problematic (i.e., affects ability to function as usual) (Study 1)	• Huppert & So (2009) • Kanksy & Diener (2017) • Jorm (2000)
Swimmer Workshop 2: Preparing for Transitions	To help swimmers understand transitions are a normal part of life and recognise social support as a strategy to manage impact of transitions.	Define transition and introduce to different types of transitions. Provide an overview of the factors that affect how well we cope with transitions and reflect on these in relation to adapting to life with COVID-19. Discuss different sources and types of social support. Activities: quiz – types of transitions, reflection on adapting to life with covid-19 in relation to 4 S's, reflection on sources and types of support available.	Swimmer wellbeing likely to be affected during transitions but effect moderated by ability to manage and adapt (Study 2) Perceived social support a contributing factor to ability to manage and adapt (Study 2)	• Schlossberg (1981; 1984) • Anderson et al. (2011) • Wylleman & Rosier (2016) • Merz & Huxhold (2010)

Session	Aims	Content & Activities	Supporting Evidence from Previous Studies	Underpinning Research
Swimmer Workshop 3: Developing a Holistic Identity and Knowing your Strengths	To help swimmers understand that they are more than just a swimmer and they have unique strengths and capabilities that can help them manage in different situations.	Introduce concept of identity. Explanation around the benefits of developing the person outside of swimming as well as the swimmer. Introduce concept of strengths and talk through a strategy for identifying strengths. Explain strengths are situation specific and what might be a strength in one situation may be a weakness in another. Activities: draw a picture that represents your identity, word cloud – what are your strengths? breakout rooms – design a 'super swimmer', newspaper activity - reflecting on how they would like to be described.	Many swimmers identify strongly as 'a swimmer' due to being socialised into swimming from a young age (Study 2) Being aware of strengths and capabilities important to be able to manage and adapt during transitions and protect wellbeing (Study 2)	• Brewer & Pepitas (2017) • Douglas & Carless (2006)
Swimmer Workshop 4: Effective Planning and Communication	Improve planning and communicating skills.	Discuss importance of planning in relation to being able to manage demands and introduce strategies (i.e., weekly schedules, to-do lists, prioritising tasks). Emphasise importance of communicating plans and discuss how to communicate well (e.g., the what, when, and how of delivering a message). Activities: pop – up questions, break-out rooms – prioritising task using Eisenhower technique, reflection - reflect on a time when communication did not go well**, s**cenarios – what is the best way to communicate in these situations?	Planning and communication identified as important factors that influence ability to manage and adapt during transitions (Study 2)	• Jones & Lavellee (2009) • Davis et al. (2019)

Session	Aims	Content & Activities	Supporting Evidence from Previous Studies	Underpinning Research
Swimmer Workshop 5: Labelling, Understanding, and Managing Emotion	To educate around emotions and the usefulness of labelling and (in certain situations) managing emotions.	Emphasise the importance of being able to identify/name specific emotions in order to understand them. Discuss what emotions are (i.e., response to situation evaluation) and what they are not (good or bad). Explore situations where emotions might need to be managed. Introduction to some emotion management strategies for when emotions are inappropriate/too intense. In session activities: Word cloud – how many emotions can you name? **l**abelling emojis game, list good vs. bad emotions**, s**pot the difference**,** reflect on a time you have had to manage an intense emotion.	Many swimmers do not think about how they are feeling until they are feeling overwhelmed (Study 1) Being able to manage emotion a key contributor that affects ability to manage and adapt (Study 2)	• Gross (1998) • Lieberman et al. (2007) • Lazarus (2000) • Perry (2019)
Swimmer Workshop 6: Recap Session, Survey Completion, and Q&A	To reiterate the key messages of previous workshops, collect post-workshop data, and allow time for swimmers to engage with a professional swimmer.	Provide an overview of key messages covered in previous sessions. Time to complete swimmer survey. Question and answer session with professional swimmer on any of the topics covered in previous sessions. Pre-session activity: Send in a questions related to any topic from the previous sessions for myself or professional swimmer to answer In session activity: Kahoot quiz	N/A	N/A

Session	Aims	Content & Activities	Supporting Evidence from Previous Studies	Underpinning Research
Coach Workshop: Recognising and Supporting Swimmer Wellbeing	Education around some of the common indicators of wellbeing. To increase confidence in ability to support child's wellbeing through having a conversation about wellbeing.	Discuss some of the changes in behaviour that may indicate declining wellbeing levels in the swimmers they coach. Introduce strategies for having a conversation about wellbeing with swimmers including time and place, active listening, validating emotions, and when to seek professional help. Explanation of NEF 5 ways to wellbeing guidance and importance of taking time to schedule these activities in. Activities: breakout room discussions, having a conversation scenario, scheduling a self-care activity	Coaches often recognise signs of declining wellbeing before swimmers notice themselves (Study 1) Appropriate social support can help to mitigate the negative impacts of performance and identity on wellbeing during times of change and uncertainty (Study 2)	• Jorm (2000) • New Economics Foundation (2008)
Parent Workshop: Recognising and Supporting your Child's Wellbeing	Education around some of the common indicators of wellbeing. To increase confidence in ability to support child's wellbeing through having a conversation about wellbeing.	Discuss some of the changes in behaviour that may indicate declining wellbeing levels in their child. Introduce strategies for having a conversation about wellbeing with their child including time and place, active listening, validating emotions, and when to seek professional help. Explanation of NEF 5 ways to wellbeing guidance and importance of taking time to schedule these activities in. Activities: breakout room discussions, having a conversation scenario, scheduling a self-care activity	Parents often recognise signs of declining wellbeing before swimmers notice themselves (Study 1) Appropriate social support can help to mitigate the negative impacts of performance and identity on wellbeing during times of change and uncertainty (Study 2)	• Jorm (2000) • New Economics Foundation (2008)

5.2.4.1 Swimmer Workshop Content and Structure. The swimmer workshops covered five topics across six sessions. These workshops were titled: (1) Understanding and recognising wellbeing, (2) Preparing for transitions, (3) Developing a holistic identity and knowing your strengths, (4) Effective planning and communication, (5) Understanding and managing emotion, and (6) Recap and question and answer. All workshops were delivered by me and facilitated by a professional swimmer (Section 5.2.5 contains further information about the delivery approach and inclusion of a professional swimmer).

5.2.4.1.1 Understanding and Recognising Wellbeing. This first workshop aimed to increase swimmers' awareness of wellbeing and its associated benefits, as well as improve swimmers' ability to recognise changes in their own wellbeing. The inclusion of this topic was based on the findings of Chapter 3, which highlighted that wellbeing meant different things to different people and was closely linked to personal values and goals. This study also indicated that swimmers often lacked awareness of their own indicators of changing wellbeing. This workshop began by asking swimmers what wellbeing meant to them, and asking them to respond using Mentimeter. This produced a word cloud of their (anonymised) responses that were used to highlight that wellbeing means different things to different people and is closely linked to personal values and goals (Chapter 3). At this stage, the professional swimmer talked about what wellbeing meant to them and reflected on how their understanding of wellbeing had changed throughout their life, in line with their values and goals at the time.

Next, wellbeing was broadly defined as the combination of feeling good and functioning well (Huppert & So, 2009) and some of the mental, physical, social, and performance benefits of high levels of wellbeing were presented (e.g., Kanksy & Diener, 2017). Again, the professional swimmer spoke about some of the benefits of high levels of wellbeing that they had experienced. After this, there was a short quiz to ensure that swimmers remained engaged. Lastly, some of the common cognitive, affective, and behavioural indicators associated with changing levels of wellbeing were discussed (Chapter 3) before the professional swimmer reflected on how they felt they knew when their wellbeing was high or low. Finally, swimmers were put into breakout rooms and asked to discuss times when they felt they had experienced either high or low levels of wellbeing, and what they thought were some of the indicators.

5.2.4.1.2 Preparing for Transitions. The second workshop was influenced by the findings of Chapter 4 that indicated transitions were critical points where swimmer wellbeing was likely to be affected and highlighted how social support played a key role in

mitigating the impact of transitions on wellbeing. This workshop aimed to help swimmers understand that transitions are a normal part of life and help them to recognise social support as a useful strategy for managing the impact of transitions on wellbeing. The session began by introducing the different types of transition (anticipated, unanticipated, and non-event) (e.g., Schlossberg, 1981; 1984) with examples, before illustrating (through the professional swimmer's experiences) how multiple transitions often occur at the same time. After this, there was a short quiz.

The next section of this workshop focused on the potential factors that may influence transitions (i.e., situation, self, strategies, social support; Schlossberg, 1981). After each of the factors were described, swimmers were asked to individually reflect on how they had managed and adapted during COVID-19. During this time, the professional swimmer shared their personal experience to stimulate thinking. Finally, the last part of the session was focused specifically on social support and the different sources (e.g., peers, coaches, parents) and types (e.g., informational, practical) of support that were available. The importance of matching the type of support to the appropriate source was emphasised (e.g., Merz & Huxhold, 2010). At the end of this workshop, swimmers were asked to think about who in their life they get what type of support from, and if there were any sources of support they had not considered before.

5.2.4.1.3 Developing a Holistic Identity and Knowing your Strengths. The inclusion of this topic was influenced by the findings of Chapter 4, which illustrated that swimmers who held an exclusive swimmer identity were more likely to experience changes in wellbeing during transition periods. The third workshop introduced the concept of identity and facilitated reflection on attendees' own identity through a drawing activity, where swimmers were asked to draw a picture that shows all the different parts of their identity. The professional swimmer also took part in this activity and talked the swimmers through what they had drawn, before the rest of the group were asked if they wanted to share their images. Next, there was a discussion regarding the numerous benefits of a holistic identity which was emphasised by some anonymised swimmer quotes from the study described in Chapter 4, as well as the professional swimmer's own experiences.

The swimmers were then asked what they felt their strengths were and to respond using Mentimeter to create a word cloud of all the different perceived strengths of the group. Following this, swimmers were invited to imagine someone was writing a newspaper article about them and were asked how they thought it would describe them and their strengths. During this activity, real media articles were shown on screen, including

one related to the professional swimmer, who spoke about how this made them recognise some their strengths that they were not aware of or did not think of as strengths. Finally, swimmers were put into two breakout rooms (facilitated by either myself or the professional swimmer) and asked to a "super swimmer" by combining all of their individual strengths.

5.2.4.1.4 Effective Planning and Communication. The fourth workshop aimed to improve swimmers' planning and communication skills. The inclusion of this session was based on the findings of Chapter 4 that indicated that swimmers who were able to successfully prepare for transitions could mitigate their impact on wellbeing. The first half of this session introduced swimmers to various strategies for planning effectively, including the use of a weekly schedule and daily to-do lists. During this section, the professional swimmer spoke about what planning strategies worked for them. Next, the swimmers were introduced to the Eisenhower technique to help them understand how to effectively prioritise tasks, before they were put into breakout rooms and asked to apply the Eisenhower technique to an example to-do list.

The second half of the session focused on communication skills and began by asking swimmers to reflect on a time where they had tried to communicate a message and it did not go as planned. While the swimmers were reflecting, the professional swimmer spoke about their own experience of a situation where they had tried to communicate but it did not go as expected. Next, swimmers were encouraged to consider the following when looking to improve their communication: (1) "what is the message that I need to communicate?", (2) "when is the best time to tell the person?", and (3) "how should I deliver the message?". Finally, swimmers were shown examples of poor and good communication, before being presented with 3 hypothetical scenarios and asked what they felt would be the best way to communicate.

5.2.4.1.5 Understanding and Managing Emotion. The aim of the fifth workshop was to support swimmers in understanding and managing their emotions. The inclusion of this topic was initially based on the findings of the study detailed in Chapter 3, specifically that swimmers sometimes lacked emotional awareness. However, the inclusion of specific strategies for managing emotions was included based on informal conversations with swimmers during the intervention development phase (Section 5.2.3). In this workshop, swimmers were asked to name the different emotions they could think of and submit their answers through Mentimeter to create a word cloud. This was used to illustrate the wide range of emotions that are available to be experienced. Next, swimmers split into breakout

rooms where they were presented with six emojis. They were challenged to label each emoji with the correct emotion before returning to the main room as quickly as possible.

After this, swimmers were presented with a list of 10 emotions and asked to categorise them as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ This was used as the basis for a discussion around emotions being not necessarily good or bad, but rather they are a response to our evaluation of a situation. Then, swimmers were presented with three emojis depicting the same emotion and asked to spot the difference. This was used to start a conversation about how emotions can range in intensity and there may be certain situations where it is necessary to manage that intensity. During this part, the professional swimmer drew upon their own experiences to give some examples. In the last section of this workshop, some strategies for managing intense emotions were presented, including a breathing exercise, the 5-4-3-2-1 technique, and the “brain drain” exercise (Perry, 2019).

5.2.4.1.6 Recap, Question and Answer. The final session provided swimmers with an overview of the key messages from previous sessions before there was a Kahoot! Quiz to test the swimmers learning and reiterate some of the key points where necessary. After this, the remainder of this workshop was a question and answer session, which provided swimmers with an opportunity to ask myself or the professional swimmer questions related to any of the topics covered in the workshops.

5.2.4.2 Coach/Parent Workshop Content and Structure. The coach workshop was titled ‘Recognising and Supporting Swimmer Wellbeing’ and the parent workshop ‘Recognising and Supporting your Child’s Wellbeing.’ The decision to include a parent and coach session was based on the findings of the previous two studies detailed in Chapters 3 and 4. Specifically, the findings that parents and coaches play an important role in recognising changes in swimmers’ wellbeing (Chapter 3) and social support plays a key role in how successfully swimmers can manage the impact of transitions on wellbeing. The structure and content of both workshops were identical, although the content was tailored to the target audience (i.e., swimmers were referred to as ‘your child’ in the parent workshop).

Each workshop started with information on some of the common behavioural indicators (i.e., changes in interaction and body language) of changing wellbeing levels that they may notice in their swimmers/children, before noting that specific indicators of wellbeing are individual. Subsequently, parents/coaches were put into breakout rooms to discuss some of the specific indicators they notice in their child/swimmers they coach. Next, some tips for having a conversation about wellbeing were presented. Specifically,

participants were encouraged to consider where the conversation might take place (set the scene), what they might say initially (start the conversation), and how to respond (listen, validate feelings, and emphasise strengths). Then, there was a short section exploring when to consider referring their child/a swimmer to a professional. After this, parents and coaches were put back into breakout rooms and presented with a scenario which required them having a conversation about wellbeing and were asked to discuss how they would approach this using what they had just learnt. The final section was focused on their own wellbeing, and parents and coaches were introduced to the 5 ways to wellbeing (New Economics Foundation, 2008) and asked to reflect on what helps them to maintain their own wellbeing. To end the workshop, parent and coaches were asked to type into the chat one thing that they were going to commit to doing for their own wellbeing over the coming days and weeks, and were encouraged to be specific about when they would fit this into their schedule (i.e., tomorrow after lunch, Friday after work).

5.2.5 Intervention Delivery

Invitations to attend the workshops were sent via an email from the NGB approximately two weeks before the start of the first session, and a reminder email containing the Zoom link and any other necessary information was sent approximately a week before each session. All emails were sent via a gatekeeper, although my name and email address were included in each email as a person to contact with any questions. In total, 55 swimmers were invited to the swimmer sessions, which included all swimmers who were in the first two levels of the NGB's National Squad. The parents of these swimmers were invited to the parent session which, based on the assumption that one parent would attend per swimmer and that each parent only had one swimmer in the squad, included 55 parents. All coaches (n= 35) who were part of the NGB's coach development programme were invited to the coach session. Of the 55 swimmers who were invited, 46 swimmers attended at least one of the swimmer workshops, out of which 16 swimmers attended all workshops. Further breakdown of the number of workshops attended by swimmers can be found in Table 5.2. In addition, 22 of the (approximately) 55 invited parents attended the parent workshop and 17 of the 35 invited coaches attended the coach workshop.

Table 5.2

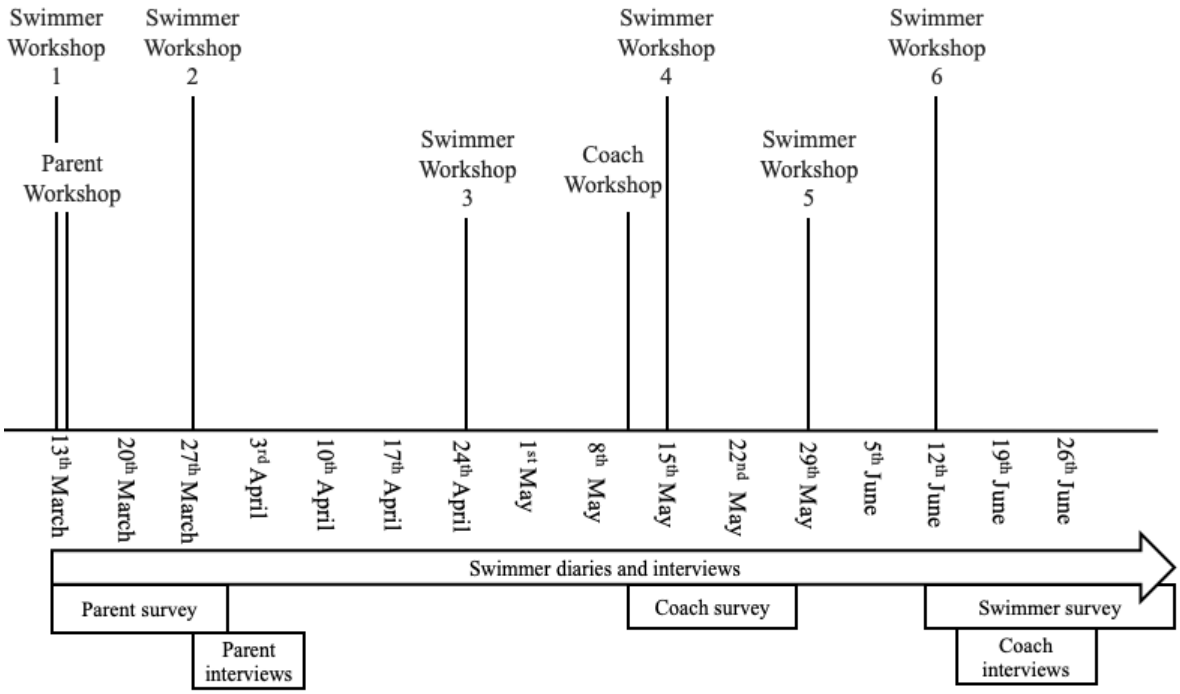
Number of Workshops Attended by Swimmers

Number of Workshops Attended	0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Number of Swimmers	9	8	11	3	2	6	16

Initially, the workshops were planned to be delivered weekly over a 6-week period at the beginning of the 20/21 season, however, due to COVID-19, the completion of Study 2 took longer than planned and, subsequently, the intervention was delayed. Then, in order to fit with their schedule, the NGB requested that the intervention be delivered over a period of 3-months, starting mid-March and continuing until mid-June. Consequently, the workshops were delivered over a 12-week period between 13th March and 12th June 2021. The first swimmer workshop took place on Saturday 13th March 2021 and subsequent sessions took place fortnightly apart from a 4-week break between sessions two and three, and a 3-week break between sessions four and five, due to scheduled competitions. The parent workshop took place on Saturday 13th March 2021 immediately after the first swimmer workshop and the coach workshop took place on Wednesday 12th May 2021 at 12pm. A timeline schematic of the workshop delivery and evaluation is presented in Figure 5.3.

Figure 5.3

Timeline Schematic of Workshop Delivery and Evaluation



Due to the ongoing restrictions related to COVID-19, all workshops were delivered live online, using Zoom. Using technology to deliver sport psychology services is becoming more popular, with an increasing number of sport psychology interventions adopting online delivery methods (e.g., Gulliver et al., 2012; Latinjak et al, 2019). Indeed, in relation to the current intervention, the decision to conduct the workshops virtually provided a number of benefits. For example, not having to travel meant that swimmers, parents, and coaches who may not have been able to attend due to location could attend the workshops. This was anticipated to be particularly beneficial as the intervention was delivered at a national level, meaning that some of the swimmers would have had to travel more than 4 hours to attend a face-to-face workshop. Furthermore, a number of the swimmers and their parents were living abroad at the time of the intervention so online delivery also meant that these swimmers and parents could also attend.

Despite the benefits of online delivery, I was aware that delivering the intervention virtually could also present some challenges. Specifically, I anticipated that there may be challenges with technology (e.g., not being able to share my screen, links not working, loss of internet connection). To reduce the likelihood of some of the potential technological challenges, I practised delivering the session to a group of peers beforehand. During the

workshops themselves, I explained to participants at the beginning of each workshop that if I experienced internet issues, I would re-connect as soon as possible. In the event of this occurring, I had agreed with the professional swimmer who was co-facilitating the workshops that they would continue to lead the session until I was able to re-join.

5.2.5.1 Delivery Approach. In addition to technological challenges, one of the other main challenges I anticipated was ensuring that participants remain engaged throughout each session, as evidence from the field of pedagogy suggests that engagement is critical for ensuring learning and increasing satisfaction (e.g., Banna et al., 2015). Therefore, I tried to tailor my delivery approach to ensure the workshops were as engaging as possible. Martin and Bolliger (2018) suggest that peer-to-peer interaction is particularly important for keeping participants engaged. As such, I ensured that swimmer, parent, and coach workshops were all designed to include opportunities for peer-to-peer interactions, for example, through group-based discussions. Further, in seeking to enhance engagement and interaction within the swimmer sessions, I drew upon guidance within the extant literature specifically related to the delivery of sport psychology within group contexts and Gen Z populations (Gould & Szczygiel, 2017). Understanding that Gen Z populations find it harder to concentrate and may need more engagement than older generations (Gould & Szczygiel, 2017), I included regular opportunities to engage during each workshop, via the inclusion of quizzes and creative activities (i.e., word clouds, drawing).

5.2.5.1.1 Inclusion of a Professional Athlete. To further enhance engagement in the swimmer sessions, a professional swimmer facilitated the delivery of the swimmer workshops, and their role was to share their personal experiences and reflections related to the workshops' topic. A similar approach has been previously reported favourably by Pummell and Lavallee (2019) who included pre-recorded videos of professional tennis players in an intervention aimed at preparing junior tennis players for the junior-to-senior transition. However, as far as I am aware, this is the first sport psychology intervention on this topic to include a professional athlete live during all workshops. The professional swimmer who facilitated the workshops was a female in their late twenties. They could be categorised as world-class elite, using the criteria proposed by Swann et al. (2015). This means that they had experienced sustained success at the highest levels of competition, achieving five gold, seven silver, and four bronze medals whilst representing their country. At the time the workshops were delivered, they had been retired from competitive swimming for approximately 2 years. During this time, they had regularly spoken at and

facilitated other events that the NGB had held, meaning many of the swimmers who took part in the workshops had met the professional swimmer previously.

5.2.6 Intervention Evaluation

5.2.6.1 Participant Recruitment. All swimmers, parents, and coaches who were invited to attend the workshops were also invited to take part in the intervention evaluation study. Information regarding the evaluation study was included in the initial invitation email, including information about the different aspects of the evaluation study that they could choose to participate in (i.e., interviews, weekly diaries, survey). For swimmer participants, participation in the study included the following options: (1) completion of a weekly reflective diary, (2) participation in semi-structured interviews throughout the duration of the workshop delivery period, and/or, (3) completion of a qualitative evaluation survey after the delivery of the final workshop. Swimmers who were interested in participating in the diary or interview aspects of the study were invited to follow a link where they were asked to indicate the specific aspect(s) they would like to participate in and input their contact details, so that I could contact them with further information. A link to the qualitative evaluation survey was sent out to all invited swimmers after the delivery of the final swimmer workshop.

For coaches and parents, participation in the intervention evaluation included the following options: (1) participation in a semi-structured interview after the delivery of the relevant workshop, and/or, (2) completion of a reflective evaluation survey after the workshop was delivered. An email inviting parents and coaches to participate in the reflective evaluation survey was sent to all participants after the relevant workshop. In relation to the semi-structured interviews, the email that was sent out after the delivery of the parent/coach workshop asked those who were interested in taking part in a semi-structured interview to contact me directly to organise a suitable day and time.

5.2.6.2 Participants (Formal Evaluation). In total, 28 swimmers, nine coaches, and 16 parents of swimmers took part in at least one aspect of the formal evaluation of the intervention (i.e., semi-structured interviews, weekly diaries, reflective evaluation survey).

5.2.6.2.1 Swimmer Participants. Out of the 28 swimmers who took part in the evaluation, 12 were male and 16 were female, their ages ranged from 13 to 20 years (M = 16.4; SD = 1.66) and years of swimming experience ranged from three to 12 years (M = 7.6; SD = 2.28). The majority of swimmers (n=16) trained in excess of 15 hours a week, with the remaining swimmers (n=11) training 10 – 15 hours a week, apart from one swimmer who trained 5 – 10 hours a week. Most of the swimmers (n=16) competed at

national level and the remaining swimmers competed at international level (n=12). Using the criteria proposed by Swann et al. (2015), all swimmers could be categorised as *semi-elite* or *competitive-elite*. Out of the 28 swimmers, five swimmers chose to take part in all three aspects of the formal evaluation (semi-structured interviews, weekly diaries, reflective evaluation survey), two swimmers chose to participate in semi-structured interviews only, and 21 swimmers chose to participate in the survey only.

5.2.6.2.2 Coach Participants. Out of the nine coaches who took part in the evaluation, seven were male and two were female. The age of the coaches ranged from 24 to 60 years (M = 40.4; SD = 12.64). The number of years that coach participants had been coaching ranged from 4 years to over 25 years, and all but one of the coaches currently coached at swimmers who competed at national level or above, whilst the remaining coach coached swimmers who competed at regional level. Out of the nine coaches, three chose to participate in the interview and the survey, with the remaining six coaches choosing to take part in the survey aspect of the evaluation only.

5.2.6.2.3 Parent Participants. Out of the 16 parents who took part in the evaluation, two were male and 14 were female, and their ages ranged from 41 to 60 years (M = 49.9; SD = 4.46). In relation to their occupation, seven of the parents were teachers or worked in the education sector, two were self-employed, two were retired, and the remaining five parents had various other roles, mainly in administration. Nearly all the parents (n=15) were parents of swimmers who competed at national level, and the remaining parent was a parent of a swimmer who competed at international level. Out of the 16 parents, three chose to participate in the interview and the survey, with the remaining 13 parents choosing to take part in the survey aspect of the evaluation only.

5.2.7 Data Collection

As alluded to above, a range of different data collection methods were used to collect evaluation data before, during, and after the delivery of the workshops. The use of multiple methods of data collection in action research has been recommended to allow for triangulation of the data, leading to more effective problem solving (Streubert & Carpenter, 1995). For the present study, I collected data through the use of semi-structured interviews, weekly reflective diaries, a reflective evaluation survey, observations, informal feedback, and a researcher/intervention deliverer reflexive diary. With regards to observations, reflections, and informal feedback, all swimmers, coaches, and parents who attended the workshops were made aware that I was evaluating the workshops and I would be using any informal feedback as well as my own observations and reflections as part of

the evaluation. I asked workshop attendees to let me know at any time during or after the workshops if they would prefer not to be included in observations and reflections. I explained I would not record any observations about attendees who made such a request or use their feedback for this study. I also emphasised that this would not impact their opportunity to take part in the workshops. For each aspect of the formal evaluation (i.e., diaries, interviews, survey), written consent was obtained from participants prior to participation. With regards to swimmers who took part in multiple semi-structured interviews, written consent was only obtained before the first one, although verbal consent and permission to record was gained at the beginning of each interview.

5.2.7.1 Semi-structured Interviews. In total, 29 semi-structured interviews were carried out with seven swimmers (n=23), three coaches (n=3), and three parents (n=3). A copy of the interview guides can be found in Appendix D.

5.2.7.1.1 Swimmer Interviews. Twenty-two interviews with swimmers were conducted before (n=2), during (n=16), and after (n=5) the delivery of the collection of swimmer workshops. The length of the interviews with swimmers ranged from between 10 minutes 14 seconds to 42 minutes 38 seconds (*M* = 23 min 50 sec; *SD* = 0.35). All interviews began with some initial rapport-building questions, such as "tell me a bit about yourself", or for participants that I already knew, "how have you been?". For the two interviews conducted prior to the delivery of the workshops, the main interview questions were focused on each of the topics that would be covered and asked for the swimmer's opinions on the topic, expectations for the workshops (i.e., what they hoped to learn), and any requests for specific material to be covered. For the interviews that took place between March 13th and June 12th (i.e., during the delivery period), the main interview questions were focused on the most recent workshop they had attended and swimmers were asked to comment on how they found the workshop, what they learnt, what they enjoyed/did not enjoy, and whether there was anything else they would have liked to have seen included. For the five interviews that took place after the workshops, the main questions focused on the final workshop as well as all the workshops more generally. For example, swimmers were asked to comment on the day/time of the workshops, the inclusion of a professional swimmer, the activities, delivery style, whether they felt that certain workshops were more useful than others, and whether they felt that any additional topics should have been included. All interviews were ended by asking the swimmer whether they had any other comments relating to the workshops, before thanking them for their time and reminding them that they could contact me if they thought of anything else.

5.2.7.1.2 Coach Interviews. Three interviews were conducted with coaches after the delivery of the coach workshop. The length of the interviews with the coaches ranged from 24 minutes 11 seconds to 34 minutes 10 seconds (*M* = 27 min 54 sec; *SD* = 0.23). As I already knew all the coach participants, the interviews began with questions such as "how have you been since I saw you last?" or "how are you finding coaching at the moment?". The main interview questions were then focused around the workshop, and coaches were asked to comment on what they had learnt during the workshop, what they enjoyed/did not enjoy, and whether they would like to have seen anything else included. Coaches were also asked to comment on the day/time of the workshop, the delivery style, and the activities included. Finally, coaches were asked if they had any other comments regarding the workshop, before being thanked for their time and reminded they could contact me if they thought of any other feedback they would like to share.

5.2.7.1.3 Parent Interviews. Three interviews with parents were conducted after the delivery of the parent workshop**.** The length of these interviews with parents ranged from 32 minutes 45 seconds to 37 minutes 52 seconds (*M* = 34 min 50 sec; *SD* = 0.11). All interviews began with some rapport building questions, for instance "what is it like being a parent of a swimmer?" or "tell me a bit about your experience of being a swim parent so far." For parents who I already knew (n=1), I began the interview by asking, "how have you been since we last spoke?". Similar to the coach interviews, the main questions were then focused on what they had learnt during the workshop, what they enjoyed/did not enjoy, whether they would like to have seen anything else included, the day/time of the workshop, the delivery style, and the activities. Again, the parent interviews ended with asking whether the parent had any other comments on the workshop they would like to share at that time, before being thanked for taking part and reminded they could contact me again if they wanted to add any other feedback.

5.2.7.2 Weekly Reflective Diaries. Five swimmers agreed to keep weekly diaries during the duration of the workshop delivery period (13-weeks). At the beginning of each week, these swimmers were sent an email/text (depending on their chosen preference) with a series of prompt questions. These questions required the swimmers to reflect on the past week and were focused around how the swimmer had been feeling, how well they felt able to function, and how well they felt they would be able to have dealt with any challenging situations. In addition, where I had delivered a workshop in the previous week, the questions included evaluation questions about that session (e.g., what did they enjoy/not enjoy, was there anything else they'd like to have seen included). On the weeks where

there had not been a workshop, swimmers were asked whether they had thought about or used any of the information covered in previous workshops. Unfortunately, despite the weekly prompts, adherence was low for some swimmers. Over the 13-week period, 34 diary entries were returned in total and, out of these 11 were from one swimmer, 10 were from another swimmer, and nine were from a third swimmer. Of the remaining four entries, three were from one swimmer, and one was from another swimmer.

5.2.7.3 Reflective Evaluation Survey. In total, 21 swimmers, nine coaches, and 16 parents completed an online evaluation survey after the delivery of the final workshop.

5.2.7.3.1 Swimmer Survey. Initial questions in the swimmer survey focused on demographics and ascertaining whether the swimmer attended all, some, or none of the workshops. If swimmers indicated that they only attended some or none of the workshops, they were asked for their reasons why this was the case. Next, there were some general questions that aimed to evaluate the workshops overall; this section included questions focused on the swimmer's overall enjoyment of the workshops, their thoughts about the days and times of the workshops, as well as their opinion on the workshop length, delivery style, activities, and the inclusion of a professional swimmer. Finally, swimmers were asked more specific questions relating to each of the workshops they attended, for example, swimmers were asked to comment on the topic, key learnings, and the specific activities that were included in that session. Questions were piped to ensure swimmers were only asked questions about the workshops that they attended.

5.2.7.3.2 Parent and Coach Qualitative Survey. The coach and parent evaluation surveys were identical and asked participants the following questions; (1) what were the key things you learnt during the workshop?, (2) what did you enjoy the most/find most useful during the workshop?, (3) was there anything you did not enjoy or find helpful in the workshop?, and (4) is there anything else you would like to have seen included in the workshop?.

5.2.7.4 Researcher Reflexive Diary. Throughout the entirety of the study, I used a reflexive diary to document my experiences. I completed the diary after the delivery of each workshop, after every interview, and after each informal conversation related to the study. I used the diary to record information such as what had happened, my thoughts on why I thought certain things had happened or been said, as well as to speculate on what I thought might happen in the future if I made certain changes. In addition, I also used the diary to record informal feedback and discussions that I had with the professional swimmer after each swimmer workshop. For example, after the first swimmer workshop, myself and

the professional swimmer discussed how we both found the breakout rooms a bit challenging. Based on this discussion, I recorded in my reflexive diary, “I also made too many breakout rooms (7), which meant that [professional swimmer] was only able to spend about a minute in each room.” I then wrote, “perhaps it would be better if I have less rooms next time, although I’m not sure how many swimmers per room is ideal.” I also speculated that, “it might work better if I can put some swimmers I know are fairly outgoing in each room so that at least one person is confident enough to talk.” Based on these discussion and reflections, as well as initial swimmer feedback, I had additional conversations with swimmers to explore preferences regarding how breakout rooms were used going forward and I made the decision not to use breakout rooms in the second workshop, which was modified so that the swimmers were asked to comment using the chat function instead. However, after this workshop, swimmer feedback and my own reflections indicated that the second workshop was not as engaging as the first workshop. Further conversations with the swimmers led to the decision to re-introduce breakout rooms again, but only create two rooms, to enable conversations to be facilitated by either myself of the professional swimmer.

5.2.7.5 Informal Feedback. In addition (or as an alternative) to participating in the formal evaluation of the workshops (i.e., interviews, diaries, survey), all workshop attendees were also invited to provide informal feedback regarding the workshop(s). I provided my email address and phone number so that feedback could be sent directly to me, although attendees were also given the option to email feedback via a gatekeeper, and assured it would be anonymised before being sent to me. Despite this, no feedback was received anonymously. One swimmer provided email feedback, and two swimmers provided feedback via Whatsapp messages. In addition, one parent provided feedback via Whatsapp on the positive impact they perceived the swimmer workshops to had on their child’s confidence. I received no informal feedback related to the coach or parent workshops.

5.2.8 Data Analysis

Prior to analysis, audio data were transcribed verbatim. This included the interview data, as well as some diary entries for one swimmer who choose to send them as voice notes. Subsequently, I used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clark, 2006; 2019) to analyse the qualitative data, following the same procedure outlined in Chapter 3. Specifically, I immersed myself in the data, which involved reading the interview transcripts, diary entries, and survey responses several times. During this stage, I also re-

listened to the audio files, read through informal feedback I had received, and re-familiarised myself with my reflections that I had recorded throughout the study. Throughout this phase, I recorded my initial thoughts regarding some of the key themes that were in the data. Next, I re-visited the data and generated codes for individual segments of the data. I used a combination of semantic coding to record explicit, surface-level meaning, as well as latent coding to capture some of the underlying meaning and ideas that I felt were in the data (e.g., Byrne, 2022). For instance, I coded "I think I preferred the actual delivery as it was online" as "online preferred", whereas I coded "I didn't connect and stay as focused as I did with the first one because it was repeating a lot of things I already knew" as "topic not relevant" rather than "repetitive content" because, although this was not explicitly stated, I felt this was the underlying meaning behind what was being said.

Subsequently, I developed initial themes by clustering codes together into meaningful groups that reflected key patterns within the data. To do this, I wrote codes on post-it notes so that I could move codes between groups until I felt that the groups accurately portrayed the data. I then used a mind map to organise these initial themes into themes and sub-themes. For example, I grouped together the subthemes 'increased accessibility of online workshops', 'reduced burden compared to in person workshops,' and 'opportunity to fully focus on the topic' as subthemes under the theme 'benefits of online delivery.' Following this, themes were reviewed and refined. As part of this, I presented the findings as an initial draft to my PhD supervisor, who acted as a critical friend by questioning my interpretations and providing an alternative perspective (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Finally, the findings were written up in the way that they are presented within this thesis.

5.2.9 Positionality

Similar to the positionality sections included in the previous two chapters (see Chapter 3, Section 3.2.6 and Chapter 4, Section 4.2.8), the purpose of this section is to consider my continually evolving positionality and reflect upon how this may have influenced the research. Throughout the duration of this study, I experienced two significant shifts in positionality that influenced the research presented in this thesis. First, the NGB's decision to include the wellbeing workshops as part of their learning and development programme meant that I went from a researcher who spent most of their time observing from the side lines, to an integral part of the team responsible for planning and delivering educational content. This meant that I was invited to attend various additional

meetings related to the future of the performance pathway, which not only gave me an insight into the NGB's perceptions of wellbeing and mental health, but also provided me with a clearer understanding of how decisions are made at the higher levels of the sport. Subsequently, this experience influenced my thinking in relation to the implications of the findings of Study 2 (Chapter 4) and influenced several the discussion points in Section 4.4, specifically around performance narratives and sport culture.

The second major shift in positionality came once I had delivered the last of the workshops and completed the final evaluation interviews. As the research progressed, the end of the intervention evaluation signified the beginning of the end of the research project as a whole. This meant that my time of being embedded within high-performance swimming environments was over. In withdrawing from the environment, I once again became an outsider to the world of high-performance swimming. This meant that the regular interactions I had with swimmers, parents, coaches, and practitioners stopped and I was no longer included in emails and group chats. Although expected, this experience prompted me to reflect on the cut-throat nature of the high-performance swimming that had been highlighted previously by a number of participants. In particular, I thought about some of the experiences that retired swimmers had shared with me related to them leaving the sport, which was often abrupt and with no support. In no way am I trying to say that my experiences the same as those of a retired swimmer, rather I am making a point about how closed off high-performance sport can be. That is, based on the findings of my research as well as my own personal experience, it appears that it does not matter who you are, Olympic swimmer or PhD researcher, if you are not in, you are out – there is no in-between.

5.2.10 Ethical Considerations

As well as the ethical considerations detailed in Chapter 3 (Section 3.2.7) and Chapter 4 (Section 4.2.9), the present study required consideration of a number of potential ethical issues specific to the delivery and evaluation of the intervention. First, although participation in the evaluation aspect of the study was voluntary, the swimmer workshops were delivered as part of the NGB's National Squad training and development programme. This meant that workshop attendance was a requirement of being a swimmer on the National Squad. As such, there was a risk that swimmers may be unaware that the evaluation aspect of the intervention was voluntary. To mitigate this, I ensured that the separation between the workshops and the evaluation of the workshops was made clear, both in writing before the delivery of the first workshop, as well as verbally during the

workshops. I also communicated that there was no expectation to take part in the evaluation study, and made sure to emphasise that not volunteering for the study would not impact their ability to attend or participate in the workshops. Further, acknowledging that swimmers might have felt pressured into taking part in the evaluation because they perceived that it would negatively impact on their progression opportunities, I made sure to communicate to the swimmers that details of who did (or did not) take part in the study would not be shared outside of the research team, to reassure them that participation (or non-participation) would not impact their progression within the National Squad.

Second, given the sensitive nature of the workshops, there was the potential for certain topics or activities to trigger difficult or unpleasant memories and/or emotions that may be distressing for participants. If those participants did not have the capability to manage these, there was a risk that attending the workshops would lead to prolonged distress that could detrimentally impact their wellbeing and mental health. To reduce the likelihood of this, participants were given notice of the topics that would be covered in advance. This information was sent via email prior to the commencement of the workshops, and participants were also verbally reminded of the next topic at the end of each workshop. This way, participants could decide whether they felt that they had the capacity to engage with that topic at that time and, if not, could choose not to attend that workshop without consequence (although the workshops were required by the NGB, they did not formally monitor the swimmers' attendance).

Additionally, during the workshops themselves, participants were reminded that they could engage as little or as much as they liked, in a way that they felt comfortable. For instance, participants were given autonomy over whether to have their cameras on or off, and could choose to communicate by speaking or typing in the chat box. Participants were also reminded that they could leave the session (and return if they wanted) at any point. I also stayed on the Zoom call for five minutes at the end of each workshop, in case any participants wanted to talk. This happened after two workshops, although in both cases the reason participants stayed was to ask clarification questions. Despite this, I made sure to ask these participants how they were feeling, in case they were struggling but unable to open up (e.g., because they were nervous, or did not know how to initiate the conversation). However, in these instances, participants did not communicate or show any non-verbal signs of distress. If they had, I would have followed the participant distress procedure detailed in Appendix B (i.e., signposting to relevant people/charities, documenting the incident, discussion with supervisor).

Finally, as the delivery of all workshops were facilitated by a professional swimmer, it was also important to consider the potential impact of the research on them. In particular, there was the potential that sharing their own negative wellbeing experiences could be distressing for them. To minimise this risk, the swimmer was given autonomy to decide which experiences they chose to share in relation to the topic. I also sent a Whatsapp message the day before each scheduled workshop to check they were still happy to facilitate the upcoming workshop and they felt comfortable talking about their experiences in relation to the scheduled topic. In addition, I arranged check-ins on the morning of each workshop, to ask the professional swimmer how they were feeling that day and discuss which experiences they were planning to share. Finally, myself and the swimmer made time to debrief after each workshop, where I also checked in on how the swimmer was feeling and encouraged them to engage in self-care.

5.2.11 Methodological Rigour

Although universal criteria for judging qualitative research exist (e.g., Tracy, 2010), it has been suggested that the application of universal quality criteria to qualitative research is too rigid and not an appropriate way of ensuring that qualitative studies are methodologically rigorous (Smith & McGannon, 2018). An alternative approach is to judge the quality of qualitative research against criteria that is specific to the chosen methodology that has been used (Sparkes & Smith, 2009). In relation to action research, there are multiple sets of criteria that have been suggested as ways of judging the quality of studies (e.g., Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000; Evans et al., 2000b; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Mertler 2009). Across the action research studies that have been conducted within sport, the 12 criteria proposed by Evans et al. (2000b) have been the most commonly used and, as such, these may be considered to be the most appropriate criteria by which to judge the present study.

The criteria are as follows:

1) *An intention and commitment to solving practical real-life problems*. The extant literature highlights the potential for high-performance athletes to experience poor wellbeing and mental health (e.g., Rice et al., 2016) and there have been calls for interventions that target wellbeing and mental health in this population (e.g., Breslin et al., 2017; Gorczynski et al., 2019). Furthermore, interventions are increasingly being delivered using online methods, however, there is currently little guidance on how to deliver such interventions online effectively. Both of these are real-world problems that the study aimed to help solve through the development,

implementation, and evaluation of an online wellbeing intervention aimed at protecting and promoting the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers.

2) *Carry out an intervention that would create change.* The purpose of the online intervention was to create positive change in relation to swimmers' wellbeing, via changes in their knowledge, self-awareness, coping ability, and identity. An additional purpose was to change coaches' and parents' confidence in their ability to recognise and support swimmers' wellbeing.
3) *Incorporates a cycle of critical reflection to enhance action.* I engaged in critical reflection throughout the duration of this study via the use of a researcher reflexive diary, in addition to informal conversations with my supervisors who acted as 'critical friends' (Smith & McGannon, 2018) by challenging my thinking and proposing alternative explanations for me to consider. These reflections and conversations were used to inform action at each stage of the intervention design, implementation, and evaluation.
4) *Carry out action based on research for the creation of knowledge.* The intervention described in this study was designed based on the findings from the studies detailed in Chapters 3 and 4 and further informed by the literature included in Chapter 2. Furthermore, the aim of the present study was to create knowledge regarding the effectiveness the intervention in the form of recommendations.
5) *Being systematic in the approach to carrying out the action research.* The research was carried out in a systematic way using the structure described in Figure 5.2.
6) *Being strategic and staying focused on the long-term purpose of the action research.* Throughout the study I stayed focus on the long-term purpose of the action research, which was to develop an effective online wellbeing intervention. This involved being strategic throughout the study, for example, keeping in mind the purpose of the study during critical periods where, without this focus, the research aim may not have been met (e.g., developing the intervention, engaging with stakeholders, collecting and analysing data etc.).
7) *Being collaborative by including the participants within the research process.* Participants were included in all stages of the intervention, including planning, implementation, and evaluation. Prior to the delivery of the workshops, a number of swimmers who would be taking part in the workshops contributed to the design of the workshops. Similarly, during the delivery of the workshops, collaboration with participants occurred in the form of diaries and semi-structured interviews

where I would ask participants what they enjoyed/did not enjoy/would like to see included. Participants were also free to contact me informally (e.g., via email) to give feedback and/or suggestions for future workshops. Finally, after the workshops were delivered, I continued to work with swimmers to evaluate the workshops and provide recommendations for future workshops.

8) *Empowering the participants by providing them with a voice and input into the research.* As mentioned in point seven, participants were encouraged to collaborate with me during each stage of the intervention (i.e., design, implementation, and evaluation). In doing so, participants were empowered with the ability to help shape the workshops to ensure that they suited their needs and preferences.
9) *Research was conducted within a mutually accepted ethical framework.* Institutional ethical approval was obtained prior to beginning the study. However, recognising that ethics is an ongoing process (e.g., Farrugia, 2019), participants were not only asked to provide informed consent before participating in each aspect of the study, but consent was also obtained verbally at the beginning of each interview, where participants took part in multiple interviews. At the beginning of each workshop, all attendees were also made aware that I would be recording observations and reflections after each session, as well as keeping a record of informal feedback, and this would form part of the evaluation study data. All attendees were invited to message me privately if they did not wish to be included in this way and I would not record any observations related to them. No swimmers, parents, or coaches requested not to be included in this way.
10) *Must utilise recognisable research methods.* Data were collected using a variety of recognisable research methods, including semi-structured interviews, surveys, participant diaries, and a researcher reflexive diary. These methods were chosen as they have been shown to be effective methods of data generation for action research (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Further, the use of a range of methods meant participants were able to choose to participate in the study in the way(s) in which they felt most comfortable, which has been shown to improve participant access to research and have positive effects on recruitment and response rates (e.g., Heath et al., 2018).
11) *The positionality of the researcher must be recognised, and the researcher is also reflexive.* Throughout the duration three studies presented within this thesis, including this one, I have kept a researcher reflexive diary where I have reflected

on my positionality, how this has changed over the course of the research project, and how I may be influencing the research at all stages (e.g., study design, data collection and analysis, discussion and recommendations). I have also included a section on my positionality in each of the studies detailed in this thesis.

12) *The findings must be useful and have applied implications for both practitioners and researchers.* The findings of the present study have several applied implications for practitioners and researchers who are interested in developing future interventions aimed at protecting and promoting the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers. These implications and recommendations are clearly detailed in the discussion section of this chapter.

5.3 Results

The purpose of this study was to design, implement, and evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of a multi-component intervention that aimed to protect and promote the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers. In analysing the interview, diary, and survey data, in conjunction with the observational data and my own personal reflections, I developed themes around the delivery, design, and content of the workshops, as well as themes related to the perceived opportunities and outcomes that attending the workshops provided participants.

5.3.1 Evaluation of Swimmer Workshops

Overall, the swimmer workshops were well-received; in particular, swimmers commented on how useful and enjoyable they found the workshops. General feedback from the reflective evaluation survey included, “I think they were really good and helpful,” “helpful and informative,” and, “really informative and useful for the future.” Similarly, during the post-intervention interviews, Swimmer 5 stated, “[the workshops] were all really good…I loved every single one.” They also commented that, as the workshops went on, “[the topics] kind of like all added up...I managed to put it all together then.” Swimmer 1 explained that they enjoyed the workshops despite being unsure when they first heard about them. They reflected, “initially I was like, ‘oh great,’ like I wasn’t really vibing with it, but they were good.” They elaborated:

> Honestly, like compared to what we usually get [single workshops, repeated yearly] what you’ve done it’s like, this is like normal, pretty bad, pretty standard and yours is like up here. It’s so much better. It’s so much more…like, it’s less boring. You

actually take something from it, like you're learning stuff. And yeah, it's like, interesting.

5.3.1.1 Workshop Delivery. Generally, the delivery of the workshops was evaluated favourably, however, some challenges and difficulties related to the workshop delivery were also reported. Specifically, swimmers discussed; (i) benefits of online delivery, (ii) challenges of online delivery, (iii) workshop schedule, (iv) informal delivery style, (v) timely and relevant content, and (vi) opportunities for interaction and engagement.

5.3.1.1.1 Benefits of Online Delivery. Many swimmers felt that the online delivery of the workshops worked well. For example, in an interview after the first workshop, Swimmer 2 commented, "I think I preferred the actual delivery as it was online." Similarly, in an interview after all the workshops had been delivered, Swimmer 6 emphasised, "I much prefer them online…I feel like, as well, it's more engaging online." One of the main benefits of the online delivery that swimmers perceived was how accessible it made the workshops. This was especially the case for Swimmer 5 who lived abroad and would have struggled to attend the workshops in person. They explained, "it is very helpful for me because I'm over here, although if I was back home, either way would be perfect, you know, but where I am now, having not to, you know, travel." For Swimmer 1, not having to travel to the workshops meant they could attend them without them feeling like an extra burden. In an interview after the workshops had been delivered, they remarked, "on Saturday mornings I'm literally so dead I just want to sit in bed until the afternoon. So, it fit in pretty well. I could just put it on my laptop and do it like that."

Another perceived benefit of the online delivery was that the workshops were not sandwiched between two swim sessions. Previous workshops had been delivered in-person as part of a National Squad learning and development day, where the primary focus was on pool and land-based training sessions, with a workshop scheduled for the middle of the day. As a result of the current workshops being delivered online, many swimmers felt they could fully focus on the workshop as they were not at the pool. Swimmer 2 explained:

> I don't think it [workshop] was delivered the same way that they always have been, but I suppose, it's always been delivered in a classroom. Like you know, in between training sets when all you're really thinking about is the next session, so I think people probably sat and listened more than usual [this time].

Swimmer 3 reiterated this, explaining, "I'm not going to lie, when we used to do our own like, squad days, when you know that you've got a kick test coming up, you're maybe

thinking about that more than the meeting." Similarly, Swimmer 6 mentioned that during previous workshops they had been, "really tired, because you swim and then you go into a lecture...most of the other swimmers [feel this way] as well, because I asked them about it, so I didn't feel as if I was the only one." They expanded:

> Having the meetings online, I just think is so much nicer. Because if they're on a completely different day, you can just go to Swansea with the sole purpose of training and then you can come home and rest and then another day, when you're fully rested and recovered you can do a Zoom…you can actually switch on and listen and engage.

However, not all swimmers liked the workshops being delivered online. For instance, during an interview, Swimmer 7 mentioned that, even though they did not attend the workshops because of their training schedule, they were unsure if they would have attended anyway because they were delivered online, so no one would know if they had actually attended. They explained:

> It's quite hard for people to engage with that…you know what people choose. They choose, "well, I have this on, blah, blah, blah." Because that's what I find with uni. Because I don't [physically] have to be in uni, I think sometimes I can choose the easy option [not to attend]. That's maybe what I think about this as well.

I included a similar point in my reflections, where I recorded that, because I was delivering the workshops online, I could not be sure that everyone was engaged. I reflected, "I find it difficult to tell if everyone is engaging because no one has cameras on. I have a feeling some swimmers log on and then go back to bed for an hour. At least in person you get real time feedback on whether you're keeping people engaged."

5.3.1.1.2 Challenges of Online Delivery. Despite the benefits, there were some unique challenges related to the online delivery of the workshops. For example, there were several technical challenges during some of the workshops that made it difficult for me to deliver as planned. For example, during the planning and communication workshop, I was using the whiteboard function on Zoom and my screen froze. I recorded how flustered this made me feel in my reflections, noting "Initial thoughts on that session – not so good. Tech issues got to me and then I felt like I couldn't get back in to the right frame of mind. I'm not even sure what I was saying at one point." However, speaking about the technical issues during an interview, Swimmer 1 recalled, "I could tell you were stressed. You were like 'guys, I'm so sorry'. I was like 'It's okay'...I don't think anyone cared or noticed so it's fine." Similarly, Swimmer 3 explained:

> I'm quite used to it now because college is always online and there's always going to be technical issues, so it didn't really bother me, and it wasn't really awkward. It was fine…you did good on the spot improvising 'cause you switched up and asked about [professional swimmer] and her different perspectives when she was swimming. So that was good as well."

In addition, swimmers thought that the online format of the workshops impacted on interaction at times, because not all swimmers were comfortable having their cameras on or talking. This was particularly challenging when using the breakout rooms, as Swimmer 2 described:

> I ended up in a room with like four young girls who turned their cameras off, mics off, and it was just me sat there and I was like 'okay' and that was a bit awkward, but I think you know in face-to-face situations it may have may have gone a similar way, you know, where no one spoke, but it's less likely to happen then."

Swimmer 3 spoke about a similar experience during an interview. They noted, "when I was in my breakout room, I was just there sitting and everyone else was on there, cameras off." Weighing up the pros and cons of online versus in person delivery, Swimmer 3 concluded:

> I'm okay with Zoom but I think in person you probably would have had more of an interaction with everyone, and it probably would have helped you as well…So overall, I found it okay on Zoom but maybe in person it would have been better.

5.3.1.1.3 Workshop Schedule. In addition to the online delivery of the workshops, the scheduling of the workshops (i.e., days and times) was also an important factor that influenced whether swimmers could (or would) engage. For most swimmers, the day and time (Saturday at 11am) of the workshops worked well. This was reflected in the numbers of swimmers who attended the workshops (an average of 26 swimmers attended each workshop) and the relatively low dropout rates over the six weeks. Further, comments from the reflective evaluation survey related to the workshop schedule included, "ideal," "perfect time," and, "very comfortable, didn't clash with any other plans in any way." One swimmer elaborated, "[the schedule] was good as I was always available and also the fact it was a Saturday morning meant we had the rest of the day ahead."

However, not everyone found the day and time suitable - the workshops were difficult to attend for some swimmers who had swim or gym training on a Saturday morning. For instance, in the reflective evaluation survey, one swimmer suggested that the workshops, "ideally would have been a bit later as I train 'till 11am so I had to miss a bit of

training.” For other swimmers, the timing of the workshops clashed with their training schedule, meaning they could not engage with the workshops at all. For example, one swimmer wrote, “didn’t work for me as Saturday morning is my most important swim session so didn’t really want to miss it,” whereas another commented, “not good, gym and swim at that time.” Similarly, in an email explaining why they had not engaged in the workshops, one swimmer noted, “I have gym from 9.30 to 11 and swimming from 11.15 to 1 on Saturdays so that might have been a factor [why I didn’t attend].” In an interview, Swimmer 7 stated, “We have swimming in the morning and then we do gym afterwards. My gym time was during the calls.”

Other swimmers mentioned that they found the time and day “alright” but noted that it was a “bit of a rush coming home from training in the morning, maybe Sunday would have worked better.” Another swimmer wrote, “it was okay, but I think I would prefer it on a Sunday evening.” However, speaking about this during an interview, Swimmer 1 stated, “If you did it on a Sunday, I wouldn’t go sorry. No chance. Sunday is for rest. I don’t want to be thinking at all on a Sunday.”

5.3.1.1.4 Informal Delivery Style. Comments from the reflective evaluation survey mentioned that the workshops were, “really well planned” and “delivered well.” Another swimmer wrote, “it was a nice atmosphere in general, where I felt comfortable and understood or not judged by peers in any way that felt uncomfortable.” Specifically, swimmers enjoyed the informal delivery style, noting that this “made it more relatable and enjoyable” and “was very interesting and kept me focused.”

For Swimmer 2, they felt the delivery was enjoyable because the PowerPoint slides contained a few short sentences that myself and the professional athlete spoke around. During an interview, they explained, “[the presentation] wasn’t too long or too many words...it wasn’t too in your face but equally it wasn’t dry...I think you got the balance well.” This was important, as they felt that there was the potential for the workshops to feel like a lesson at school. They explained, “I think the talking is much better than having it written down. Because if it’s written down I feel like I'm in school again, especially with school being on Zoom now as well.”

Swimmers also felt that having two people deliver the workshops made the workshop more enjoyable and engaging. Speaking about this during an interview, Swimmer 6 reflected:

> I like that because sometimes, when we used to do the [squad days] in real person, having one person speak at you it can get a bit boring sometimes. So, having a

> conversation with two people with different experiences and different view and stuff is much more interesting and engaging to listen to, rather than if you just have one person speaking at you the whole time.

Making a similar point, Swimmer 1 described the delivery as, “like a podcast” and Swimmer 5 commented, “it was more of like a conversation...so it kind of helped focus a bit more, in my perspective, you know, it felt more normal to think, talk and communicate, if that makes any sense.” The professional swimmer and I also discussed the benefits of the informal delivery style in several informal conversations during the intervention period. Specifically, after the third workshop, the professional swimmer commented on how much more confident they felt the swimmers were becoming and how they felt that this was because of the conversational style that we were delivering the workshops in. They mentioned how they had noticed that during times where we were sharing experiences with each other, the swimmers seemed more engaged and became more confident to ask questions or share their thoughts, either verbally or through the chat.

5.3.1.1.5 Timely and Relevant Content. The workshops that swimmers perceived to be the most interesting and helpful were those that were relevant to them at that time. For example, speaking about the identity workshop during an interview, Swimmer 1 observed, “it sort of came at quite a good time for me because we had some time off and I was feeling a little bit bored without swimming.” Similarly, Swimmer 5 enjoyed the transitions workshop because they felt, “it was all good information to help take on with yourself - with myself - or future and like thinking, ‘oh if this happened, I’d know what else I could do’.”

Related to this, several swimmers mentioned that they did not enjoy the transitions workshop as much as the other workshops because they already knew a lot about the topic and so they felt that it was not relevant to them. For example, in a diary entry, Swimmer 4 wrote, “The [transition] workshop on the weekend I didn’t connect and stay as focused as I did with the first one because it was repeating a lot of things I already knew.” Making a similar point, Swimmer 3 explained:

> I think because we’ve had something similar before, and because I’m like older than the other swimmers, we’ve been doing how the body matures and stuff in school and stuff like that. But I think for the younger swimmers, I think they learnt a lot more.

However, Swimmer 1 still enjoyed the transition workshop because they learnt something new. They commented, “Although I knew what was going on, you gave me some new

ideas and it was really useful." During this session, I could tell that swimmers were not as engaged as in the previous workshop as there were long delays when swimmers were asked to put their responses in the chat. I also had to prompt swimmers to engage using the chat function multiple times. This was different to the first workshop, where I reflected on how – although they were quiet in the breakout rooms – swimmers were much more engaged using the chat function. The professional swimmer and I also discussed the decrease in engagement in an informal conversation after the workshop, where they told me that they found this workshop a bit more difficult as the lack of engagement meant they could not tell if anyone was listening, which put them off at times.

5.3.1.1.6 Opportunities for Interaction and Engagement. Despite some of the aforementioned challenges, swimmers perceived the workshops to be interactive and engaging overall. For example, during an interview, Swimmer 1 explained that the workshops were more interactive and engaging than previous workshops they had attended. They explained, "compared to like all the other sessions that we usually have they're so interactive." Related to this point, many swimmers felt that the opportunities for interaction and engagement were some of the most enjoyable aspects of the workshops. For example, in a diary entry, Swimmer 4 wrote, "the thing I enjoyed the most about the [wellbeing workshop] was being able to have a bit of interaction by doing the quiz things" and Swimmer 6 recorded, "I liked when we drew all of the items we associate with our identity as it was very engaging, and we actually had to do it ourselves." Similar comments were received via the reflective evaluation survey, where swimmers commented that they most enjoyed, "the activities and interactivity with other swimmers," "seeing people I haven't seen in a while," and, "the quizzes and games involved."

Swimmers felt that, because the workshops were engaging and interactive, they were better able to stay focused throughout the session. For example, during interviews, Swimmer 1 commented, "you're actually quite interesting to listen to and you don't send us to sleep and it's not the same thing every time" and Swimmer 3 explained, "you can see that from the responses you got in the [poll] that you did…I think almost everyone answered and got them all right... I think it makes people more engaged because it's interactive." Similarly, Swimmer 5 told me, "I found it was a good balance because it was information and then there was also quizzes, so like you had to test yourself to see if you were actually learning things."

One type of activity that all swimmers appeared to enjoy were the quizzes and polls. For example, on the reflective evaluation survey, some swimmers recorded that they

enjoyed “the little quizzes,” and “quizzes, surveys, Kahoots,” and, “Kahoot was good as it was competitive.” Similarly, another swimmer commented that the Kahoot quiz was, “one of the most enjoyable activities throughout the workshops.” The professional swimmer and I also reflected on this during an informal conversation after the workshops had all been delivered, where we both agreed that if we were to deliver the sessions again, we would try to include more competitive elements from the beginning. In addition, we reflected that an icebreaker activity in the first workshop would have been beneficial to facilitate interaction between the swimmers early on, rather than the focus being on wellbeing straight away.

However, apart from the quizzes, swimmers had different preferences regarding how they liked to interact and engage. For example, the drawing activity during the identity workshop received mixed feedback – for some swimmers, they reported that they most enjoyed “the drawing task,” and comments from the survey and email feedback included, “[the drawing activity was a] fun idea and [it was] interesting to see what other people said and also drew” and, “I mostly enjoyed when we got to draw our hobbies/interests as it allowed us to really think about it and made the session really interactive and fun.” Elaborating on why they enjoyed the drawing task, Swimmer 1 explained:

> It like makes you, like, involved with the thing and you have to actually think about it. Sometimes I just put a computer up and I just like listen, do you know what I mean, and you don’t really pay that much attention, like it’s going in but I think [the drawing activity] made you sort of like focus on the actual thing and relate it to yourself which I think was really helpful.

But not all swimmers enjoyed this activity; one swimmer commented on the survey that “the drawing one” was the activity they enjoyed least, and a different swimmer wrote, “wasn’t a fan of the drawing one.”

Similarly, some swimmers seemed to enjoy the breakout rooms and group work, whereas others preferred to engage in ways that did not require them to speak. For example, some swimmers recorded via the survey that they least enjoyed, “breakout rooms,” “speaking in breakout rooms,” and, “talking in breakout rooms.” Other swimmers commented, “the breakout rooms weren’t the best” noting that they were, “quite awkward at times.” In an email, another swimmer wrote, “I’m not a big fan of the breakout rooms personally, they’re useful for sharing ideas but I’m just not a fan of them.”

However, some swimmers reported that they did enjoy the breakout rooms on occasion. For example, in a diary entry, Swimmer 3 wrote, “I enjoyed the breakout rooms

this time due to it being very interactive and funny" and, during an interview, Swimmer 5 commented that the breakout rooms during the planning workshop were, "quite good to get other people's points of view on what their thought is about communication and like you get not only your side but you get different points of views." For Swimmer 1, they enjoyed the breakout rooms more as the workshops went on. They reflected:

> You know what, I think I'm actually starting to like the breakout rooms. Like the big ones, not the small ones. The big breakout rooms. I'm starting to quite like those. I think it's nice for everyone to get involved and like, yeah...I think that was actually my favourite part of it.

5.3.1.2 Workshop Effectiveness. The workshops appeared to be effective in facilitating a range of outcomes that positively impacted swimmers' wellbeing and mental health. For example, comments from the survey showed that, by attending the workshops, swimmers learned, "how to manage my mental health," "how to manage my mental wellbeing," and "how to look after myself and ask for help if I need it." More specifically, swimmers perceived that by attending the workshops, they had; (i) gained new knowledge, (ii) had a better understanding of themselves, (iii) experienced reassurance and increased confidence. Further, swimmers felt that these outcomes were achieved because the workshops provided; (i) an opportunity for reflection and shared experiences, (ii) the chance to learn from the experiences of a professional swimmer, and (iii) an opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills they had learned outside of the workshops.

5.3.1.2.1 Gained Knowledge and Skills. Many swimmers reported that they had gained new knowledge and skills by attending the workshops. For instance, during an interview, Swimmer 4 commented, "I learnt a lot of things which I didn't already know, which I thought was quite nice, and it was something different to what I've done before." Similarly, Swimmer 2 spoke about how they had kept a record of what they had learned during each workshop. They explained, "I've got like a little Word document that I've been writing everything down throughout the sessions."

The main things that swimmers learnt from attending the workshops appeared to be how to recognise declining wellbeing, how to communicate more effectively, and how to recognise and manage their emotions. For example, in their survey response, one swimmer wrote that they had learned, "how to recognise when my wellbeing is not good" and another wrote, "coping mechanisms and signs that wellbeing is off." In relation to communication, swimmers recorded that they had learned, "different ways to communicate with coach" and "how to pick the right time to speak people." With regards to emotions,

one swimmer learned that there are “no good or bad emotions and how to recognise emotions,” whereas another learned, “how to deal with stressful situations and how to manage emotions and communicate properly with coaches.”

5.3.1.2.2 Better Understanding of Self. In addition to gaining new knowledge and skills, swimmers also reported having a better understanding of themselves because of attending the workshops. Specifically, swimmers reported having a better understanding about who they were, what they enjoyed, and the strengths they possessed. For example, in an email to me, one swimmer wrote, “I found [the identity workshop] very informative and I learnt a few more things about myself that I hadn't thought about much before.” In a comment on the survey, another swimmer wrote, “[identity workshop] made me think on a deeper level about myself as a person.” Making a similar point during an interview, Swimmer 5 told me:

> I found [the identity workshop] good because it helped you think about, think a bit more into what else you are. Subconsciously. You know… first of all, if they ask you ‘oh yeah, what are you, what are you known to be’ and it’s like, ‘I swim’ you know. But with other things it helps to think a bit deeper which you don’t, wouldn’t really think you think of people knowing you for or what you like.

For Swimmer 1, the identity session gave them a better insight into the things they like to do outside of swimming. During an interview, they commented, “I think maybe after that meeting, it was like, there's other things that I enjoy and that I can spend time doing when I'm not swimming.”

The workshops also helped some swimmers to become more aware of their strengths. For example, one swimmer emailed me to say, “I have also become better at identifying my own strengths in and out of the pool.” For another swimmer, they felt the planning and communication workshop that helped them to see their strengths and highlight areas for improvement. On the survey, they wrote that they had learned, “that I do actually plan very well, but [I learned] things about communication like when and how to deliver.” For Swimmer 3, they explained during an interview that the workshops, “make you realise oh yes, I’ve done this right or yes, I need to improve on that. So it does make you think what can I improve and what am I doing well.”

5.3.1.2.3 Reassurance and Increased Confidence. Many of the swimmers reported that the workshops gave them reassurance. Specifically, swimmers reported feeling reassured that there was support around them and that their experiences were “normal.” For example, one swimmer commented on the survey that the section on identifying their

social support network (during the transition workshop) helped to reassure them that "there are lots of different people and things you can use and have as support to work on your well-being." Similarly, Swimmer 5 wrote in their diary, "I have found reassurance that there is support out of my house." During an interview, Swimmer 3 explained, "I didn't really think how much support I actually had in swimming. But then once I narrow it down and see who is a part of the team, there is a massive group of us."

Further, swimmers also felt that the workshops provided reassurance by helping to normalise their experiences. Specifically, swimmers commented how hearing that the professional swimmer had gone through similar experiences was reassuring to them. During an interview, Swimmer 2 commented:

> I've thought a lot about what [professional swimmer] said especially when she said that she always got nervous and stuff before races and everything and I thought you know that is me you know that does mimic and mirror how I get and I've thought I think that my reaction was a bit extreme...it's made me feel a bit more normal.

Similarly, Swimmer 6 explained:

> I think it's just reassurance, not just for me but for all the swimmers as well, because you can just be like, it's okay. Someone who was at a very high level who has done this so well…she's gone through this and it's okay to be going through this. Sometimes having those down days and being like, it's normal. It's not like you're not feeling committed and stuff, it's normal and I think it's really nice.

In addition, some of the swimmers reported that they felt more confident after attending the workshops. For example, Swimmer 3 explained that, throughout the workshops, they were thinking, "I do that." They elaborated, "So it was like, 'thank God,' it's put me on the right track and gave me a little bit of confidence."

For Swimmer 1, they gained confidence around communicating with their coach. Before the planning and communication workshop, Swimmer 1 told me that they would like to know, "how best to talk to your coach, to communicate with them...I do find [them] scary and like hard to approach." In an interview after the workshop, they reflected, "I think maybe now I know the best way to sort of ask [them], I feel more comfortable doing it." For Swimmer 5, they experienced increased confidence around talking about how they feel. They remarked, "it's helped a lot because…before I really struggled to talk about how I felt and now it's come a bit easier."

5.3.1.2.4 Opportunities for Reflection and Shared Experiences. In general, swimmers enjoyed the reflections they conducted through attending the workshops. For

example, when asked what they enjoyed in the survey, swimmers' responses included, "the reflections," "reflecting on your own performance for the different workshops," and, "just listening along and thinking about how the information related to myself." However, one swimmer noted that they, "didn't like reflection time because I couldn't think of any good examples."

For those who enjoyed the reflection opportunities, it seemed that having the time to reflect was useful as they did not usually get a chance to engage in reflection. During interviews, Swimmer 1 told me, "you don't really have time to think about yourself really, especially with Covid now, [and] swimming practice, assignments, exams." Similarly, Swimmer 3 mentioned that they enjoyed, "all of the meetings in general" because:

> It gave me time to reflect back on myself and what I do. Because you don't really think of yourself, you just get day by day and you just get through the day. Go training, go to college or sleep, eat and you don't think really about yourself.

In addition, some swimmers felt that the opportunities to share their experiences with the group were useful as this helped them to learn more about the topic and about their peers. For example, during an interview, Swimmer 2 observed, "if it's more talking, listening, hearing about other people's experiences and all that sort of stuff, it becomes something that you're learning from." Similarly, Swimmer 1 noted, "I think I learnt more about people then that I wouldn't normally talk to. I think it was [swimmer name] who spoke. I genuinely never said a word to her [before], so I feel I maybe got to know her a bit more through that."

For Swimmer 6, they liked hearing others' opinions as they felt it was useful for interpreting their own experiences. During an interview, they told me, "I just like being involved in stuff and getting other people involved and being able to hear their opinions. I can take that on board and be like, actually, you can see it from that way." Swimmer 3 also enjoyed hearing from their peers, as they felt it gave them new ideas that they could apply to themselves. A quote from their diary read, "I enjoyed doing the Mentimeter due to being able to gain ideas from other swimmers." In a later entry, they wrote, "I would like to see where people would be able to share their situation or experiences like me and [another swimmer] have done, either verbally or have a chance to write them down." After the final workshop, they recorded "I found that everyone sharing their thoughts [during the recap] useful."

5.3.1.2.5 A Chance to Learn from the Experiences of a Professional Swimmer. Swimmers perceived the inclusion of a professional athlete to be, "really useful" and

"made the presentation more relatable." Responses from the survey indicated that swimmers enjoyed "having to opportunity to hear past experiences from [professional swimmer]," "listening to all the information and how it related to [the professional swimmer's] experiences within swimming," and "input from [professional swimmer] which gives good examples from a higher-level swimmer perspective." One swimmer commented that it made, "a nice change to have an experienced swimmer talking about her past experiences" and another stated, "hearing [professional swimmer's] advice was truly inspiring."

With regards to the inclusion of a professional swimmer in the workshops, swimmers felt it was important that the person had the right personality. Swimmer 2 noted, "I've met a lot of people who have done really well in swimming who are a bit, you know, up themselves…you wouldn't want them on your PowerPoint presentation, you know." Speaking about the professional swimmer who facilitated the workshops during interviews, Swimmer 1 observed, "She knows how to talk and keep everyone engaged" and Swimmer 6 commented:

> She is just so friendly to talk to… sometimes you meet other swimmers and they'd be a bit like, don't really want to talk to you, but she is so nice, and you feel connected, like you can just have a conversation with her.

Although it was important that the professional athlete had the right personality, swimmers were less concerned about the demographics of the person, instead they felt it was more important that they could relate to their experiences. For instance, talking about the gender difference between themselves and the professional athlete, Swimmer 2 explained, "[it doesn't matter] at all, she's done everything I want to do, and she's done everything that everyone else wants to do so, you know, I still look up to her." Making a similar point, Swimmer 3 explained, "I could still relate, even though I'm a male and she's a female, we both shared the same experience, so I could still relate to that."

5.3.1.2.6 Use of Skills and Knowledge Outside of the Workshops. Many swimmers felt they had been able to use the knowledge and skills they had gained from the workshops in their day-to-day lives. For example, talking about the social support section of the transition workshop in an interview, Swimmer 2 stated, "it has helped, definitely, I've already put it into practice." Swimmer 3 also used some of what they had learned from this workshop. In their diary, they wrote:

> At the start of the week I didn't feel like I adapted to the challenges very well, however, at the end of the week I found it easier. Towards the end of the week, I reflected back on each session and it [gave] me ideas who can help.

Other swimmers reported using information from the wellbeing awareness workshop. For instance, Swimmer 4 wrote in their diary, "I have used some of the wellbeing awareness over the past week."

For other swimmers, they mentioned that they had used information from multiple workshops to help them. For example, Swimmer 1 noted that they had used what they had learned during the wellbeing awareness workshop, in combination with information from the identity workshop. One of their diary entries read:

> I've used the wellbeing awareness techniques to spot when my wellbeing might've been a bit lower and used info you gave us in the identity sessions to help me during the week before when I had some time off swimming to put everything in perspective and realise that there's more to me than just a student and athlete.

For Swimmer 5, they used information from the planning and communication and managing emotions workshops to help them during a competition. During an interview, they explained:

> I have used the communication side of it a lot. You know, because in [location] over the summer, I've had points where I've done a competition and I'm like okay, that wasn't too well. I've got to speak about it and how I felt about it and everything. And also, just like, it's been mostly positive like with how I've felt and just the different experiences. So, communication and the emotions as well. So, like handling it. Not to get too excited as well.

5.3.2 Evaluation of Parent and Coach Workshops

Generally, parents and coaches evaluated the workshop that they attended positively and feedback from the parent evaluation survey included, "it was excellent," "[I] thoroughly enjoyed it," and, "Katie was brilliant and gave lots of tips for everyone's wellbeing." From the coach evaluation survey, feedback included, "it was a very well thought out and run workshop" and "it was a good balanced workshop."

5.3.2.1 Workshop Design and Delivery. Parent and coach evaluations of the workshops were largely positive, and many felt that the way in which the workshops were designed facilitated their learning and enjoyment. However, some participants highlighted they did not enjoy the online delivery of the workshops and there were also a number of additional elements coaches and parents felt they would have like to have seen included.

Four main themes were developed related to the design and delivery of the parent and coach workshops: (i) delivery mode; (ii) relevance and usefulness of content; (iii) opportunities for discussion and sharing ideas, and; (iv) the use of real-world examples and scenarios to facilitate learning and understanding.

5.3.2.1.1 Delivery Mode. The online format of the workshop worked well for many of the parents and coaches. For example, during an interview, Parent 2 mentioned that they, "quite liked them online personally." They continued, "in the nicest sense, we are all so busy it actually works quite well. So, I think for more parents they are probably happy, you know, just to do them online anyway." Similarly, Coach 3 felt that the online delivery worked better for them as they felt it was more "accessible." They explained:

> All I've got to do is just block out this hour, then log in and don't have to go anywhere and if I need to do other things while it's on in the background then I can do that instead of like you say, doing it face to face [and] having to think right, I've got to block out more time as I've got to travel, get there and actually be there and stuff.

However, not everyone liked the online format of the workshop. During an interview, Coach 2 thought that the worst thing about the workshop was it, "being on Zoom" and stated that they, "100 percent" would have preferred it to have been delivered face-to-face. They elaborated:

> There was a point during lockdown where I was on, I was on a Zoom meeting every day for a week I think it was. And that's not including the workouts with the kids. So, like some days it was like three or four Zooms and I was just like 'oh my God.' And then a family quiz in the evening just to top it all off.

In addition, one of the parents commented that it would have been helpful to have the content that was covered sent to them so they could revisit it after the workshop had ended. They wrote on the survey, "[I would have liked] to have the information sent to us for future reference, or a place where we can find useful tips as it's hard to remember everything although I was trying to keep notes."

5.3.2.1.2 Relevance and Usefulness of Content. Overall, parents and coaches felt that the workshop content was relevant and useful. For example, parents' comments from the survey included, "it was incredibly helpful and timely" and "the content was useful and I'm glad it's being talked about." Similarly, during an interview, one parent commented, "it is such an important topic isn't it? I mean, and if anything, I am not even sure we are doing enough on it." For another parent, they noted how the workshop "came at a really

good time personally for me and [my daughter]" because "in the past year, she's gone from [school club] to [another club]." Coaches felt that the content of the workshops was useful too. For example, Coach 1 stated, "I think they were helpful" and Coach 3 explained:

> It was all useful like for different reasons. Either learning new things around it or just like I say, reaffirming and confirming why or what I thought already which was always a nice thing kind of knowing that okay, I am down the right track. Especially in a topic like this.

Despite finding the content that was provided relevant and useful, parents and coaches highlighted that they would have liked for the workshop to have included information and guidance related to supporting wellbeing in different scenarios, such as COVID-19, competitions, and school pressures. For example, on the survey, one parent noted they would have liked, "a bit more on wellbeing in different situations like now with COVID," whereas another parent wrote they would have liked to have covered, "how best to deal with my daughter during this difficult time with the COVID-19 situation as this is very different to the normal struggles."

In addition to information on COVID-19, one parent told me during an interview that they would have liked some content on helping their child, "with the losses and the wins and the ups and the downs and all that type of thing" whereas a different parent mentioned they would have liked to have covered, "how to help your child deal with disappointment." They elaborated:

> So, when they've had that disappointment and they need to refocus and they are feeling demotivated and you know as a parent it's not the end of the world, they can go on and achieve, you don't want to trivialise it by saying it's only a swim because for them it's far more than that.

For coaches, they felt that they would have liked the workshop to have covered how best to help swimmers manage school pressures and how to support swimmer wellbeing during exam periods. For instance, on the survey, one coach stated, "we need to open discussions around how schools seem to be piling on pressure." In an interview, Coach 3 commented:

> I think in our breakout groups we were saying all around exams 'cause it was at that time where they were starting to get, exams were starting to pick up and do certain things and stuff. So, it's kind of how do these different strategies evolve at different times of the season and things.

As well as covering specific scenarios, both parents and coaches would have liked the workshops to include recommendations for specific professional services that they could signpost to which could help support wellbeing and mental health. For example, on the survey, one parent wrote that they would have liked to have covered, "how to access professional help" and a coach wrote, "I think some recommended services would help." In an interview, Coach 2 explained how they would have liked to have learned, "where to point a child if they're suffering with depression or if something's happening at home and they don't want to talk to me or the welfare officer or anyone else."

5.3.2.1.3 Opportunities for Discussion and Sharing Ideas. In general, parents and coaches enjoyed the opportunities to discuss experiences and share ideas with other parents/coaches that the workshops provided. For example, on the survey, many parents reported that they most enjoyed, "meeting Kate and talking to other parents," "seeing the other parents and [their] comments," "the opportunity to discuss experiences with other parents," and, "speaking to other parents and hearing how they deal with different situations that maybe you have not yet come across." Similarly, on the survey, one coach commented, "I found the group discussions in the breakout rooms to be really useful" and another wrote, "a chance to have coach discussions and find out others experience is always beneficial."

For parents, the opportunity to chat to other parents was helpful as it gave them a chance to share experiences. Illustrating this point during an interview, Parent 3 described:

> The parents were just so keen to talk, they couldn't wait because it's almost like it was their first opportunity...it was like 'aah, I've seen you in a meet, I recognise your surname, oh, how is your daughter finding it' you know? Straightaway they were sharing experiences.

For Parent 1, talking to the other parents helped them to feel more supported. They commented, "you don't realise how much of a support the other swimming parents are, because you're all going through the same thing, together."

However, not all the parents enjoyed the discussion opportunities as they did not see how it related to the workshop topic. For example, one parent commented, "It was nice to meet other parents from the squad but not sure much was gained in respect of wellbeing for our children when we were put in rooms." For another parent, they felt it would have been more beneficial if the discussion was facilitated. They wrote, "breakout rooms were a bit awkward. Would have been better if someone was there to lead the conversation." Similarly, after the parent workshop, I recorded in my reflections:

> I'm not too sure if the breakout rooms worked for everyone. In some of the rooms I popped in to it felt like some of the more confident parents were dominating the conversations. It would have been good if I had someone co-delivering with me so we could have tried to facilitate and give everyone a chance to speak but I couldn't do it on my own.

5.3.2.1.4 Scenarios and Real-World Examples to Facilitate Learning and Understanding. Parents and coaches felt that the use of hypothetical scenarios and real-world examples helped to facilitate their learning and understanding of the topic. For example, on the survey, one parent wrote that what they found most helpful during the workshop was, "expanding key facts with practical, real-world scenarios," whereas one coach wrote that the most useful part of the workshop was, "discussing with other coaches the same situations we are dealing with and working out with a scenario given how we would react or work with the swimmers to find the best outcome."

In particular, coaches liked the hypothetical scenarios and discussing real-world cases with other coaches. For example, during an interview, Coach 2 commented, "I quite enjoyed the scenarios to be honest. Going into the groups and discussing...it was good to listen to some more experienced coaches talk about how they would handle it."

Making a similar point during an interview, Coach 3 explained:

> I quite liked when we were in the breakout rooms and kind of discussing what everyone else had kind of seen. Again, you're getting different perspectives and how they dealt with it and whether they felt that they dealt with it in a good way or bad way, or how would they deal with it next time, or if they're in the same situation but with a different kid, how would they have dealt with it and things.

During interviews, coaches explained how they would have liked to have seen more of this type of activity. For example, Coach 3 suggested, "I don't know how you'd do it but kind of maybe, I don't know if it would be quite hard to do but I was thinking like case studies to an extent." For Coach 1, they felt including role-play activities would have further facilitated their learning an understanding of the topic, although they acknowledged that not everyone would agree. They commented, "I don't think people like this, but I do think that maybe trying to do a bit of role-play at some point." I also reflected after the coach workshop that:

> It would have been good to have included a swimmer (maybe retired) who could openly share their wellbeing experiences with the coaches so that they had a real-

life example and chance to ask what type of support that swimmer would have benefitted from at the time.

5.3.2.2 Workshop Effectiveness. Overall, parents and coaches perceived that the workshops were effective in helping them to feel better able to recognise and support the wellbeing of their child or the swimmers they coached. Specifically, by attending the workshop, parents and coaches reported that they had gained; (i) knowledge around recognising and supporting wellbeing; and (ii) reassurance and increased confidence in their ability to recognise and support wellbeing.

5.3.2.2.1 Knowledge about Recognising and Supporting Wellbeing. By attending the workshops, both parents and coaches reported that they had gained knowledge about how to recognise and support the wellbeing of their child or swimmers. For instance, in the coach survey, one coach commented, "[I learnt] how to recognise declining swimmer wellbeing and the different ways this can manifest" and another wrote that the most useful thing they learned was, "having a structure of how to approach [wellbeing] conversations and how to manage these." Similarly, in the parent survey, one parent stated that they had learned, "tips on how to best deal with my daughter when she is down," whereas another reported they had learned, "how to manage talking to your child about their wellbeing." For Parent 2, they felt that what they learned around the signs of declining wellbeing had made them reassess some of their previous interpretations of situations with their child. During an interview, they explained:

> When I look back I used to, I used to think that chattiness was because she was just bubbly and curious… Because it was the overly chatty, she overthinks and she really struggles with worry and that was her way of coping with it.

In addition to learning how they might recognise and support their child or swimmers' wellbeing, several parents and coaches commented that the workshop had also helped them to think about their own wellbeing. For example, one coach wrote on the reflective evaluation form, "[the workshop] highlighted that sometimes I don't take care of my own wellbeing well enough." During an interview, Coach 2 spoke about how the workshop had prompted them to begin making some changes to their lifestyle to support their wellbeing. They told me:

> I'm actually beginning to sleep a bit better and I'm able to relax when I need to and I have been doing bits like, I finish work on a Saturday at eleven, everything switches off and I won't switch anything on until sort of two o clock on the Sunday when I'm back at work at three o clock. And that then means, we put it away and we just go

> and have nice days out and everything...so it is better, but it's just taking time to get there that's all.

Similarly, Parent 1 perceived the workshop itself to be beneficial for their wellbeing. They commented, "It was really nice, I felt a bit pampered myself, do you know what I mean, having something like that, it was really good."

5.3.2.2.2 Reassurance and Increased Confidence in Ability to Support Wellbeing. As well as gaining knowledge about how to recognise and support wellbeing, parents and coaches reported that the workshops provided them with reassurance that they were not alone and they were already doing the right things, which gave them increased confidence in their ability to recognise and support wellbeing. For example, on the parent survey, parents commented that they found most useful, "finding I'm not alone, we all have similar experiences," and, "finding that other parents have the same issues." On the coach survey, one coach wrote:

> [I learnt] a lot of coaches are in the same position as myself working with either confidence in swimmers returning from lockdown and identifying swimmers who could be struggling with either mental health or overwhelming emotions with life balance as we return to normal life.

In addition to feeling reassured that they were not alone, coaches and parents explained they also felt reassured because the workshop confirmed they were already doing the right thing. For example, on the survey, one coach reported, "I found the workshop helped reinforce the practices that we already use within our programme," whereas another coach noted, "it reaffirmed the current processes we have as a club and that we are doing a great job on supporting swimmer wellbeing." Similarly, one parent wrote the most helpful part of the workshop for them was, "seeing that as a family we are doing the right things." During interviews, Coach 3 explained how the workshop helped confirm that they were already looking for the right things when supporting the wellbeing of the swimmers they worded with. They reflected:

> It was nice to have just kind of, confirm different things of like what I thought already...reaffirm of okay I'm actually looking for the right things and not just looking at randomly and interpreting things in the wrong way.

Parent 1 made a similar point, they told me, "it's really nice, somebody says to you, do you know what, and you think, oh yeah, but sometimes you're so in it, aren't you, you can't quite see the woods for the trees."

For Coach 1, they felt that, as well as reassurance, the workshop gave them some new ideas. During an interview, they commented “it’s good because it always helps reaffirm what you know but also gives you little ideas.” In addition, some parents and coaches reported that the reassurance they felt from attending the workshops increased their confidence in their ability to recognise and support wellbeing. For example, during an interview, Coach 3 reflected, “I think it’s made me a bit more confident around approaching it, 'cause sometimes I’ve kind of known...[and] I’ve not acted on it straight away,” They continued, “I’m more happy to jump in that little bit earlier I think.” On the survey, one parent made a similar comment. They wrote:

> [The workshop] gave me confidence to engage with my child [and] that my engagement to date was along the right lines. This is important. I feel very confident in my working life in recognising well-being issues, but it is more difficult in a domestic setting.

5.4 Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to design, implement, and evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of a multi-component intervention that aimed to protect and promote the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers. Although a number of athlete mental health interventions have already been presented in the literature (e.g., Breslin et al., 2019; Vella et al., 2018), such interventions have mainly focused on achieving outcomes related to one aspect of wellbeing (e.g., improving mental health awareness, reducing symptom severity). The present study contributes to this rapidly growing body of work by presenting an intervention that targets multiple areas related to athlete wellbeing (i.e., awareness, transitions, identity, coping) within the same intervention. Specifically, the online intervention comprised six swimmer workshops that aimed to improve swimmers’ self-awareness in relation to wellbeing, help them to anticipate and prepare for transitions, promote the development of a holistic identity, and support athletes in developing strategies for managing periods of change and uncertainty. In addition, two additional workshops were delivered (one to parents and one to coaches) that aimed to increase their ability to recognise and support swimmer wellbeing.

Overall, the findings suggested that the workshops were generally well-received by everyone who attended and swimmers, parents, and coaches reported numerous favourable outcomes that they attributed to their attendance at the workshops. In particular, swimmer, coach, and parent participants all reported improved knowledge regarding the topics covered in the workshops, as well as increased confidence in their coping abilities

(swimmers) or their ability to support swimmer wellbeing (coaches and parents). In addition, swimmers also felt that the workshops helped them gain a better understanding of themselves. The findings indicated that outcomes were fostered by the delivery of timely and relevant content (all workshops), the inclusion of an experienced swimmer (swimmer workshops), the use of scenarios and real-world examples (parent and coach workshops), as well as the opportunities for reflection and discussion that the workshops provided (all workshops).

Within the sport literature, there has been a substantial increase in athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions over the past 5 years (e.g., Breslin et al., 2021; Dowell et al., 2021; Vella et al., 2018). However, a recent review of athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions highlighted that there is a need for future interventions to be both theory-driven and evidence-based (Breslin et al., 2022). Thus, the present study contributes to the extant literature by presenting an intervention that has been designed based on a substantive theory that was developed with the target population and further informed by the wider literature. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first athlete wellbeing intervention that has used such an approach, although a similar approach has been reported in the sport parent literature by Thrower et al. (2019), who developed a parent education programme based on their grounded theory of sport parents' educational needs (Thrower et al., 2016). Perhaps unsurprisingly, evaluation of Thrower and colleagues' parent education programme found that the intervention was most effective for parents whose needs met those that were covered by the programme content (Thrower et al., 2019). Similarly, the findings of the present study suggest that the inclusion of timely and relevant content facilitated the positive outcomes experienced by many participants. As such, to be most effective, it appears important that interventions are tailored to the specific needs of participants and must, if possible, be created in collaboration with the intended participants. Indeed, the adult learning literature suggests that the delivery of educational content that is directly relevant to an individual's life can increase motivation to learn (e.g., Knowles et al., 1998). As such, including participants in intervention development can ensure that included content is timely and relevant, which will subsequently increase the intervention's effectiveness.

As well as the inclusion of timely and relevant content, the findings of the present study indicate that positive outcomes were further facilitated by the focus on practical application of knowledge skills (e.g., communication, emotion management). Specifically, the focus on practical application of skills meant that participants were able to apply what

they had learnt outside of the workshops, which helped to solidify learning and increase confidence. This is supported by evidence that suggests effectively transferring learning into practice can positively impact knowledge, skills, and confidence (e.g., Dowson, 2019). Further, the findings of the present study suggest increased knowledge was also facilitated by the opportunity to self-reflect, as well as the interaction and discussion opportunities that the workshops provided. In particular, the benefits of peer-discussion were emphasised by parents and coaches. This is consistent with previous research that has highlighted both reflection and peer-discussion as effective informal learning strategies in the context of coach education (Nelson & Cushion, 2006; Nelson et al., 2006). In terms of peer discussion, it is likely that this facilitated learning through the formation of *communities of practice* (e.g., Wenger, 2011) where participants were able to make connections and seek support and enhance learning through collaboration of knowledge and reciprocal questioning (e.g., Sullivan, 1998).

In addition, the AR methodology used within the present study ensured that the intervention could be modified throughout the design and delivery stages, which further facilitated positive outcomes by making sure that participants felt part of the intervention. Within sport psychology, AR is becoming an increasingly popular approach for developing athlete wellbeing and mental health interventions (e.g., Vella et al., 2018), to ensure that interventions are tailored to the specific needs of the target population. Indeed, the use of an AR methodology in the present study – in particular the extended exploration phase – allowed me to design an intervention that covered topics that were both timely and relevant for participants. However, whereas previous studies have tended to use an AR approach for the development phase only (e.g., to identify needs), the present study went beyond this to include participants at all stages of the intervention, including delivery. By continuing to include participant feedback and suggestions during the delivery of the intervention, I was able to modify certain aspects of the intervention delivery (e.g., breakout rooms) to ensure that participants remained engaged. Given that engagement is critical for ensuring learning (e.g., Banna et al., 2015), it is likely that these modifications contributed to the increased knowledge that participants gained by attending the workshops.

As well as modifying the intervention to enhance learning, the inclusion of a professional swimmer was also beneficial for fostering positive outcomes. Specifically, swimmers felt that being able to relate to the professional swimmers' experiences, especially regarding setbacks and challenges, provided reassurance and gave them increased confidence that they would be able to achieve a similar level of success. This

aligns with the suggestion that interaction with role models can provide a way to envision what is possible for oneself (Savickas, 2013). Previous research on role models suggests that, to be effective, the role model should possess similarities in relation to age, gender, interests, and background (e.g., Gibson, 2004; Ronkainen et al., 2019). However, the present study included swimmers with a range of demographic and characteristic differences and findings indicated that certain similarities were more important than others. For instance, the age and gender differences between the professional swimmer and some of the swimmer participants were not perceived to be as important as the fact that the professional swimmer had held (and achieved) similar goals to the ones that they held. Therefore, when looking for role models, future interventions should prioritise those whose experiences best align with the goals and aspirations of the target population.

However, although the workshops were generally well-received and participants reported numerous positive outcomes, there were a number of challenges that may have hindered the effectiveness of the intervention for some participants. For example, the wide age range (13 – 20 years) meant that, although most swimmers generally found the topics of the workshops to be relevant, the content of some of the workshops was not as relevant for certain swimmers. In particular, findings indicated that the '*preparing for transitions'* workshop was more relevant for younger swimmers, as they were less likely to have experienced many of the transitions that were covered and therefore found it useful to hear the professional swimmers' experiences of these transitions. However, many of the older swimmers had already been through many of the transitions and so did not find listening to the professional swimmers' experiences as useful. In light of this feedback, it may be beneficial to split the swimmers into smaller groups (based on age and stage of career) and deliver separate workshops to each group, so that each session could be tailored to the specific needs of each group. Alternatively, the older, more experienced swimmers could have been asked to share their transition experiences and offer advice and guidance to their younger selves. This would effectively allow older swimmers to act as role models for younger swimmers, whilst encouraging increased self-awareness in older swimmers through self-reflection.

In addition to ensuring the content of the workshops was relevant for everyone, another key challenge was related to the scheduling of the workshops. Despite working with the NGB to ensure the workshops were scheduled for a day and time where swimmers were unlikely to have training or school commitments, some swimmers still experienced clashes due to the substantial variation in training schedules (both between clubs and

across different squads within the same club). This meant that some swimmers could not attend the workshops, or if they did, they felt that they had to make a choice between training and attending the workshops. This is an important point, as feeling as though they have to choose between two competing priorities may have negatively impacted swimmer wellbeing. Yet, the findings also highlighted that there was no ideal day or time for the swimmer workshops to be delivered which means that, no matter when the workshops were scheduled for, there would always be some swimmers who experienced clashes.

In an ideal world, the training schedules of swimmers across clubs would be aligned to allow for easier scheduling of the workshops. However, as highlighted in Chapter 4, swimmers' training schedules are often inflexible due to the amount of training sessions required and the access restrictions placed on clubs by the swimming pools. Thus, for future workshops, a more feasible approach may be to deliver each session multiple times, although this would be resource intensive (and therefore expensive). Alternatively, workshops could be recorded for dissemination to those who are unable to attend. However, knowing that the workshops are being recorded may negatively impact on how open and honest the swimmers who attend are – particularly given the nature of the topics being covered. Additionally, the findings of the present study highlight the importance of interaction and discussion in facilitating positive outcomes, so recording the sessions may also decrease the intervention's effectiveness. Further, recording the sessions may also discourage some participants from attending as they know they can access the recording at a later date. Other options include disseminating key information in alternative ways (e.g., podcasts, booklets, infographics) for those who could not attend.

In relation to the coach workshop, one of the main challenges was related to buy-in. Out of the 35 coaches that were invited, only 17 attended the workshop. One reason for this may be that the workshop was seen as an extra burden on top of what is already a demanding role (e.g., Carson et al., 2019). Additionally, since the pandemic, coaches were being offered an increasing number of Zoom workshops on a range of different topics. This had led to what one coach described as "Zoom fatigue" which may have led some coaches to be more selective in the Zoom workshops they chose to attend. Given that athlete wellbeing is often seen as secondary to performance in elite sport (e.g., Mountjoy, 2019) and coaches are rarely (if ever) evaluated on how happy or satisfied their swimmers are (e.g., Mallet & Côté, 2006), it is possible that a perceived lack of importance of the topic may have influenced coaches' decisions not to attend. This raises an important

question regarding how, in a world where there are an increasing number of online workshops, to best sell wellbeing workshops to maximise attendance.

One way to sell such workshops may be to emphasise that wellbeing and performance are not – and should not – be mutually exclusive (e.g., Van Yperen, 1998; Kanksy & Diener, 2017). Although this point was made within the workshop that I delivered to coaches as part of the present study, future workshops may benefit from emphasising this point at the time of advertising the workshops. However, future research should also explore the specific reasons behind why some coaches choose not to engage with wellbeing-related workshops. Further, future interventions should consider disseminating key information in different ways, for example, through the use of infographics, short video clips, or easy to read blog posts, so that coaches can engage with this information without it being seen as an added burden.

Interestingly, despite relatively low turnout for the parent session, the findings suggested that there was an appetite for more workshops in the future. This is important as many sports often keep parents at a distance (e.g., Pankhurst & Collins, 2013; Smits et al., 2017), which can make it difficult for parents to access important information required to provide necessary tangible support in relation to training and competitions (Knight & Holt, 2013). Further, Burgess et al. (2016) suggest that parents often seek information from a range of sources to help them cope with sport stressors, including concerns related to nutrition, injury, and education. Consequently, a lack of understanding of the sport can leave parents feeling ill-prepared to support their child (e.g., Clarke & Harwood, 2014). As such, there has been a significant increase in parent education programmes reported in the extant literature (see Burke et al., 2021 for a review). Such programmes have been effective in facilitating a range of positive outcomes, including improved knowledge (e.g., Lisinskienne & Lochbaum, 2019; McMahon et al., 2018; Thrower et al., 2017), reduced anxiety (e.g., Smoll et al., 2007), improved parent-child (Dorsch et al., 2017; Harwood & Swain, 2002) and parent-parent (Thrower et al., 2019) relationships, and increased confidence to support their child (Thrower et al., 2017).

In relation to the present study, the findings indicate that the parent workshop helped parents to feel included in their child's swimming journey, while also providing parents with useful information on how they might best support their child's wellbeing. In addition, the opportunity to meet and interact with other parents helped parents to feel less isolated by providing access to a group of people with similar experiences, from which they were able to form connections and build a wider network of social support – a

beneficial outcome that has also reported by Dorsch et al. (2017). However, despite the range of beneficial outcomes associated with parent education programmes, one of the main limitations of parent education workshops (including the one in the present study) is poor attendance. Similar to the present study, previous evaluations of parent education programmes have reported low attendance rates (Azimi & Tamminen, 2020; Thrower et al., 2017; Thrower et al., 2019). As such, future research should explore the reasons why parents are unable to (or chose not to) attend such programmes, despite their appetite for information. By understanding the reasons for non-attendance, future parent education programmes can be modified to maximise attendance and therefore increase the number of parents (and children) who may benefit from such interventions.

5.4.1 Limitations and Future Research Directions

The findings of the study should be considered within its limitations. First, the majority of the feedback on the workshops was largely positive. This meant that, aside from the changes to the breakout rooms, limited changes were made during the program delivery phase. I recognise that the limited amount of negative feedback may have been influenced by the fact that the workshops were both delivered and evaluated by myself, meaning that swimmers may not have felt comfortable telling me about aspects that did not work for them in case they offended me or hurt my feelings. Having said that, I made sure to emphasise that I was specifically looking for feedback on how to improve the sessions and I spent time building rapport with participants to try and ensure they felt comfortable being honest with me. Alternatively, participants were given the option to email feedback to a gatekeeper, who would anonymise it before passing it on to me. The online survey also gave participants an opportunity to provide anonymised feedback, however, as this was only sent out at the end of the workshops, this feedback did not influence the delivery of the current workshops. On reflection, I believe that it would have been beneficial to have provided another mechanism for providing anonymous feedback and suggestions for improvement throughout the intervention (e.g., via short online surveys after each session). Additionally, it may have been useful to have an independent person conduct the evaluation interviews as this may have helped participants feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts about what was not working or what could be improved.

Second, although the swimmer reflective diaries were a good source of evaluative data, only five swimmers agreed to take part in this aspect of the evaluation and adherence was low for some swimmers. Over the 13-week period, 34 diary entries were returned in total and the majority of these entries came from two swimmers. This means that the data

collected from the diaries was heavily influenced by the experiences of these two swimmers and the limited data generated from the diaries overall means that the findings are heavily influenced by interview and survey data. One reason for the limited uptake of this aspect of the study may be related to terminology – the use of the word diary may have put swimmers off, due to the perception that they would have to write lengthy, daily entries. In future, rather than using the term diary, this type of feedback may be better reframed as written reflections or written evaluation, to increase the number of people who may be willing to participate.

Third, findings related to the coach and parent workshops may be limited due to the lack of feedback from parent/coach participants. In particular, despite being asked to comment on why they were unable or chose not to attend the workshop, no parents or coaches who did not attend provided any feedback. As such, their reasons for not attending remain unknown and the evaluation of these workshops is limited to those who did attend. With regards to feedback from those who attended, despite multiple follow-up emails, only three coaches and three parents agreed to take part in the interview aspect of the evaluation, whilst nine coaches and 16 parents completed the online evaluation survey. Further, all coaches and parents who participated in the interviews also completed the online evaluation survey. This means that the findings related to the coach and parent workshops that are presented in this chapter are heavily based the survey data, and may be heavily influenced by the experiences of a small number of individuals.

Fourth, although the intervention presented in this chapter aimed to protect and promote the wellbeing of high-performance swimmers, the impact of the intervention on wellbeing was not directly assessed. This is because the intervention was designed to support swimmers in developing knowledge (e.g., regarding transitions and wellbeing indicators) and skills (e.g., improved self-awareness, coping strategies), with the assumption that these would benefit their wellbeing during future transitions. As such, the evaluation focused on exploring the perceived impact of the workshops on swimmers' knowledge and skills. However, although many swimmers perceived that the intervention had positive effects in this area, a lack of longitudinal follow up means it is not possible to know whether the positive impact of the intervention on swimmers' knowledge and skills translated into the intended positive effects on wellbeing. In the future, similar intervention evaluation studies would benefit from adopting a longitudinal design, that allows for the longer-term impact of the intervention on wellbeing to be explored.

Finally, the findings of Chapter 4 illustrated the overarching role of culture in determining how high-performance swimmers' wellbeing is affected. This suggests that, to have the most impact, any wellbeing interventions should be delivered alongside targeted culture change. As such, the impact of the intervention presented in this chapter may be limited as it did not include a specific attempt to change the culture within the sport. Having said that, by educating swimmers, parents, and coaches about the importance of wellbeing and providing strategies for communicating about wellbeing, it could be speculated that the intervention may begin to facilitate a culture change from the bottom-up (see e.g., Hagmann et al., 1997). Even so, future interventions may benefit from targeting culture change both from bottom-up and the top-down, for example, by working with senior management and policy makers to include a wellbeing focus in their mission statements, values, policies, and procedures.

5.4.2 Applied Implications

The purpose of AR is not only to generate new knowledge, but also to produce an iterative plan of action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). With this in mind, there are a number of applied implications for the design and delivery of future athlete wellbeing interventions, based on the findings of the present study. In particular, the findings of the present study emphasise the importance of involving participants in all aspects of the intervention – including delivery – to maximise the intervention's effectiveness. As such, future iterations should ensure that participants are involved in all stages of the intervention planning and delivery. Further, although the present study gave participants a choice of how they could participate in the evaluation study (e.g., interviews, diaries, survey), the range of methods were pre-decided. As such, it is not clear whether other data collection methods may have been preferred by participants. Therefore, future interventions may benefit from also including participants when planning how to evaluate the intervention.

In addition, the findings highlight the delivery of relevant and timely content, the inclusion of role models, and the use of real-world examples, as well as providing opportunities for reflection and discussion with peers as key mechanisms that facilitated positive outcomes. Thus, it appears that the inclusion of informal learning strategies may be more important than formal learning for improving knowledge and increasing confidence. As such, future interventions should look to design interventions in a way that allows for the inclusion of informal learning strategies to enhance their effectiveness. However, it is important to ensure that informal learning strategies (e.g., peer discussion,

inclusion of role models) are well planned and align with participant's preferences, to maximise engagement and facilitate learning in this way.

5.5 Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to evaluate the delivery and effectiveness of a multi-component online intervention that was delivered to high-performance swimmers, their parents, and coaches. Overall, the findings suggested that the intervention was effective in increasing knowledge and skills and improving self-awareness, as well as providing reassurance that led to increased confidence in coping abilities (swimmers) and ability to support swimmers' wellbeing (parents and coaches). Further, the findings indicated that the aforementioned positive outcomes were facilitated by the delivery of timely and relevant content, as well as the inclusion of a professional swimmer, the use of real-world examples, and opportunities for self-reflection and interaction with peers. However, the present study also illustrated some key challenges related to delivering a workshop-based intervention, such as ensuring the content is relevant and useful for all, and delivering workshops at a time that suits everyone, in a format that fits individual preferences. Moving forward, one of the main challenges for anyone looking to design and implement a successful athlete wellbeing intervention will be to try maximise the intervention's reach (e.g., by delivering the intervention in different formats such as podcasts, infographics), whilst finding a way to ensure the inclusion of important components that facilitate positive outcomes - such as interaction and engagement - remain.

Chapter 6: General Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The aims of this thesis were two-fold; (1) to gain an in-depth understanding of high-performance swimmers' experiences of wellbeing in terms of how it is understood, recognised, and affected within the context of high-performance swimming, and, (2) to develop, implement, and evaluate an intervention aimed at protecting and promoting high-performance swimmers' wellbeing. To achieve these aims, I conducted the three studies described in the preceding chapters. Specifically, Study 1 (Chapter 3) used interpretive description as a methodology to explore how high-performance swimmers' wellbeing was understood, experienced, and recognised. Study 2 (Chapter 4) used a grounded theory methodology to develop a substantive theory of the process through which engagement in high-performance swimming affects athlete wellbeing. Finally, Study 3 (Chapter 5) drew on an action research methodology to develop, implement, and evaluate a multi-component online wellbeing intervention that was informed by the findings of the previous studies.

The purpose of this final chapter is to provide a general discussion of the findings of this thesis as a whole and consider their contribution to, and implications for, the field of athlete wellbeing (and sport psychology more broadly). First, the key theoretical and methodological contributions of the thesis are discussed before the applied implications for athletes, coaches, sport psychologists, and sports organisations are considered. Following this, limitations of the thesis are discussed and future research directions are suggested. Finally, I provide some personal reflections and key lessons learnt from conducting wellbeing research whilst being embedded within a high-performance sport.

6.2 Conceptual and Theoretical Contributions of the Thesis

There are a number of conceptual and theoretical contributions of this thesis. From a conceptual point of view, the findings of Chapter 3 suggest that wellbeing is a highly subjective phenomena that is closely tied to an individual's personal values and goals. That is, wellbeing is understood, experienced, and evaluated in relation to the aspects of life that a person perceives to be important, either because they place value on them, or because they are related to what they hope to achieve. As such, it appears that personal values and goals are integral to, and cannot be separated from, wellbeing. This may help to explain why previous studies have found it difficult to agree on a universal definition of wellbeing, as many studies (both within and outside of sport) do not take into consideration that

individual differences in values and goals might have influenced how participants understand, experience, or evaluate their wellbeing.

Within the wider psychology literature, personal values have been defined as "desirable transsituational goals, varying in importance, that serve as guiding principles in the life of a person or other social entity" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 21). According to Schwartz (1992; 2006; 2012), values can be conceptualised on three levels – individual values, value types, and value dimensions. At the lowest level, individual values represent the specific values a person holds (e.g., obedience, honesty, loyalty). On the middle level, Schwartz suggests that all individual values can be categorised into one of 10 value types. Then, at the highest level, these 10 value types are encompassed by two higher order bi-polar dimensions. The specific value types and higher order bi-polar dimensions are displayed in Figure 6.1.

Figure 6.1

Overview of the Value Types and Higher Order Dimensions Proposed by Schwartz

Note. Reprinted from "An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values**",** by Schwartz, S, 2012, *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture*, p. 9.

Underpinned by Schwartz' universal value theory (e.g., Schwartz, 1992), the model of Psychological Balance (Besika et al., 2021) is a theoretical model of wellbeing that draws on existing literature suggesting people adopt the universal value structure as a set of personal standards to assess themselves in comparison to the external environment. Using the self as a reference point, individuals decide how important each of the universal values are, with values closer to a person's self-concept more likely to influence identity and behaviour (e.g., Verplanken & Holland, 2002; Verplanken & Sui, 2019). The model of Psychological Balance (Besika et al., 2021) posits psychological balance – defined as a dynamic state characterised by consistency and flexibility – as a necessary antecedent to wellbeing. Specifically, the model suggests that individual's value patterns provide psychological stability by aligning a person's goals and actions to the things that are most meaningful to them, thus facilitating psychological balance through consistency. The model also acknowledges that, as a person moves through life, they are required to reprioritise values in response to developmental and situational changes to maintain balance between internal (e.g., developmental) and external (e.g., situational) worlds. Thus, in addition to consistency, flexibility is also necessary for maintaining psychological balance (Besika et al., 2021).

As a relatively new model, the model of Psychological Balance has not yet received empirical support aside from an initial validation study (Besika et al., 2021). However, the findings presented within this thesis appear particularly well-aligned with model. In particular, the findings of Study 1 (i.e., wellbeing understood and experienced in relation values and goals) provide support for the influential role of personal values in how wellbeing is experienced. Similarly, the findings of Study 2 (i.e., if not successfully managed, transitions have the potential to affect wellbeing through changes in performance that threaten or reaffirm identity) provide support for the idea that re-alignment of self-concept during periods of change is necessary for maintaining wellbeing. With this in mind, it appears that the model of Psychological Balance may provide a useful theoretical lens through which the thesis findings may be interpreted.

As well as highlighting the importance of personal values in relation to swimmer wellbeing, the findings of the present thesis also highlight how the environmental context within which a person is situated plays an important role in the development of personal values and goals. Specifically, Chapter 4 illustrated how the substantial amount of time spent in high-performance swimming environments from a young age meant that swimmers internalised the specific norms, values, and behaviours that were promoted by

those within the sport. As such, these findings support the notion that wellbeing is highly domain-specific (e.g., Diener et al., 2003; Lundqvist, 2011). This has key implications for the extant athlete wellbeing literature, as previous athlete wellbeing studies have tended to explore athlete wellbeing across multiple sports (e.g., Brown et al., 2018; Pankow et al., 2021). However, sport is diverse and although there are likely to be commonalities between sports, particularly sports that are characteristically similar (e.g., early specialisation sports, team sports), each sport will also contain unique environmental and socio-cultural factors that will determine the specific values that are promoted within each sport (e.g., collaboration, conformity, enjoyment, achievement). As such, there is a need for future research to explore these differences and consider how they might impact on the development of personal values that underpin wellbeing. In particular, it would be interesting to explore whether sports that are very different from swimming (e.g., late specialisation sports or sports with less intensive training demands) still play a significant role in shaping the development of personal values, or if other life domains (e.g., education, family) have a greater impact.

In terms of the factors related to athlete wellbeing, a review of the extant literature (Chapter 2) produced an extensive list of factors linked to athlete wellbeing. However, the majority of previous athlete wellbeing research is quantitative and cross-sectional (e.g., Ferguson et al., 2015; Jowett & Cramer, 2009; Lundqvist & Raglin, 2014; Schary & Lundqvist, 2021; Thomas et al., 2021; Vella et al., 2021; Wahesh et al., 2021). As such, methodological limitations hinder their ability to provide insight as to how and/or why the factors that they identify are related to athlete wellbeing. The work presented in this thesis contributes to the field by extending our knowledge of athlete wellbeing beyond a list of isolated factors. Instead, the findings of this thesis suggest it is more useful to view athlete wellbeing as a process involving complex and dynamic interactions between personal, social, and environmental factors that work together to affect wellbeing in various ways. As such, the findings of this thesis highlight the need to get to know the person and understand how their individual characteristics and past experiences might influence how wellbeing is affected. Moreover, the findings also emphasise the importance of looking beyond the person and considering the wider social and environmental context in which the individual operates. This is because complex interactions occur between the person and their wider social and environmental context that have critical implications for athlete wellbeing. Within this thesis for example, the context of high-performance swimming affected athletes across all aspects, from influencing identity formation and the values and

goals through which they understood and experienced wellbeing, through to whether swimmers chose to engage with the intervention. Thus, it is only by explicitly exploring and focusing upon the complex interactions between different factors that future research can generate the most beneficial knowledge of athlete wellbeing.

With this in mind, future athlete wellbeing research would benefit from adopting a systems theory approach, for example using ecological systems theory (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1995) as a framework to explore the complex interactions between various interdependent and interrelated subsystems that exist within elite sport, and their consequences for wellbeing. Indeed, a systems approach has shown to be useful in advancing knowledge in other areas of sport psychology, such as talent development (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2010a; Henriksen et al., 2010b; Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), and such an approach is also already starting to make its way into the athlete wellbeing and mental health research. For example, an ecological systems model for elite athlete mental health has been developed that situates the athlete within the wider micro, meso, and macro systems of sport (Purcell et al., 2019). Moving forward, future research should look to further refine and expand this model before applying it across a wide range of sports to improve our understanding of the impact of unique sporting contexts on athlete wellbeing.

Specifically, future research should consider incorporating the Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) model (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1995; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), as not only does this model situate the person within their wider micro, meso, and macro environments, but also highlights how *proximal processes* influence development over time (Bronfrenbrenner, 2005). That is, the PPCT model considers how an individual's demand (e.g., age, gender), resource (e.g., past experiences, skills), and force (e.g., temperament, motivation) characteristics shape the ways in which a person acts and interacts with their environment over time (e.g., Tudge et al., 2009). Given that the findings of this thesis suggest that athlete wellbeing is a process that involves a wide range of personal (e.g., identity), social (e.g., social support), and environmental (e.g., sport culture) factors that are interrelated and interact to affect wellbeing over time, it appears that the PPCT model can provide a useful framework through which researchers can further explore how these interactions and their impact on athlete wellbeing.

An alternative to the PPCT model is the Demands Resources Individual Effects (DRIVE) model (Mark & Smith, 2008). Originally developed to explain and predict workplace stress, the DRIVE model has been expanded over time to incorporate a wide range of outcomes, including wellbeing (e.g., Williams et al., 2017; Zurlo et al., 2018). The

DRIVE model may provide a useful framework for future studies looking to explore how athlete wellbeing might be affected as it structured in a way that incorporates both external (i.e., situational demands and resources) and individual difference (i.e., personal characteristics, demands and resources) factors that influence wellbeing, as well as appraisal of wellbeing (e.g., perceptions of stress or life satisfaction), and both positive (e.g. satisfaction, positive affect) and negative (e.g. anxiety, depression and negative affect) outcomes (Smith, 2021). Moreover, in line with the thesis findings that suggest complex interactions between various personal, social, and environmental factors affect wellbeing in various ways, the DRIVE model also recognises that – in addition to direct effects of individual variables on wellbeing – interactive (i.e., moderation and mediation) and combined effects of multiple variables can also impact on wellbeing outcomes (Williams et al., 2017).

One of the main strengths of the model is that it is intended as a framework to which relevant context-specific variables can be added (Smith, 2021). Indeed, previous studies have adapted the DRIVE model to explore how wellbeing is affected across a wide range of occupational contexts (e.g., nursing, education, policing) and countries (e.g., United Kingdom, Italy, China, United States) (see Margrove & Smith, 2022 for a recent review). Additionally, Zurlo et al. (2018) used the DRIVE model to compare the psychological risk profiles of Italian and UK nurses, with findings suggesting that, whereas problem-focused coping had a protective effect and wishful thinking had a negative effect on the psychological health outcomes of both UK and Italian nurses, over-commitment and the use of self-blame and avoidance coping strategies were associated with poorer psychological health outcomes for UK nurses only. There was also stronger evidence for the negative effects of perceived demands, as well as the protective effects of perceived rewards, for UK nurses compared to Italian nurses. With this in mind, the use of the DRIVE model in future athlete wellbeing research may also facilitate comparison within- and across sports.

In addition to highlighting the role of values and the environment, the findings presented within this thesis also highlight the key role that happiness plays in relation to athlete wellbeing. Specifically, the terms ‘wellbeing’ and ‘happiness’ were often used interchangeably by participants, suggesting that participants viewed them as synonymous. This view reflects the wider wellbeing literature where happiness has been defined as “the experience of joy, contentment, or positive well-being, combined with a sense that one’s life is good, meaningful, and worthwhile” (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p.32). Indeed, the fact that

happiness was found to be important is unsurprising, given that happiness is a key component of subjective wellbeing (Diener, 1984). Moreover, the positive psychology movement is founded on the belief that happiness is a worthwhile human pursuit (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The finding that happiness plays a key role in wellbeing aligns with the PERMA model of wellbeing (Seligman, 2011), which proposes Positive Emotion as one of five core pillars of wellbeing – the other four being Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments (Seligman, 2011). However, the idea that happiness should be central to wellbeing has received considerable criticism within the literature (see e.g., Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2008; 2015). Similarly, within sport, the happiness aspect of athlete wellbeing has often been overlooked. This may be related to concerns that happy athletes may become less proactive (e.g., Lam et al., 2014), more complacent, and less motivated to achieve new goals (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005), and the worry that this may detrimentally impact on performance. Yet, the findings of this thesis support the notion that happiness may well be the best predictor of wellbeing (Lyubomirsky, 2001) and, as such, the concept of happiness in relation to athlete wellbeing deserves further exploration. Furthermore, evidence from the wider wellbeing literature suggests that happiness provides the foundation for success across multiple life domains (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Subsequently, increasing athlete happiness could have positive consequences for sport that reach far beyond athlete wellbeing itself.

As such, future research should seek to provide a strong evidence base that highlights the specific benefits of happiness within the context of high-performance sport, that can be used to drive change and support a shift away from the mindset of performance over wellbeing, to one of performance *through* wellbeing. However, a shift in mindset away from performance may not be an easy task to accomplish, even with strong evidence to support it. For example, despite presenting findings that suggested athletes who held an exclusive swimmer identity were more at risk of experiencing low wellbeing during transition periods, I experienced pushback from a number of coaches, practitioners, and NGB staff members in relation to supporting athletes to develop a more holistic identity that was less tied to their sporting performance. My experience fits with the wider culture change literature that suggests that some individuals are likely to resist change if they do not see the benefit of it (e.g., Gibson & Groom, 2018). As such, culture changes can take considerable time (Henriksen, 2015) and it is likely that trying to implement a shift in

focus away from performance within an elite sport context will require continuous engagement and considerable effort to action.

Early athlete wellbeing research tended to conceptualise wellbeing from a deficit perspective, where wellbeing was inferred by the absence of mental illness (e.g., Gouttebarge et al., 2017; Gulliver et al., 2012; Newman et al., 2016). Then, aligned with the shift in thinking more generally, more recent athlete wellbeing studies have taken a more salutogenic approach to wellbeing, exploring wellbeing at the highest levels (i.e., flourishing/thriving) (e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Pankow et al., 2021). The present thesis contributes to the extant athlete wellbeing literature by offering a unique and detailed insight into athlete wellbeing as a whole, rather than the extremes. This is important as, for the vast majority of people, wellbeing is neither extremely low or high, rather many people experience moderate levels of wellbeing most of the time (e.g., Keyes, 2005). As such, it is important to understand what wellbeing looks like across all levels, as this will allow individuals to recognise subtle changes in wellbeing earlier. This is particularly important for declining wellbeing, as being able to recognise subtle indicators of declining wellbeing sooner will allow for earlier intervention, therefore hopefully reducing the likelihood that an athlete will experience extremely low levels of wellbeing. Being aware of what average wellbeing looks like for them will also allow athletes to more clearly assess what (or who) has a positive impact on their wellbeing, at what times, under what circumstances. Subsequently, athletes can try to seek out people, places, or experiences that positively impact their wellbeing.

Finally, although wellbeing is context-dependant and how people experience and evaluate their lives cannot be separated from the cultural and social environments in which they operate (e.g., Crivello et al., 2009; White, 2015), it is important to remember that wellbeing is a universal human experience that is crucial to optimal functioning across all cultures (e.g., Lambert et al., 2020; Lomas, 2021). Recognising this, there have been recent calls for the development of a more global view of wellbeing that is representative of individuals and societies worldwide (Lambert et al., 2020). To achieve this, Lomas (2021) argues that it is necessary to identify wellbeing's "golden thread" (p.50) – a term that refers to the defining feature(s) of wellbeing present across all conceptualisations of wellbeing, irrespective of culture and context. Following an extensive review of the wellbeing literature, Lomas (2021) proposed balance (i.e., quality of the relationship between two opposing phenomena, such as positive and negative affect) and harmony (i.e., dynamic coordination of multiple balances, for example maintaining balance whilst

experiencing a range of emotions synchronously) as unifying principles that draw together the diverse and disparate threads of wellbeing research.

Despite not being explicitly referenced, balance and harmony represent underlying themes that are alluded to throughout the thesis. For instance, the findings of Study 1 (Chapter 3) indicated that swimmers experienced wellbeing as happiness which occurred when they were able to live in a way that was in line with their values and enabled them to progress towards their goals. Similarly, the grounded theory presented in Study 2 (Chapter 4) illustrated how transitions had the potential to negatively affect high-performance swimmers' wellbeing by disrupting the balance between identity and performance, whilst also highlighting how the balance between performance outcomes and swimmer identity can be maintained through the use of proactive coping strategies such as social support and planning. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this section, the combined findings of these studies can be interpreted as a contextualised example of psychological balance (Besika et al., 2021) As such, in addition to advancing knowledge in relation to athlete wellbeing, the findings of the present thesis also contribute to a broader understanding of wellbeing as a human experience by offering some support for Lomas' suggestion of balance and/or harmony as defining features of wellbeing.

6.3 Methodological Contributions of the Thesis

The theoretical contributions of this thesis were only achieved because of the qualitative methodologies used to conduct the studies. Through the use of interpretive description, grounded theory, and action research methodologies, I was able to attain a deeper, more complex, and nuanced understanding of athlete wellbeing than would have been possible otherwise. Thus, this thesis contributes to the field methodologically by reinforcing the value of adopting qualitative approaches when trying to understand complex and multifaceted constructs such as wellbeing. More specifically, this thesis highlights the benefits of conducting longitudinal research where the researcher is embedded within the environment in which the research is being conducted. For instance, Study 1 (Chapter 3) indicated that wellbeing was linked to performance for many swimmers. However, it was only during Study 2 (Chapter 4) that it became clear that it was not performance itself that affected wellbeing, rather the relationship between performance and wellbeing was mediated by the swimmers' identity which had become tied to performance through a period of socialisation and prolonged engagement with a culture that was dominated by a performance narrative. Thus, it was only by spending a significant amount of time within the research setting that I was able to move beyond the

surface-level and develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how high-performance swimmers' wellbeing was affected.

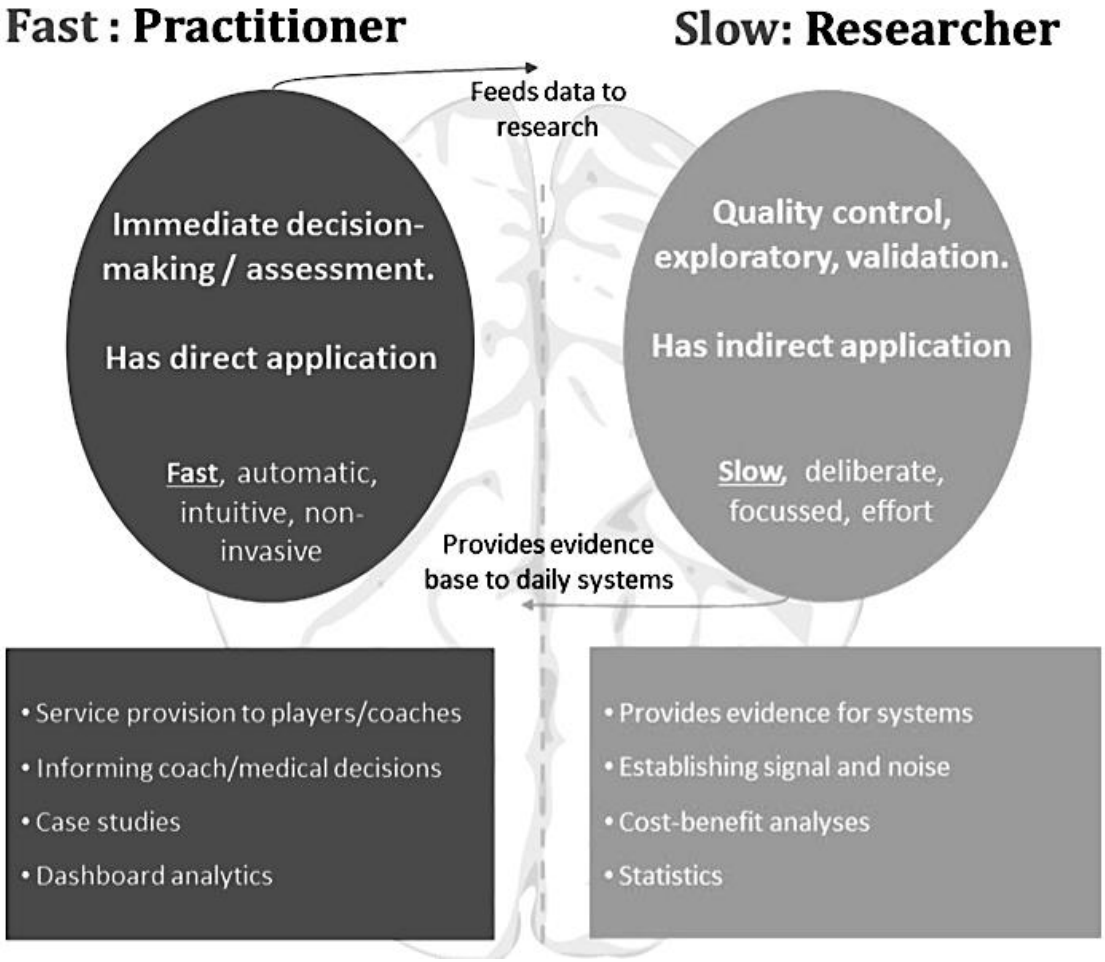
Through being embedded within the swimming environment, I was also able to access a range of individuals within the sport, some of whom are notoriously hard to reach (i.e., elite athletes) (e.g., Bloodworth & McNamee, 2010). Further, the length of time that I was embedded (approx. 3.5 years) meant that I was able to develop lasting and meaningful relationships with the people in the environment, which increased buy-in and positively impacted the richness and quality of the data I was able to collect. The benefits of embedded research have been extensively documented elsewhere (e.g., Cheetham et al., 2018; Jackson et al., 2022). For example, Cheetham et al. (2018) advocate embedded research as an example of a joined-up approach that ensures the generation of useful knowledge that is both grounded in context and relevant to stakeholder interests. Cheetham and colleagues also suggest that, in addition to building research capability, embedded researchers also act as a catalyst for change by providing a fresh set of eyes, as well as a knowledge broker (i.e., providing access to and interpretation of relevant knowledge), and provide a voice through which people's stories can be heard. Further, Jackson et al. (2022) suggest that embedded research is particularly useful for generating knowledge that can drive evidence-based innovative change. This fits with my own experience of conducting embedded research, where the findings of Study 1 (Chapter 3) and Study 2 (Chapter 4) influenced the NGB's decision to formally include wellbeing as a topic on their Performance Pathway learning and development programme. Thus, it is clear that longitudinal, embedded research has many benefits and, as such, future studies would benefit from adopting this approach where it may be useful for the research.

However, in a fast-paced and dynamic environment such as elite sport (Sotiriadou & De Bosscher, 2017), there can often be a desire for knowledge to be generated quickly so that it can feed into action as soon as possible (e.g., Cruikshank et al., 2014). Yet, this thesis highlights the importance of 'slow' research that takes the time to explore beyond the obvious (Coutts, 2016). This is especially important considering that wellbeing is a complex, multi-faced construct that extends beyond the person to encompass the wider relational, contextual, and cultural environment (e.g., Davis & Jowett, 2014; Diener et al., 2010; Joshanloo et al., 2021). As such, without taking the time to understand the environment and the people who operate in it, any attempts at effecting change may, at best, provide short term gains without real lasting impact. At worst, premature action may have the opposite effect to what is intended and hinder athlete wellbeing.

To avoid this, Coutts (2016) suggests that having an applied researcher embedded within the sport environment can help ensure that practices are ethical and evidence-based, highlighting that slow research can still feed into decision making by providing a solid evidence base from which practitioners (and others) can base their decisions on. Illustrating this point, Coutts (2016) uses Kahneman's (2011) theory of fast versus slow thinking systems, where the applied researcher acts in a slow, deliberate manner, making sound decisions and developing an evidence-base from which the practitioner can draw on whilst making quick, innovative decisions, often on the spot (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.2

Relationship Between Practitioners and Researchers in High-Performance Sport



Note. Reprinted from "Working Fast and Working Slow: The Benefits of Embedding Research in High-Performance Sport**",** by Coutts, A., 2016, *International Journal of Sports Physiology and Performance*, p. 2.

In addition to emphasising the need for qualitative, longitudinal, and embedded approaches when researching complex topics such as wellbeing, this thesis also showcases a range of qualitative data collection methods that go beyond the traditional qualitative methods of interviews and focus groups. For example, in addition to interviews, I collected data using observations, participant diaries, and informal conversations, as well as my own researcher reflections. The use of a variety of data collection methods helped me to collect data from a wider range of participants, some of whom may have not felt comfortable

being interviewed and consequently would not have participated. Additionally, observations and informal conversations helped me to contextualise interview data and enabled me to gain a more detailed and nuanced understanding of the wellbeing experiences of high-performance swimmers. The value of multiple data collection methods has been discussed by Ahluwalia et al. (2007), who suggest that the quality of the data produced and the subsequent knowledge claims that can be made depend on the sources from which data is sought, as well as the tools used to collect the data. As such, multiple methods of data collection can improve the quality of the data collected by counter-balancing the limitations of a single method (e.g., Thorne, 2016) and can help to ensure that any complexity and nuance is not lost.

Moving forward, researchers should be open to exploring new ways of collecting data using innovative and creative data collection methods beyond traditional interviews and focus groups. At this point, it is important to note that the aforementioned methods (i.e., observations, diary entries etc.) are not the only alternatives to interviews and focus groups. Indeed, there are a wide range of innovative and creative data collection methods have been documented within the extant sport psychology literature that could be useful for athlete wellbeing research, such as story completion (e.g., Boswell & Cavallerio, 2022), emotion mapping (e.g., Goldman et al., 2022), or photo elicitation (e.g., Woodford & Bussey, 2021). Additionally, where more traditional qualitative data collection methods (i.e., interviews) are used, future research could benefit from experimenting with alternative ways of conducting interviews, such as the 'go-along' method (e.g., Carpiano, 2009). Reassuringly, such methods are already making their way into the athlete wellbeing research. For instance, a recent study by Woodford and Bussey (2021) used photo elicitation as a method to explore athletes' perceptions of the pandemic social distancing measures on wellbeing. Future athlete wellbeing research should use more of these methods to generate richer data and more insightful findings related to the wellbeing experiences of elite athletes. However, it should also be noted that the use of novel methods should not be about being innovative and creative for the sake of it, rather they should be used when it is appropriate, ethical, and their use will provide insightful knowledge that would otherwise not be achieved (Evans et al., 2021).

This thesis also highlights the benefits of being flexible in relation to how data are collected. For example, Study 3 (Chapter 5) details how swimmers who chose to participate in the diary aspect of the intervention evaluation were given a choice as to how they would prefer to receive their weekly diary prompts (e.g., via email or Whatsapp) and

were given autonomy regarding how they completed and returned their diary entries. Flexibility within the method meant that participants were more engaged which reduced the likelihood of drop-out and likely improved the quality of the data they produced. This was important given the low number of swimmers who chose to participate in this aspect of the study. Moving forward, future studies should look to build flexibility into the research wherever possible so that participants not only have the opportunity to choose whether or not they participate in the research, but also have a choice regarding how they choose to participate.

6.4 Applied Implications

In addition to the aforementioned theoretical and methodological contributions, the findings of this thesis offer a variety of applied implications for sports organisations, coaches, and sport psychologists who are interested in supporting athlete wellbeing, as well as for parents of athletes and athletes themselves. At the organisation level, the findings of this thesis suggest that sports should be mindful of the culture they promote. Rather than the win-at-all costs culture that is typical to many elite sports (Mountjoy, 2019), sports organisations should seek to foster a culture of performance through wellbeing, where wellbeing is prioritised and underpinned by the belief that performance will follow. In practice, this might look like sports moving away from an early specialisation model to one which encourages within and across sport diversification instead (e.g., Gullich et al., 2022; Staub et al., 2020). Additionally, sports organisations looking to develop a wellbeing-oriented culture should look to create holistic talent development environments that are led by a coherent and integrated culture (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2014), focus on individual growth and development (e.g., Henriksen et al., 2010a) and prioritise long-term development over short-term performance (e.g., Ivarsson et al., 2015).

Further, sports should treat athlete mental health similarly to physical health. This means that athletes should be encouraged to engage in wellbeing protective behaviours, even if they include behaviours that are traditionally frowned upon, such as reduced training or withdrawal from competitions. Additionally, athletes who are struggling with poor mental health should be supported and encouraged to seek appropriate treatment. However, it is not enough that sports organisations merely “talk the talk” (i.e., say they promote a culture of performance through wellbeing), they must also “walk the walk” (i.e., actually promote a culture of performance through wellbeing). As such, it is important that organisational policies are aligned with the culture that sports organisations wish to

promote. For example, coaches are unlikely to prioritise athlete wellbeing over performance if they are only being judged by how well their athletes perform. As such, sports organisations should look to widen the scope of how coaches' performance is assessed, to include how happy their athletes are or how well supported they feel, rather than based on athletes' performance alone.

At the coach level, the findings of this thesis suggest that coaches have an important role to play in supporting athlete wellbeing. This aligns with previous literature which has highlighted the coach-athlete relationship as being influential for athlete wellbeing (Jowett, 2017). Additionally, the extant literature suggests that coaches are well placed to effect change due to their position of leadership (e.g., Crisp, 2020). As such, it is important that coaches use their influential position to positively impact the wellbeing and mental health of their athletes. One way in which this may be achieved is through adopting a transformational leadership style whereby coaches inspire and motivate athletes through their coaching behaviours (e.g., Matthews & Passmore, 2021). Indeed, a study by Gosai et al. (2021) highlighted how coach transformational leadership served as an antecedent to quality coach-athlete relationships and psychological safety – both of which predicted athlete flourishing and thriving.

Additionally, Bissett et al. (2020) have suggested a number of behaviours that coaches can engage in to foster a culture that values and prioritises athlete mental health. Specifically, Bissett and colleagues recommend coaches establish good working relationships with their athletes, that are based on openness, trust, and honesty and include regular conversations around mental health. Coaches should openly communicate the importance of wellbeing and mental health using non-stigmatising language and encourage athletes to engage in help-seeking behaviours. They should also role model healthy self-care practices, such as practicing relaxation, taking regular time out, and making time for things that they enjoy outside of sport. Further, Bissett et al. (2020) recommend that coaches look for changes in athlete behaviours that may indicate a mental health concern and offer emotional support whilst clearly communicating their professional boundaries. Where necessary, coaches should communicate with others (e.g., emergency services) to ensure the athlete's safety. Finally, Bissett et al. (2020) highlight that coaches should support athletes who are receiving mental health related treatment and be willing to modify training and competition commitments to accommodate treatment and facilitate recovery.

In terms of implications for sport psychologists, the findings of this thesis indicate that Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) (Hayes et al., 1999) may provide a

useful approach when working with athletes to support wellbeing and mental health. ACT is a Mindfulness and Acceptance Based Intervention (MABI) that focuses on developing psychological flexibility through values-based living, present-moment awareness, and non-judgmental acceptance (e.g., Hayes et al., 2013). ACT revolves around the six core processes of *being present* (having awareness of, and engagement with, the present moment), *acceptance* (fully accepting experiences without defence), *cognitive defusion* (distancing from thoughts), *self as context* (recognising transcendent identity), *values* (identifying what is most important), and *committed action* (setting goals that align with core values) (Harris, 2006). Given that a number of these processes of ACT are touched upon in the findings presented in this thesis (i.e., values, identity), this approach may be a useful approach for sport psychologists working with athletes to support their wellbeing and mental health.

Sport psychologists may find particular value in working with athletes to identify their core values and reflect on inconsistencies between their espoused values (what the athlete says they value) and enacted values (what their behaviour suggests that they value). Once the athlete is aware of their values and potential incongruencies between their values and behaviours, they can then focus on *committed action* and take concrete steps to behave in ways that reflect their espoused values. Second, given that the findings of this thesis suggest that the context of high-performance sport can encourage athletes to centre their identity around their sport, sport psychologists would also benefit from working with athletes on viewing *self as context.* This will help athletes to recognise that who they are as a person extends far beyond themselves as an athlete, which is likely to positively impact athlete wellbeing during times where their sporting journey is not going as hoped.

In addition to aforementioned implications for sports organisations, coaches, and sport psychologists, there are also a number of implications for parents of athletes, as well as for athletes themselves. For parents, the findings of this thesis highlight how parents (alongside coaches) play a key role in the early detection of declining wellbeing, as they are often one of the first people to notice wellbeing-related behavioural changes in their child. As such, parents should remain vigilant and, when they notice changes in their child's behaviour, they should share these observations with their child to initiate a conversation around wellbeing and mental health.

Further, the findings of this thesis indicate that athletes draw on their parents as a key source of wellbeing support. However, evidence from the wider sport parent literature suggests that, to positively influence wellbeing, provided support needs to be responsive

(e.g., Rouquette et al., 2021). With this in mind, parents would benefit from talking with their child about how they would like them to support their wellbeing to ensure that any support they provide matches their child's preferences and is therefore likely to have a positive impact on wellbeing. Finally, whilst it is understandable that sport parents want to support their child in achieving athletic success, it is also important that parents encourage and support their child to develop a holistic identity that is not tied solely to sport. To do this, parents should ensure that conversations with their child are not always centred around sport and encourage their child to seek out and engage with opportunities and experiences outside of sport.

For athletes themselves, the findings of this thesis suggest that athletes would benefit from developing their self-awareness, particularly in relation to their own cognitive, affective, and behavioural wellbeing indicators. This is important because being able to recognise the early signs of declining wellbeing means they can seek help earlier, rather than relying on those around them to notice and offer support. Further, evidence from the wider sport literature suggests that increased self-awareness can also boost athletes' confidence (Beaumont et al., 2015), as well as improve athletes' resilience and increase their ability to cope with stress (Cowden & Meyer-Weitz, 2016). Strategies for developing self-awareness might include engaging in self-monitoring, for example by using a daily logbook to record thoughts and feelings and any triggering events (e.g., Hardy et al., 2009) or using a self-assessment wheel to identify strengths and areas for improvement (e.g., Weston et al., 2011). Further, increasing self-awareness by engaging in mindfulness practices may also be beneficial for athlete wellbeing due to the positive impact of the mechanisms of mindfulness (e.g., values clarification, self- regulation) on psychological skills (e.g., motivation, coping) (e.g., Birrer et al., 2012).

6.4.1 Generalisability and Transferability to Other Settings

Qualitative research is often criticised for lacking generalisability, as critics reason small sample sizes mean the findings are unlikely to be representative of the target population (Hagger & Chatzisarantis, 2011). However, differences in the ontological and epistemological assumptions that inform qualitative research mean that generalisability in terms of population representativeness (i.e., statistical-probabilistic generalisability) is neither a relevant nor appropriate criterion by which to judge the quality of qualitative research (e.g., Lewis et al., 2014, Smith, 2018). Yet, this does not mean that qualitative researchers should discard the concept of generalisability altogether. As Smith (2018) highlights, statistical-probabilistic generalisability represents only one form of

generalisability and there are other types of generalisability that are congruent with, and applicable to, non-positivist research (Smith, 2018). As such, rather than simply dismiss generalisability as irrelevant and/or problematic, qualitative researchers can (and should) engage in critical thinking and discussion about the generalisability of their work (Smith, 2018).

Indeed, as Levitt (2021) points out, although not concerned with statistical-probabilistic generalisability, qualitative researchers often incorporate strategies to improve the generalisability of their findings in other ways. For example, the use of specific sampling techniques, such as maximum variation sampling, ensures that data is collected from a diverse range of people (Creswell, 2014). This increases the likelihood of findings having naturalistic generalisability (e.g., Stake, 1995; Lewis et al., 2014), which occurs when the findings resonate with the reader as they draw similarities between participants' accounts and their own lived experiences. Within the present thesis, the use of both maximum variation sampling and theoretical sampling strategies enabled me to gain an in-depth understanding of the wellbeing experiences of a wide range of swimmers (e.g., retired swimmers, current swimmers with different levels of experiences, swimmers located in different clubs etc.). Thus, in relation to the naturalistic generalisability of the thesis findings, it is likely that any high-performance swimmer will be able to identify with many of the experiences shared by the participants who were involved in the research, given that there are substantial similarities in how swimming is structured across the world (e.g., competitive seasons, training schedules). Similarly, high-performance athletes from other sports – particularly other early specialisation sports (e.g., gymnastics, figure skating, diving) – may also find that they can relate to certain aspects of the findings, such as the dominance of a performance narrative and the impact of sport culture on identity formation and maintenance (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2013; Douglas & Carless, 2006). Outside of sport, it is also possible that the findings will have relevance to, and resonate with, those situated in any highly demanding environment, particularly where there is a focus on performance (e.g., performance arts, academia).

Levitt (2021) also suggests that, rather than seeking to account for variability within a population, qualitative analysis aims to account for variability within a phenomenon. During data analysis, qualitative researchers often seek to first identify elements of participants' experiences that are universal to the phenomenon under study, before building in variability, in relation to people, time, and place (Levitt, 2021). This approach facilitates analytic generalisation (e.g., Chenail, 2010; Lewis et al., 2014) where,

although findings are contextualised to a particular group of people or a specific setting, the overarching concepts represent universal elements of a phenomenon that are not tied to a particular person, place, or time. Subsequently, analytic generalisation can enhance the transferability of the findings to other contexts (Levitt, 2021). Within the present thesis, the use of both TA and GT methods of data analysis required me to engage in an iterative and reflexive process and encouraged me to account for both the stable and the variable aspects of the data related to the research question. Thus, although highly contextualised to a specific group of swimmers in a particular location, it is likely that many of the concepts identified as being related to swimmer wellbeing (e.g., values, culture, identity, transitions) are not necessarily swimming-specific, rather they relate to the key aspects of human existence more generally. As such, it is likely that the findings may be transferable to a wide variety of settings and contexts beyond those already mentioned, through analytical generalisation. For instance, any person experiencing a major life event involving change and uncertainty (e.g., career change, divorce) may find it useful to draw on the grounded theory presented in Chapter 4 and consider if and how their culture, identity, as well as their available coping strategies, could influence their wellbeing during this time.

Although I have presented several possibilities in relation to the generalisability and transferability of the thesis findings within this section, it is not possible for researchers to anticipate all instances in which their research may be transferable and it is also the responsibility of the reader to assess the transferability of the findings to their specific context (Chenail, 2010). I have tried to facilitate this process through the inclusion of detailed information regarding my methodological choices throughout each study, as well as providing thick description within the finding sections of each empirical chapter. Hopefully, this will allow you, as the reader, to decide if, and in what ways, the findings presented within this thesis may be transferable to your own context(s).

6.5 Limitations and Future Research Directions

As much as it is important to highlight the theoretical, methodological, and applied contributions this thesis makes to the field of athlete wellbeing, it is equally important to be transparent with regards to the limitations of the work presented within this thesis. As the specific limitations pertaining to each study are detailed in the respective chapters, the purpose of this section is to consider the limitations of the thesis as a whole.

First, this thesis is focused solely on athlete wellbeing, specifically within the context of high-performance swimming. However, athletes are not the only people who operate within an elite sport environment. Coaches, practitioners, and sport parents all face

additional demands on top of those typically faced in everyday life (e.g., Edkardt et al., 2022; Hill et al., 2021; Harwood & Knight, 2015). Whilst many of the demands may be broadly similar, there are unique differences in how they are experienced. For instance, although both athletes and coaches face pressure to perform, coaches' performance is largely judged on the performance of their athletes, whereas athletes are typically judged on their own performance. Further, given that the findings of this thesis have highlighted the influence of the wider environment on athlete wellbeing, it is likely that the wellbeing of coaches, practitioners, and others operating within the environment will also impact upon athlete wellbeing. Moving forward, the field would benefit from obtaining a comprehensive understanding of how high-performance sport impacts the wellbeing of other people in the sport, as it is only with this information that we will be able to ensure that high-performance sport is conducive to wellbeing for all involved.

Second, the studies detailed within this thesis were conducted across various swimming clubs and centres within one country, where inhabitants are demographically similar (i.e., immigration to these areas is relatively low). Therefore, there was significant homogeneity across participants included in the three studies and, as such, this thesis represents a western perspective and is tied to the specific geographical, societal, cultural norms of the country. It is likely that athletes from other cultures may understand and experience wellbeing differently. With regards to emotion for example, western cultures tend place a higher value on high arousal emotions such joy or excitement, whereas in other cultures value lower arousal emotions such as calmness or contentment (Lim, 2016). Future work should look to explore the wellbeing experiences of athletes from other cultures, with a particular focus on exploring the wellbeing of athletes from non-WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Democratic) populations (Henrich et al., 2010).

6.6 Personal Reflections

My personal experience of conducting research on athlete wellbeing whilst being embedded within a sport organisation has been extremely rewarding, yet also challenging at times. Throughout this PhD, I have spent considerable time reflecting on my experiences and, aligned with my interpretivist approach to research, I have integrated these personal reflections throughout the thesis. However, a number of my reflections expand beyond the findings presented within the specific studies presented within this thesis. As such, the purpose of this section is to share some of my wider reflections on the benefits and challenges of conducting research whilst embedded within a sport organisation, in the hope that others can draw upon them to support their own research journey.

First, being embedded within the sport throughout the project was invaluable in helping me to collect rich and insightful data. Being in the environment often allowed me to form meaningful relationships with various people (i.e., swimmers, coaches, support staff), which had a positive impact on the quality of the data I collected. I believe this is because I was able to gain the trust and respect of these individuals, which led them to feel comfortable sharing their honest thoughts and experiences with me. However, the initial phase of integration was particularly challenging. Entering the organisation with no prior experience of swimming (or sport in general) meant that I had a lot of questions which made me feel like a burden at times. In addition, I felt like my motives for being there were questioned at times, especially by the coaches who did not always understand why I was there or what I was trying to do. For example, some coaches assumed that I was there to provide formal psychology support to the swimmers. Within my first week, an athlete approached me for support stating that their coach had told them I was the "new psychologist." I quickly informed the athlete that whilst I was happy to chat to them informally, I was not a qualified psychologist and could not offer them advice or counselling. This experience solidified the importance of clearly communicating my role, something I would recommend anyone in a similar position to do as early as possible to avoid experiences such as the one I just described.

Second, my experience of becoming embedded also made me aware that, to become accepted in the environment, I needed to find a way to add value to the team without overstepping ethical boundaries. In the end, I found that one of the quickest and easiest ways to integrate and be accepted into the environment was to be as helpful as possible. Once I began to offer to carry sports equipment or note down swim times during training session I experienced a notable shift in how coaches acted around me. They became more open and began to initiate conversations, which also had a positive impact on how the swimmers engaged with me. Based on this, I would advise early career researchers (or indeed anyone new to embedded research) that the process of becoming embedded takes time. Therefore, rather than rush to collect data from the outset, researchers should first spend time finding ways to integrate themselves. This may look different depending on the environment in which the researcher is becoming embedded, but the focus should ultimately be on building open and trusting relationships, as this will enhance the quality of the data that the researcher is able to collect.

Third, conducting research whilst being embedded within an organisation has taught me the importance of tailoring my approach to suit the audience. This is a lesson I

learnt early in the project when I gave a presentation on the benefits of athlete wellbeing to approximately 10 people, including several coaches and various staff members from the NGB. From this presentation, I quickly learnt that the NGB were not impressed by my knowledge of the academic literature but wanted to know how I could use this knowledge to effect change that would help them to support their swimmers' wellbeing and mental health without impacting their success in the pool. Similarly, I learnt that coaches were not interested in understanding all the benefits of high levels of wellbeing, rather they were keen to understand whether increased wellbeing would improve performance. Although this presentation left me feeling disheartened initially, it made me realise the importance of understanding people's underlying motivations for engaging with the project, and the value in adapting the message to suit the audience. Thus, I would encourage others to identify their audiences (e.g., fellow academics, sports organisations, coaches, practitioners, athletes etc.) and try to understand why they might be engaging with the research (e.g., their area of expertise, to improve performance, curiosity etc.). From there, it is important that researchers tailor their approach to suit the audience, to ensure that the message is positively received and more impactful.

With this in mind, one of the key personal challenges that I experienced throughout the research was related to impact. At various stages throughout the project, I struggled to see the real-world impact of my work which led to periods where I felt dejected and unmotivated. Additionally, I became acutely aware that access to academic journals is often paywalled, although even when articles are open access, the majority of people working within high-performance sport do not have the time or the inclination to read lengthy academic papers. In seeking to find ways to increase the impact of my work, I learnt that there were many other ways to share the findings aside from academic journal publications. For example, I presented my work at numerous conferences, including the My Child: The Athlete conference, which was not only attended by academics, but also coaches and practitioners working in sport. In addition, I regularly presented my findings to the organisation in a variety of ways, such as written reports, presentations, review meetings. I also used some of my funding to commission a series of infographics (Appendix E) that visually depicted some of the findings detailed in Chapters 3 and 4 and shared these with the organisation. As such, the findings of my research were able to feed into the organisation's decision making and have impact at numerous stages throughout the project. For instance, after sharing the findings detailed in Chapter 4, the organisation made the decision to formally integrate the wellbeing intervention into their learning and

development programme and deliver it to all youth and elite development swimmers who were part of the NGB's National Squad. Through this experience, I have come to realise that, particularly during embedded research, it is important that researchers provide feedback regularly to ensure their findings are able to drive impactful and meaningful change. In addition, there is a need for academic researchers (including myself) to become better at finding alternative ways of disseminating findings, for example, via infographics, podcasts, or on social media (e.g., twitter threads) to maximise reach and further enhance impact.

6.7 Conclusion

Collectively, this thesis has provided a comprehensive and detailed insight into the wellbeing experiences of high-performance swimmers. Specifically, the studies detailed within this thesis have explored how high-performance swimmers come to understand and recognise wellbeing and how this is impacted by the sporting environment in which they are embedded. Additionally, this thesis has shed light on the contextual factors and underlying mechanisms that impact on high-performance swimmers' wellbeing. Subsequently, this thesis has illustrated how these insights can be used to develop an intervention that is effective in supporting high-performance swimmers' wellbeing. In doing so, the importance of prolonged engagement and collaboration for facilitating positive outcomes has been highlighted. Finally, future research has been recommended to build upon and further refine the findings of this thesis and expand our understanding of athlete wellbeing.

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Appendix A: Example Interview Guides for Study 1

Swimmer Interview Guide	
Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about your swimming career so far. - When did you start swimming? - What do you enjoy about swimming? - Is there anything you don't enjoy about swimming?
Main Questions and Probes	In your own words, what does the term wellbeing mean to you? - What sort of things do you think it includes? - physical signs - specific thought patterns - feelings Tell me about a time when you feel you have experienced high levels of wellbeing - How were you feeling at the time? - What thoughts did you have? - How did you feel physically? - What was your behaviour like? Tell me about a time where you've felt you've been struggling with your wellbeing - How were you feeling at the time? - What thoughts did you have? - How did you feel physically? Do you feel you are able to recognise when your wellbeing levels are changing? What do you notice? - thoughts - behavioural changes - sensations Do you think other people can easily recognise changes in your wellbeing? What sort of things do you think they notice? How do you think your wellbeing affects/is reflected in: - your physical health - your performance - your social interactions - your behaviour - how you think or feel
Concluding Questions	Anything else to add?

Coach/Staff Interview Guide

Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about your role. - What does a typical day look like? - How often do you work with the swimmers?
Main Questions	In your own words, what does the term wellbeing mean to you? - What does it include? Drawing on your experiences of working with swimmers on an elite development pathway, can you describe what a swimmer with high levels of wellbeing looks like? - What type of behaviours do you notice in swimmers who you perceive to be experiencing high levels of wellbeing? - How would you say high levels of wellbeing would reflect in - emotions displayed? - social interactions? - performance? - physical health? Drawing on your experiences of working with swimmers on an elite development pathway, can you describe what a swimmer with low levels of wellbeing looks like? - What type of behaviours do you notice in swimmers who you perceive to be experiencing low levels of wellbeing? - How would you say low levels of wellbeing would reflect in - emotions displayed? - social interactions? - performance? - physical health? Do you think there are differences in what high/low wellbeing looks like at different stages of the pathway? - In what ways would you say they differ?
Concluding Questions	Anything else to add?

Parent Interview Guide	
Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about yourself. What has your sport parent journey looked like so far?
Main Questions	In your own words, what does the term wellbeing mean to you? - What does it include? Based on your experiences, can you describe what you notice in your child when they have high levels of wellbeing? - What type of behaviours do you notice in your child when you perceive them to be experiencing high levels of wellbeing? - How would you say high levels of wellbeing would reflect in - emotions displayed? - social interactions? - performance? - physical health? Based on your experiences, can you describe what you notice in your child when they have low levels of wellbeing? - What type of behaviours do you notice in your child when you perceive them to be experiencing low levels of wellbeing? - How would you say high levels of wellbeing would reflect in - emotions displayed? - social interactions? - performance? - physical health?
Concluding Questions	Anything else to add?

Appendix B: Participant Distress Procedure

PARTICIPANT DISTRESS

Procedures to follow in the event of participant distress during Interviews/Focus Groups

Prior to the interview:

Prior to conducting interviews, pilot interviews will be conducted in liaison with the supervisor. These interviews will provide the researcher with an opportunity to identify any questions that might lead to distress and where appropriate, take steps to rephrase or change these questions.

Before conducting the first formal interview, the student will meet with their supervisor to discuss to procedures that are in place in case a participant becomes distressed during an interview. The supervisor will also ensure the student feels prepared for the interview. The supervisor must be satisfied that the researcher is competent in conducting interviews before giving approval for the commencement of data collection.

Students will inform their supervisor where and when they are completing all interviews and in turn the supervisor will ensure the student has a means of contacting them when they are conducting interviews.

During the interview:

At the beginning of the interview the student will remind the participant that they can stop the interview at any time, that they can choose not to answer questions, and that there are no right or wrong answers to questions (so there is no fear of ‘saying the wrong thing’).

Once the interview begins, the researcher will be required to be aware of any potential indications of distress (e.g., withdrawing, visible upset, declining to answer numerous questions, shifting in seat, looking away from the interviewer, asking for the interview to end) and should air on the side of caution in all instances. If there is even the slightest indication that participants might be distressed students must immediately follow the procedure below:

1) The recording will be immediately stopped and the participant will be asked if they are ok. At this point the participant will be asked if they want to take a break/end the interview/continue talking – the participant's decision will be final. If the participant decides to take a break and continue with the interview, confirmation will be sought that the participant is actually comfortable continuing and they will be reminded there is no penalty for withdrawing.

2) If the participant wishes to continue but remains distressed, the interviewer will make the decision to drawn the interview to an end. At this point, the interviewer will commit to providing the participant with an opportunity to talk and ensure the participant is not visibly distressed when leaving the interview.

3) If the participant remains distressed and the researcher does not feel capable of managing the situation they will contact their respective supervisor who will be available at all times during interviews by phone contact. Depending on the situation, the supervisor will either provide guidance to the student, speak directly to the participant over the phone, or make attempts to go and meet with the researcher and the participant.

4) If the participant has become distressed at any point in the interview, the student will ensure the participant has the contact details of the rest of the research team and remind them that they are free to contact any member of the research team if there is anything further they would like to discuss.

5) The interviewer will also offer to provide the participants with a list of local contacts (e.g., counselling services, sport psychology services) if they would like them.

6) Following the interview, the student will debrief the interview with their supervisor and (if necessary) other senior members of the research team. A written record of the incident and the procedures followed will be made.

Appendix C: Example Interview Guides for Study 2

Current HP Swimmer Interview Guide (Friday 27th March)	
Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about your swimming career so far. - How long have you been swimming for? - When did you start swimming? - Where did you swim before you joined the HP team? - What is your favourite thing about swimming? - What do you enjoy the least about swimming?
Main Questions	What does wellbeing mean to you? What does it include? How do you recognise changes in your own wellbeing? What factors do you feel affect your wellbeing (positively and/or negatively)? What do you feel the reasons are for X affecting your wellbeing? Does X always affect your wellbeing? Does X always affect your wellbeing the same way? When your wellbeing is low, what things help you to get back to normal? How do you feel the HP swimming environment helps/hinders your wellbeing? Is there anything you feel would be helpful?
Closing Questions	Are there any other factors that you feel affect your wellbeing that you'd like to mention? Any other questions or comments? Thank you for talking to me today!

Current HP Swimmer Interview Guide (Wednesday 30th September 2020)	
Introductory Questions	- How have you been? - How did you find lockdown? - What's it been like settling into the new season?
Main Questions Ask about how this has affected identity and desire for performance Ask about how these influence each other	As I mentioned in my email – I wanted to talk to you about what I've found so far and see how it does or doesn't match with your experiences. **Socialisation into swimming norms and traditions** So, you were pretty young when you started swimming? What are some of the norms and traditions that you are aware of in swimming? **Swimming Identity** How would you say that being a swimmer fits in to your identity as a person? What else is part of your identity? **Desire for continual improvement and ever better performances** Can you talk to me a bit about your experience of this? Would you say this is something that you have experienced? **Critical periods** How would you say your wellbeing is usually? Do you think that there are certain periods where your wellbeing is more likely to be affected? Is there anything that they have in common? **Coping and adapting** During these periods, would you say that the impact on your wellbeing depends on your ability to cope with, and adapt to, the situation? How do you normally do that? What sort of things influence how well you can cope and adapt? (personal, social, environmental)
Closing Questions	Are there any other things that you'd like to discuss in relation to how wellbeing is affected? Thank you for talking to me today!

Coach Interview Guide (Version 1)	
Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about yourself. Tell me about your career as a swim coach. - How long have you been coaching for? - What level swimmers do you currently coach? - What do you enjoy most/least about coaching?
Main Questions	How do you perceive that swimmers' wellbeing is affected within high-performance swimming? Throughout your career as a swim coach, what factors would you say positively affect the wellbeing of the swimmers you've worked with? What factors would you say negatively affect the wellbeing of the swimmers you've worked with? For each factor mentioned: - Do you feel X always has a positively/negative influence on the swimmers' wellbeing? - Can you think of a time where X hasn't affected a swimmers' wellbeing positively/negatively? What happened? - Do you feel that certain factors affect wellbeing less or more at different stages of the pathway? Can you tell me a bit more?
Closing Questions	Are there any other factors that you feel affect the swimmers' wellbeing that you'd like to talk about?

Appendix D: Example Interview Guides for Study 3

Intervention Evaluation Swimmer Interview Guide	
Introductory Questions	Tell me a bit about yourself/your swimming journey so far. For those swimmers I know – How are you? What have you been up to since we last spoke?
Main Questions	Overall, how did you find the sessions? How did you find: - The day/time - Delivery style - Activities - Inclusion of a professional swimmer Was there anything you particularly enjoyed/did not enjoy? What do you think you learnt by attending the workshops, if anything? How do you feel that the sessions affected your wellbeing, if at all? - Were there any sessions in particular that you thought did/did not help? - What was it about these sessions that did or did not help? How do you feel that the sessions affected how aware you are of your own indicators of declining wellbeing, if at all? - Were there any sessions in particular that you thought did/did not help? - What was it about these sessions that did or did not help? How do you feel that the sessions affected how well you feel able to manage future demands, if at all? - Were there any sessions in particular that you thought did/did not help? - What was it about these sessions that did or did not help? How do you feel that the sessions affected how you see yourself, if at all? - Were there any sessions in particular that you thought did/did not help? - What was it about these sessions that did or did not help? If you were to take part in the intervention sessions again, would there be anything that you'd change? Would you like to have seen any additional topics covered? What are your reasons for this?
Closing Questions	Is there anything else you'd like to mention? Thank you for talking to me today!

Intervention Evaluation Parent/Coach Interview Guide	
Introductory Questions	Tell me bit about yourself/your journey as a swim parent so far. (parents I don't know) For those I already know – how have you been since we last spoke? How are you finding coaching at the moment? (coaches)
Main Questions	Overall, how did you find the workshop? How did you find: - The day/time - Delivery style - Activities Was there anything you particularly enjoyed/did not enjoy? How useful do you feel that the sessions were in helping you to support your child's/swimmers' wellbeing, if at all? - Were there any parts of the workshop in particular that you thought did/did not help? - Why do you think that this was/was not helpful? If you were to take part in the workshop again, would there be anything that you'd change? What are your reasons for this?
Closing Questions	Is there anything else you'd like to mention? Thank you for talking to me today!

Appendix E: Infographics Depicting Findings from Studies 1 and 2


INDICATORS OF DECLINING
WELLBEING
IN HIGH PERFORMANCE
SWIMMERS
CHANGES IN BODY LANGUAGE
LACK OF ENJOYMENT
LOSS OF MOTIVATION
LOSS OF FOCUS
INABILITY TO RATIONALISE
CHANGES IN SOCIAL INTERACTION


SCHOOL CHANGING
MOVING HOUSE
PUBERTY
SQUAD SELECTION
NEW COACH
AMILUU