

Chapter 10

Social Support

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Introduction

Flick through any autobiography of a celebrated athlete and you will find that one of its key themes is social support. Certainly there will be discussions of training and tactics, distress and disappointment, guts and glory. But the backdrop to all this is likely to be the support the athlete received from key individuals and groups along the way. The mother who drove them to training every day in the middle of winter, the coach who instilled a sense of self-discipline and pride, the backroom team who always had a kind word when things hadn't gone quite to plan. This is beautifully exemplified by a legendary yet bitter-sweet moment from the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, where hot-favourite sprinter Derek Redmond from the United Kingdom tore his hamstring during the 400 meters semi-final. His father, Jim, jumped the balustrades and pushed past event officials to help his son cross the line and finish the race.

We hobbled over the finishing line with our arms round each other, just me and my dad, the man I'm really close to, who's supported my athletics career since I was seven years old.

(Bos, 2017)

Accounts such as this are also often filled with heroic examples of athletes going 'above and beyond' to provide support to others in their team — even to the extent of making personal sacrifices for the 'greater good'. Consider the 2012 Tour de France, when Chris Froome gave up his opportunity to secure personal victory, instead opting to help his teammate Bradley Wiggins secure the coveted *maillot jaune*. Clearly, the role of socially supportive others, across both sport and life more generally, cannot be understated. For this reason, social support plays a key role in optimal functioning across a range of performance contexts — not only in sport, but also in the workplace, at school, or at home (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012; Freeman & Rees, 2009; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014). Indeed, work by the fourth author and his colleagues highlighted how supportive families, coaches, and networks are key to the development of super-elite athletes (Rees et al., 2016).

Social support may refer to the existence of socially supportive *relationships*, but may also include people's helping and supportive *actions*, and/or an exchange of *resources* with the goal of enhancing positive outcomes for the recipient (e.g., Hobfoll, 1988; Sarason, Sarason, & Pierce, 1990; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). In the case of Derek Redmond we see all three of these things at work: he had a supportive relationship with his father, his father went out of the way to do things to help him, and this involved the provision (and receipt) of tangible resources — in this case, literally, a shoulder to lean on. As we will

discuss more below, these resources can also take a range of other forms: emotional, esteem-focused, and informational.

Social support has been associated with a range of positive outcomes — not only for performance but also for health and well-being. The latter include reduced stress (Cohen, Underwood, & Gottlieb, 2000; Clawson, Borrelli, McQuaid & Dunsinger, 2016), reduced risk for cancer (Pinquart & Duberstein, 2010), and reduced risk of mortality (Barth, Schneider, & von Kanel, 2010). Indeed, although this point is routinely overlooked (Haslam et al., 2018), meta-analytic evidence suggests that *lack* of social support can be at least as bad for a person's health as smoking, obesity, and physical inactivity (Berkman & Syme, 1979; Holt-Lunstad, Smith & Layton, 2010).

Within sport, the benefits of being socially integrated and having socially supportive others have also been well documented. For example, social support has been linked with better performance (Freeman & Rees, 2008, 2009; Gould et al., 2002; Rees & Freeman, 2009, 2010), positive stress appraisals (Freeman & Rees, 2009), improved flow (Bakker et al., 2011), more beneficial responses to injury (Mitchell et al., 2014; Rees et al., 2010) and greater self-confidence (Holt & Hoar, 2006; Rees & Freeman, 2007), as well as with lower risk of both injury (Carson & Polman, 2012) and burnout (Freeman, Coffee & Rees, 2011; DeFreese & Smith, 2013, 2014; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a; Lu et al., 2016).

However, is it always the case that social support has beneficial effects in sport? Consider, for example, the hypothetical scenario where a coach or parent provides a young athlete with social support in the form of tactical feedback about '*what went wrong*' during the first set of a disastrous tennis match. Depending on the content and timing of this (otherwise well-intentioned) advice, it is not hard to see that this will not *always* 'work' because it is experienced as stressful rather than supportive. Rather, then, than giving the young tennis player tactical foci to prioritise during the second set, such a message might be interpreted as criticism. It may even instil a sense of negative expectation and pressure to succeed during the second set, leading the young player to resent the so-called 'support' and reject it altogether. In line with this point, there is evidence that, in a range of contexts, social support can have negative effects on athletes — not least *increasing* both burnout and dropout (Sheridan, Coffee & Lavalley, 2014). This observation begs an obvious question: What is it that makes social support effective? This is the key question that this chapter attempts to answer.

As we will see, the answer to this question is complex. Despite the fact that social support is often thought to be a simple matter ("you either get it or you don't"), it is a

nuanced construct and understanding it presents many challenges. In an attempt to navigate our way through these, this chapter begins by introducing the construct of social support and discussing its associations with sport-related outcomes. We then provide an overview of four approaches to the study of social support that are particularly influential in sport psychology today. As well as outlining the key theoretical tenets of these approaches and the evidence that supports them, we also identify their shortcomings. These centre on the fact that contemporary approaches to the study of social support in sport focus almost exclusively on athletes' *personal* experiences and understandings. In this, they relate to questions of the form "Am I threatened?" and "What support do I have?"

Such questions are important but we argue that, by its very nature, social support is never entirely personal. Instead, it is a *group* process that routinely raises questions of the form "Are *we* threatened?" and "What support do *we* have?" As will become apparent, the dynamics of social support are thus always conditioned by the group memberships — and associated social identities — that bear upon and inform this process. For instance, would one expect the support provided by a fan of a rival team to be as effective as the support provided by a fellow fan of your own team? In this regard, the very same supportive act can sometimes prove beneficial but sometimes prove disastrous. Seeking to make sense of this enigma, the second half of the chapter presents a social identity approach to social support in sport. Amongst other things, this draws attention to the way in which shared social identity (or a lack of it) conditions athletes' perceptions of both the availability and the utility of support. Understanding this, we conclude, provides a new agenda for both research and practice.

Current Approaches to Understanding Social Support in Sport

One of the challenges associated with studying social support in sport is the diverse ways in which it has been defined and measured. In the wider social psychology literature, social support has been conceptualised as (a) demonstrating that a person is loved and cared for, (b) the subjective judgement of support availability, (c) the mere existence of supportive relationships, or (d) simply an exchange of resources (e.g., Hobfoll, 1988; Sarason et al., 1990; Shumaker & Brownell, 1984). Nevertheless, contemporary conceptualisations of social support generally consider it to be comprised of three major subconstructs (Lakey, 2010). First, social support can be conceptualised as a form of *social integration* that refers to the number and types of social ties and relationships within an athlete's social support network. Second, social support can be thought of as *perceived support* that derives from a subjective judgement that support is available and can be accessed if needed. Third, social support can

be seen as *received support* (also sometimes referred to as enacted support) referring to the specific helping and supportive actions provided by individuals within an athlete's social support network (Rees, 2016).

To illustrate the difference between these subconstructs, consider the number of social ties in a high-profile athlete's support network. This network might comprise thirty or more teammates, coaches, trainers, physiologists, nutritionists, and psychologists. In addition, the athlete likely has a number of family members (partners, parents, children) who accompany them some or all of the time. Further to this, they may have thousands of fans and followers who travel to watch them perform or who support them on social media. All of these social ties that an athlete may have available to them would be indicative of social integration. Realistically, however, the athlete may only perceive support to be available — and actually receive support — from a select few of these social ties. For instance, the athlete could rely heavily on support from one coach, one parent, and their physiotherapist (e.g., Abgarov et al., 2012; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Nicholson, Hoyer, & Gallant, 2011; Sanders & Winter, 2016). Indeed, this highlights that the degree to which an athlete is socially integrated may not be indicative of how much support they perceive to be available or actually receive (nor how effective that support will be; Rueger et al., 2016).

The latter points speak to the fact that social support can be conceptualised and assessed in a range of different ways (Cohen et al., 2000; Holt & Hoar, 2006). One important distinction in this regard is between support that is *perceived* to be available if needed and support that is actually *received* (Freeman et al., 2014; Gottlieb & Bergen, 2010; Wills & Shinar, 2000). The importance of this distinction can be illustrated by the example of rock climbing (see Figure 10.1). When climbing, a climber can typically find viable routes to the top of a wall in relative safety because a belayer is holding the other end of the rope. At the same time, though, the climber typically also knows that, if needed, the belayer is available to give support (e.g., advice) about viable routes to the top of the wall. So while received support centres on *manifest* supportive actions, perceived support centres on the mind and *psychological state* of the athlete (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Although a person's ongoing experiences of receiving support are likely to contribute to their sense that social support is available (Uchino, 2009), these things are not the same. Moreover, as we discuss below, it is often perceptions of support that are stronger predictors of outcomes than received support, and perceptions of support availability may be misaligned with the actual provision and receipt of support (e.g., Defreese & Smith, 2013; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a; Haslam et al., 2018).



Figure 10.1 Perceived and received social support

Note: Perceived and received social support are both central to sport. In the case of rock climbing, climbers typically receive support from the belayers who hold their ropes but they also perceive other types of support to be available — as those belayers can also provide tactical advice and encouragement if needed.

Source: Helen Cook, Flickr

As we intimated earlier in the chapter, perceived and received support are typically further broken down into four specific forms of socially supportive behaviour: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible (Rees & Hardy, 2000; see Figure 10.2). *Emotional* support refers to acts that convey a sense of being loved and cared for (e.g., parents emphasising that whatever the outcome of a game, they will always be there for their child); *esteem* support refers to attempts at bolstering a sense of competence and ability (e.g., parents making it clear that they believe their child is capable and talented); *informational* support refers to guidance and instruction (e.g., parents suggesting that their child use a particular strategy to combat anxiety), and *tangible* support refers to material forms of instrumental assistance (e.g., parents driving their child to the game). While the precise wording of these differ across domains (e.g., of organisational, health, and sport psychology), on the basis of interviews with high-level sports performers about the nature of their supportive experiences, Rees and Hardy (2000) argued that these four forms of support are all very relevant to sport.



Figure 10.2 Social support is a universal feature of sport

Note: Support comes in many different forms: emotional, esteem, informational, and tangible.

Coaching is an example of informational support, as seen in the bottom left picture. Here the technical instruction provided by the coach to the Little League Baseball player is designed to help the young player improve his game – but, as with all support, this will not always be effective or favourably received.

Source: popofatticus, Flickr; superdirk, Pixabay; pxhere; SeppH, Pixabay

Clearly, though, these different types of social support are not necessarily mutually exclusive. A coach, for example, can provide both esteem and informational support to athletes by discussing both how and when they previously executed a sport-related skill correctly. Accordingly, the four dimensions of support are highly inter-correlated. However, given their unique characteristics, the different types of support will often each have unique relationships with particular outcome variables (e.g., burnout and self-confidence; Freeman et al., 2011, 2014).

While dominant approaches to studying social support in sport are influenced by social, motivational, developmental, and cognitive theorising (Sheridan et al., 2014), most approaches are aligned with theories of *stress and coping* (e.g., Lazarus, 1999; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Not least, this is because sport participation routinely involves exposure to a range of *stressors* (i.e., things which pose a threat to the self; Fletcher, Hanton & Mellalieu,

2006; Sarkar & Fletcher, 2014), and social support is recognised as having the potential to protect athletes from their deleterious impact (e.g., burnout; DeFreese & Smith, 2014; Gustafsson, Defreese & Madigan, 2017; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a). In what follows we provide an overview of the four main theoretical approaches to studying social support in sport, with the latter three aligned with this stress and coping process (see Figure 10.3).

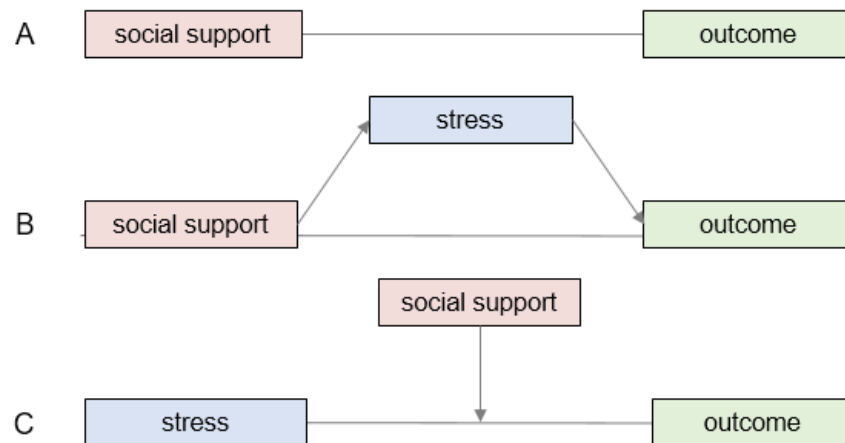


Figure 10.3 Schematic representations of dominant approaches to social support in sport

Note: The main-effects model (A), the stress-prevention model (B), and the stress-buffering model (C) provide different frameworks for understanding the impact of social support on the experience of stress and sport-related outcomes.

The main-effects model

As the top panel in Figure 10.3 suggests (i.e., 10.3 A), the *main-effects model* suggests that social support has direct benefits for sport-related outcomes independently of other factors such as stress (Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985). In particular, this is because support is theorised to be directly associated with outcomes such as enhanced levels of self-esteem, purpose, control, and mastery (Cohen et al., 2000; Thoits, 2011).

However, while the model's simplicity contributes to its intuitive appeal, the evidence that has tested it tells a more complex story. This is seen in evidence that perceived support is more beneficial than received support for golf performance, self-confidence, flow states, and burnout (Bakker et al., 2011; Defreese & Smith, 2014; Freeman & Rees, 2008; Freeman & Rees, 2010; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a). Moreover, although received support has been associated with many of the same positive outcomes (Rees & Freeman, 2007; Rees, Hardy & Freeman, 2007; Mitchell et al., 2014), it is not always beneficial (Abgarov et al., 2012; Knight & Holt, 2014; Lakey & Orehek, 2011; Uchino, 2009).

So why would receiving social support be less beneficial than simply knowing (or believing) it is available? There are a number of reasons. The first is simply that when it is actually given, social support can prove to be sub-optimal. Informational support (such as advice), for example, can be poor or simply wrong. Second, people may have unrealistic or poorly calibrated expectations about the effectiveness of received support (Rees & Freeman 2010; Sarason & Sarason, 1986; Uchino, 2009). Third, acts of support may be viewed as negative or controlling by recipients, and thus result in negative outcomes (Nadler & Jeffrey, 1986; Udry *et al.*, 1997). For example, if you were the Little League Baseballer in Figure 10.2, you might find that being singled out to receive technical instruction from your coach in front of the whole team is embarrassing and stressful and leaves you feeling humiliated and resentful.

There are also theoretical grounds for expecting differences in the relationship between particular forms of social support and sport-related outcomes. Consider, for example, the support that an aspiring golfer might receive from a parent. Unless the parent is a golf expert, it is likely that any technical instruction (*i.e.*, informational support) they provide will be suboptimal. However, their words of encouragement (*i.e.*, esteem support) may have a more favourable effect. In line with this point, when investigating the main effects of social support on burnout, researchers have found discrepancies in the presence and magnitude of associations between different forms of support and dimensions of burnout. For example, research has demonstrated that all dimensions of perceived support may play an important role in protecting athletes from a reduced sense of accomplishment, while only perceived informational support may protect them from exhaustion (Freeman *et al.*, 2011; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a). Such patterns again underscore the need for researchers to adopt multivariate conceptualisations and methods of assessment when investigating the effects of social support. More generally, while there is some support for the main-effects model (speaking to the fact that it is, on average, a good thing to perceive support to be available if needed) it is also clear that it fails to account for the fact that support can sometimes prove to be unhelpful or even harmful (*e.g.*, Schwarzer & Leppin, 1991).

Accordingly, the model's core prediction — that athletes will benefit from high levels of social support regardless of any other variable of interest — is not always upheld, as it is not always the case that social support has beneficial effects. Indeed, while it tends to be true that perceived support is consistently associated with beneficial outcomes, the relationship between received support and outcomes is quite inconsistent. For instance, a coach may provide technically sound, appropriate and well-timed informational support that has no

effect. At the same time, a teammate may provide support that looks on the surface to be unhelpful — team-deprecating humour perhaps — but this can have resoundingly positive effects.

The remaining theoretical approaches to the study of social support in sport are more closely aligned to the stress and coping literature (Cox, 1978; Lazarus, 1999), and explicitly linked with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) *transactional model* of stress and stress appraisal. This model argues that responses to stress are determined in large part by individuals' cognitive response to stressors (see also Wolf et al., Chapter 9 above). Specifically, *primary appraisal* centres on judgements of whether a stressor is threatening to the self in some way, whereas *secondary appraisal* centres on judgements of whether or not one has the resources to cope effectively with any threat. Social support is theorised to impact on these appraisal processes by affecting a person's sense of the social resources they have available to deal with the stressor. The perceived availability of these resources then subsequently influences their emotional, cognitive, and behavioural responses to that stressor and promotes more favourable stress appraisals and more positive coping solutions.

The stress-prevention model

In sport it is clearly the case that athletes are frequently exposed to stressors which can be seen as posing a threat to the self. For example, these may take the form of concerns about injury, fitness, current form, or the demand to perform (Freeman & Rees, 2010; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a). The *stress-prevention model* argues that social support can help athletes minimise any potentially negative impact of such stressors. In particular, perceiving support to be available when needed (e.g., when a stressor is first encountered) may help an athlete appraise the stressor as non-threatening. Similarly, if a stressor has been appraised as threatening, received support may help an athlete cope when subsequent stress starts to impact on relevant outcomes (notably health and performance; Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Cohen et al., 2000).

The model offers a partial insight into how social support can protect against stressors — suggesting that this helps to minimise the stress experienced by an individual thereby resulting in better outcomes than would result if no social support were available (see Figure 10.3 B). For example, if the stressor took the form of abuse from an opponent in a football match, then social support might help a footballer (a) to make sense of the abuse (e.g., encouraging them to see it as problematic or not), (b) to respond to the abuser (e.g., by

confronting them), or (c) to take the matter further (e.g., by striving to stamp out abuse in their sport).

The stress-prevention model has received some support in sport. For example, Raedeke and Smith (2004) found that satisfaction with support was associated with reduction in stress, which in turn helped to protect athletes against burnout. Furthermore, Rees and Freeman (2009) found that perceived support was positively associated with enhanced perceptions of situational control, which was in turn positively associated with challenge appraisals and negatively associated with threat appraisals. Perceived support has also been identified as a key factor in the promotion of resilience in Olympic athletes, for example, by promoting positive adaptations to setbacks (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2012). Such evidence supports the model's core assertion that social support can lead to a reduction in stress. Nevertheless, the model fails to account for evidence that the effectiveness of social support depends on the level of stress that an individual is experiencing and the nature of the stressor they are confronting. In particular, when a person is under a lot of pressure, some forms of social support can sometimes exacerbate rather than ameliorate their stress (Grolnick, 2002). Esteem support, for example, can backfire if it makes athletes over-confident or fearful of letting their supporters down (Thomas, Lane & Kingston, 2011).

The stress-buffering model

Speaking to evidence that the effect of support is contingent on an athlete's level of stress, the *stress-buffering model* is one of the most influential models in sport (see Figure 10.3 C; Cohen et al., 2000). It argues that social support will have minimal impact on outcomes under conditions of low stress (because here it is not needed) but that it will be more predictive of beneficial outcomes under conditions of high stress. For example, when an athlete is experiencing high levels of stress, high levels of support can protect them from performing poorly. And, conversely, high levels of stress are likely to lead to poorer performance if the athlete has low levels of support.

The stress-buffering model is also aligned with the transactional model of stress and stress appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Specifically, after a person is exposed to stressors which pose a threat to the self, it suggests that both perceived and received support play a role in shaping the impact of that threat. More specifically, both types of support can enhance perceived or received coping resources during secondary stress appraisal, thereby reducing (i.e., 'buffering') the negative effect of stress on sport-related outcomes (Cohen et al., 2000; Cohen & Wills, 1985). At the same time, however, perceived and received support

are theorised to exert unique stress-buffering effects (Bianco & Eklund, 2001; Cohen et al., 2000; Rees & Hardy, 2004). Indeed, qualitative and quantitative research has found that both received and perceived support *can* reduce the negative impact of stress on sport-related outcomes such as self-confidence and performance (Freeman & Rees, 2008; Kristiansen & Roberts, 2010; Rees & Freeman, 2007). However, when considered simultaneously, there is mixed evidence for these claims, and it is unclear whether one form of support exerts stronger stress-buffering effects than the other (e.g., Hartley & Coffee, 2019a; Rees et al., 2007).

Overall, then, the stress-buffering approach is valuable both in helping us to understand when social support is likely to be beneficial (i.e., under high levels of stress) and in pointing to the importance of cognitive appraisal for this process. However, evidence for the model is mixed, both in sport and in the wider psychological literature (for reviews, see Cohen & Wills, 1985; Lakey & Cronin, 2008; Rueger et al., 2016). The picture is further complicated by evidence that different dimensions of support are associated with different forms of coping behaviour (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Freeman et al., 2011; Hartley & Coffee, 2019a; Lu et al., 2016). Furthermore, as we will see, the stress-buffering model also fails to account for other factors that appear to play a significant role in determining whether social support is beneficial — notably the social context in which it is provided and the source from which it emerges.

The optimal-matching approach

The *optimal matching hypothesis* builds on the stress-buffering model by specifying what forms of social support help people cope with specific stressors (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). As Table 10.1 indicates, this approach suggests that social support is most effective when it comes in a form that helps people deal with the specific nature of the threat posed by a given stressor (see Table 10.1).

Table 10.1 The optimal matching hypothesis

	Controllability of stressor	Type of support	Type of coping
Optimally matched	Uncontrollable	Emotional + Esteem	Emotion-focused
	Controllable	Informational + Tangible	Problem-focused
Poorly matched	Uncontrollable	Informational + Tangible	Problem-focused
	Controllable	Emotional + Esteem	Emotion-focused

Note: Developed by Cutrona and Russell (1990), this model suggests that social support is most effective when specific dimensions of support are optimally matched to situational needs demanded by the controllability of the stressor.

This approach characterises stressors as varying in terms of their controllability, as well as their desirability, duration, and domain. Social support is then expected to be more effective the more compatible it is with these variables. For example, Cutrona and Russell (1990) argue that uncontrollable stressors (e.g., a deselection or a last-minute hamstring injury) typically require forms of social support that enable *emotion-focused* forms of coping. In this instance, then, emotional and esteem support would be more appropriate — and hence more useful — than informational or tangible support. In contrast, controllable stressors (e.g., a flight cancellation or a tyre puncture) typically require forms of support that promote *problem-focused* forms of coping. Here, then, informational and tangible forms of social support would be more appropriate, as they provide viable ways of managing the stressor (e.g., rescheduling the flight or repairing the tyre so that these events disrupt performance as little as possible).

Yet while the optimal-matching model is intuitively appealing and theoretically ‘clean’, the hypothesis again only receives mixed empirical support — either in sporting domains (Arnold, Edwards & Rees, 2018; Rees & Hardy, 2004) or beyond (where it has generally been studied; Burleson, 2003; Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002). For example, Ian Mitchell and colleagues (2014) found that when dimensions of social support were matched to specific stressors (e.g., injury), stress-buffering effects were observed for perceived but not received support. Other researchers have also failed to observe main- or stress-buffering effects of optimally matched support on either performance (Rees et al., 2007) or on responses to injury (Rees et al., 2010). For example, research led by Paul Freeman and

colleagues (2009) who delivered a well-matched social support intervention during a round of golf, demonstrated that this led to significant improvement in the score for only one of the three high-level golfers who took part in the study.

As with preceding models, this model also fails to conceptualise or account for the influence of other factors that play a significant role in determining whether social support is effective. For instance, irrespective of whether dimensions of social support are optimally matched to the demands of a particular stressor, the social context may dictate whether or not those types of supportive behaviours are warranted (or even resented). The effectiveness of optimally matched social support may also partially depend on provider characteristics. Consider again the example of the golf parent — here the receipt and impact of optimally matched forms of social support (e.g., for coping with controllable golf-related stressors) may ultimately depend on the parent's golfing expertise. One reason for this is that social contextual factors (e.g., to do with the source and the audience) affect the *meaning* of support and hence play a key role in shaping its impact (Burleson & MacGeorge, 2002; Haslam, Reicher & Levine, 2012; Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). Accordingly, if we are to understand the dynamics of what makes social support effective, a theoretical framework is needed which not only makes predictions about when and how social support will be effective, but which also conceptualises and accounts for the influence of relevant social contextual factors — notably those which pertain to the *group-based relationship* between providers and recipients of support.

A Social Identity Approach to Social Support in Sport

By drawing on the stress appraisal and coping literature (e.g., Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), the main and stress-buffering approaches have sought to understand how different types of social support behaviours contribute to primary and secondary stress appraisals, and how these impact upon sport-related outcomes. However, a weakness of these approaches is that their hypotheses are rather rigid. In particular, they are insensitive to social contextual factors that determine when, how, and why social support is beneficial (Thoits, 2011). Relatedly, they are all limited by the fact that they construe stress and the experience of social support in purely *personal* terms (Folkman & Moskowitz, 2004). In particular, most research focuses exclusively on the recipient's perspective and experience of support *as an individual*. However, it is clear that *social support occurs between recipients and providers, and the perceived availability or actual exchange of any social support resources is necessarily conditioned by the nature of their shared group membership*. For example, however optimal

it might be, one would not expect support provided by a member of a rival team to have the same meaning or impact as support provided by a trusted teammate.

This speaks to the fact that athletes are never merely ‘passive recipients’ of support. Importantly, they have support-related preferences, and will often choose how they wish to seek and use support. Importantly too, these preferences are often grounded in group memberships and associated social identities. For example, research with indigenous Australian Football League players found that they saw other players from similar cultural backgrounds to be their most important source of support (Nicholson et al., 2011). Likewise, in a study where participants learned to play a new game, their willingness to ask for support from teammates was influenced by group norms concerning the perceived appropriateness of this behaviour (Butler, McKimmie & Haslam, 2018). This meant that players were much more likely to ask for and use support, if their teammates did so too. In this regard, it is also clear that group memberships place constraints on who is perceived to be eligible for support (Defreese & Smith, 2013; Cruickshank & Collins, 2013; Fletcher & Wagstaff, 2009; Freeman & Rees, 2010). More generally, we suggest that the experience of social support in sport is bound up with the dynamics of group life (Rees et al., 2015), and needs to be understood in *social* (i.e., group-based) terms, not just personal terms.

Another weakness of prevailing approaches to social support is that they fail to explain the capacity for social support to sometimes be the *source* of stress and harm. Most readers will be able to recall situations where others’ well-intentioned attempts to provide support have backfired and made things worse. Along these lines, as we noted above, the Little League baseballer receiving corrective technical instruction from the coach in front of his teammates in Figure 10.2 may experience this as embarrassing, punitive, or as an attempt to assert dominance. More generally, this suggests that there is a need for a theoretical framework that captures the potential for identity-related processes to *transform* the experience of both support and stress (Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

In line with these arguments, in what follows we flesh out a social identity approach to the study of social support in sport. This builds on prevailing approaches in a number of ways. First, by seeing support as a synergistic exchange between provider and recipient (Hayward, Knight & Mellalieu, 2017), the approach recognises the importance of the *identity-based relational perspectives* of all those involved in a social support exchange (i.e., not only recipients but also providers, onlookers, and other stakeholders; Coussens, Rees & Freeman, 2015). Second, it provides a framework to explain the influence of the *social environment* that speaks to the importance of salient social identities and their associated

content (e.g., support-related norms) for the meaning and experience of support (Butler et al., 2018; Rees et al., 2015). Third, the approach provides a framework that explains the *transformative potential* of support whereby it can be *both* profoundly debilitating and supremely empowering (Haslam & Reicher, 2006).

The importance of social identity for social support was actually reinforced by the foundational research in this theoretical tradition: the minimal group studies (Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel, et al., 1971; see Chapter 2 above). Although these studies focused primarily on acts of discrimination and inter-group competition, they also highlighted the point that social categorization has implications for supportive behaviour. Specifically, they showed that even when groups are inherently meaningless, people reliably display favouritism towards members of their ingroup through the assignment of monetary rewards (while strategically withholding points from an outgroup; Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1975). Thus although the studies' findings are typically framed as providing a window onto the capacity for social identity to engender discrimination, they can equally — and in many ways more fundamentally — be seen to show how social identity provides a psychological platform for the provision (or withholding) of social support (in this case, tangible support).

Of course, the impact of social identity on social support provision is something that can readily be seen in the world of sport. Consider the 2016 World Triathlon Series in Cozumel, Mexico where, as Slater and colleagues noted in [Chapter 5 above](#), within sight of the finish line, Alastair Brownlee of Great Britain gave up his chance to win the final race of the season, instead choosing to help his struggling brother Jonny across the line (see Figure 5.7). Why would an individual who has trained hard to ensure that he has the best chance of winning a competition willingly set aside his own opportunity to do so in order to support a competitor? One answer is that no athlete is ever just 'an individual'. Instead, the social identity approach alerts us to the fact that in a range of social contexts — including sporting ones — how people think, feel and behave is defined by their group membership (i.e., their social identity as members of the same family, club or team; Tajfel, 1972; Turner, 1982).

As discussed in Chapter 2, when this is the case this serves to transform behaviour so that it is guided by the perspective, interests, and needs of the ingroup ('us') rather than those of the personal self ('me'). This also means that when social identity is salient the dynamics of giving, receiving, and utilising social support are also structured by group membership and associated social identity-based relationships between relevant actors (i.e., support providers, recipients, onlookers, and other stakeholders). Indeed, as we see clearly in the case of the Brownlee brothers, here acts of personal sacrifice can become acts of collective (and

personal) victory. In the sections below we tease out these arguments to shed more light on the complex dynamics that dictate the dynamics of social support in sport.

Key point 1: Shared social identity makes social support possible

In line with the key tenets of self-categorisation theory (Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994), the foregoing analysis provides a basis for understanding how an emergent sense of shared social identity (a sense of ‘we-ness’) can (re)shape the nature of the relationship between providers and recipients of social support. An underlying point here is that, however people define themselves, they are generally motivated to have — or more particularly to *achieve* — a sense of the self as a positive and distinct entity (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). This means, for example, that if a female runner defines herself as an individual then she will want to see herself as different from, and better than, other athletes — for example, by trying to win a race in which she is competing against other runners. However, we noted above that there are a great many contexts where people engage in self-stereotyping (depersonalisation; Turner, 1982) such that their sense of self is defined by shared group membership (as ‘we’ and ‘us’, rather than ‘I’ and ‘me’). Where this is the case, the motivation for positive distinctiveness should now manifest itself as a desire to see the ingroup as different from, and better than, comparison outgroups — for example, by winning a tournament in which our team is competing against other teams. In this context, one of the key points to note about social support is that it is a form of behaviour that is broadly oriented towards this collective goal. That is, it is a manifestation of the aspiration to enhance the interests of a shared social identity.

This is a basic point that has a number of significant implications. The *first* is that, when social identity is salient, people should generally be inclined to support those who are members of an ingroup more than those who are members of outgroups. This, of course, is a basic feature of most sporting encounters where fans, coaches, physiotherapists, and sponsors generally support ‘us’ (whoever us happens to be) rather than ‘them’. This is what was found in the stripped-down conditions of the minimal group studies (Tajfel et al., 1971), but, as discussed in Chapter 2, it was also found in studies by Mark Levine and colleagues (2005) which looked at football fans’ willingness to help a person who had fallen down in front of them and (seemingly) hurt himself. It was also observed in a study by Michael Platow and colleagues which found that fans of Australian Rules football gave much more money to a charitable cause when it appeared to be supported by someone who was a fan of their team (rather than of a rival team or no team at all; Platow et al., 1999).

The *second* point is that social identity also provides a basis for *perceived expectations of support availability* (i.e., perceived support; Haslam et al., 1998). More specifically, in a situation where people define themselves in terms of a particular group membership (e.g., as ‘us reds’) they typically look to fellow ingroup members to help them out (e.g., by giving them useful advice or assisting them if they are in difficulty). As a corollary, though, people generally do not perceive support to be available from outgroup members. And this means that if they *do* get support from an outgroup source, it will often be treated with suspicion because the motivations that drive it are hard to understand. This in turn is a key reason why, as we noted earlier in the chapter, perceptions of support availability are often misaligned with the actual provision and receipt of support.

Third, and related to the preceding point, it is also the case that when people provide support to outgroup members, the quality of received support will often be inferior to the support provided to ingroup members. For example, the football fans in Platow and colleagues’ study (1999) gave significantly less money to charitable causes that appeared to be supported by outgroup members. Likewise, research by René Bekkers (2005) found that parents were far less likely to volunteer to support community sporting activities once their children were no longer involved in them. When it comes to sport, the actual provision of support (e.g., charity) thus often begins — and ends — at home.

Following on from this, a *fourth* point is that support from outgroups will often prove to be suboptimal relative to the support provided by ingroups, partly because it is unexpected and hard to make sense of. In particular, it is unlikely to have the positive effects on well-being and performance that the main-effects model suggests, and this is one key reason why support for this model is generally weak (Haslam et al., 2012).

Putting these things together, the more general point is that social support is always an *achievement* that is largely *made possible* by a sense of shared identity between those who are party to it (see Figure 10.4). As an example of this point, consider the tendency for powerlifters to slap each other prior to executing a heavy lift. For those who self-stereotype as a powerlifter, this form of esteem support is likely to be interpreted favourably and to help them feel confident and perform well. However, outside the context of this shared identity the same experience is unlikely to be seen as so supportive and hence unlikely to help a person perform better. Indeed, it may be quite intimidating in ways that actually impair performance. The same is true of the gruelling training regimes that coaches design with a view to helping athletes develop skill and stamina. For the athletes who identify with those coaches and their

programmes, these are typically experienced as supportive and necessary (see Figure 10.4). But anyone else would likely experience them as cruel and unusual punishment.

Yet, as noted in Chapter 2, a further key consideration here is that the self-stereotyping process is *context-sensitive*. This means that the social identities that define a person's sense of social identity are not fixed (Oakes, Haslam & Turner, 1994). For example, the participants in Levine and colleagues' (2005; Slater et al., 2013) research could self-categorise — and could be led to self-categorise — as supporters of a particular football team at one level of abstraction but also define themselves as football supporters at a higher, more inclusive, level of abstraction. This in turn has implications both for who people offer social support to as well as who they receive it from. So the passer-by whose identity as a Manchester United fan had been made salient by the experimenters was far more likely to stop and help the person who tripped and fell in front of them when that person was wearing a Manchester United shirt rather than a Liverpool one. However, the Manchester United and Liverpool fans received the same amount of help (and more than the person who was in a plain T-shirt) if the passer-by's social identity as a football fan had been made salient.

This points to the fact that merely 'having' a shared social identity is not enough for support to be received and to be effective; instead that identity must be psychologically *salient* in order for it to be harnessed as a useful resource. At the same time too, it speaks to the capacity for social identity to be redefined in more inclusive ways that allow previously eschewed and unsupported outgroups to be welcomed inside the tent of a more inclusive sense of 'us'. When an opponent is seriously injured, for example, intergroup rivalry will often give way to shared humanity. Thus when Colin Charvis — the Welsh rugby player — was knocked out during a 2003 test match between New Zealand and Wales in Hamilton, the All Blacks player Tana Umaga left his position to roll Charvis into the recovery position and remove his gum shield.

On a larger scale it was this same recategorization process that allowed Everton fans to reach out in solidarity to their Merseyside rivals after the 1989 Hillsborough disaster in which 96 Liverpool fans died following a horrific crush in the stands. At the time, conservative politicians and some sections of the press blamed Liverpool fans for the crush, but was subsequently shown to have been caused by negligent policing (see Figure 10.4). As the Everton manager David Motes wrote in his programme notes for the match after Liverpool fans had been absolved of responsibility for the disaster:

As part of the football family, I, and everybody at Everton, stand alongside the families who for so long have challenged the authorities over what has now been proved a

travesty. I am not only a football manager, I'm a football supporter and a father, and I applaud the families who continued to fight for the ones they loved. (Luckhurst, 2012)



Figure 10.4 Liverpool and Everton fans stand side by side at a Goodison Park memorial service for victims of the 1989 Hillsborough disaster.

Note: This image speaks to the capacity for fans who typically define themselves in terms of oppositional social categories to redefine themselves at a higher level of self-categorization when this makes sense in the situation at hand (in this case due to their shared sense of sorrow and injustice). Where this happens, the contours of social support can be redefined in powerful ways.

Source: Liverpool Echo

Key point 2: The experience of stress and social support is structured by self-categorisation

So how exactly do groups come to agree about the forms of social support they want? As already discussed, social identity theory proposes that when people define themselves as group members they seek to define themselves and their ingroup positively. Accordingly, it follows that group members' understanding of the value of support will be determined by their sense of the capacity for that support to promote the interests of their ingroup — for example, in helping to deal with a group-specific problem or with a challenge of historical relevance to the group.

By way of example, research conducted by the first and third authors of this chapter with a regional Rugby Academy in Scotland observed that transport challenges were an ongoing stressor for both players and support staff (in ways that were not true for urban branches of the same Academy; Hartley & Coffee, 2019b). As a result, members of this group placed a particular value on social support that helped them tackle these transport

challenges. Rather than simply being matched in terms of its abstract content (in ways suggested by the optimal matching approach; Cutrona & Russell, 1990), support thus needs to match ingroup expectations and needs.

This example also speaks to the fact that in contexts where an athlete's sense of self is defined by his or her group membership, stress appraisal will be shaped by the circumstances of their ingroup not just by those that they face as individuals. In ways suggested by Figure 10.5, this is true for both primary appraisal (where the question is not so much "Is this stressful for me?" as "Is this stressful for us?") and secondary stress appraisal (where the question is not so much "Can I cope?" as "Can we cope?"; Campo et al., 2018; Haslam, 2004; Haslam et al., 2012; Gallagher, Meaney, & Muldoon, 2014; Rees et al., 2015).

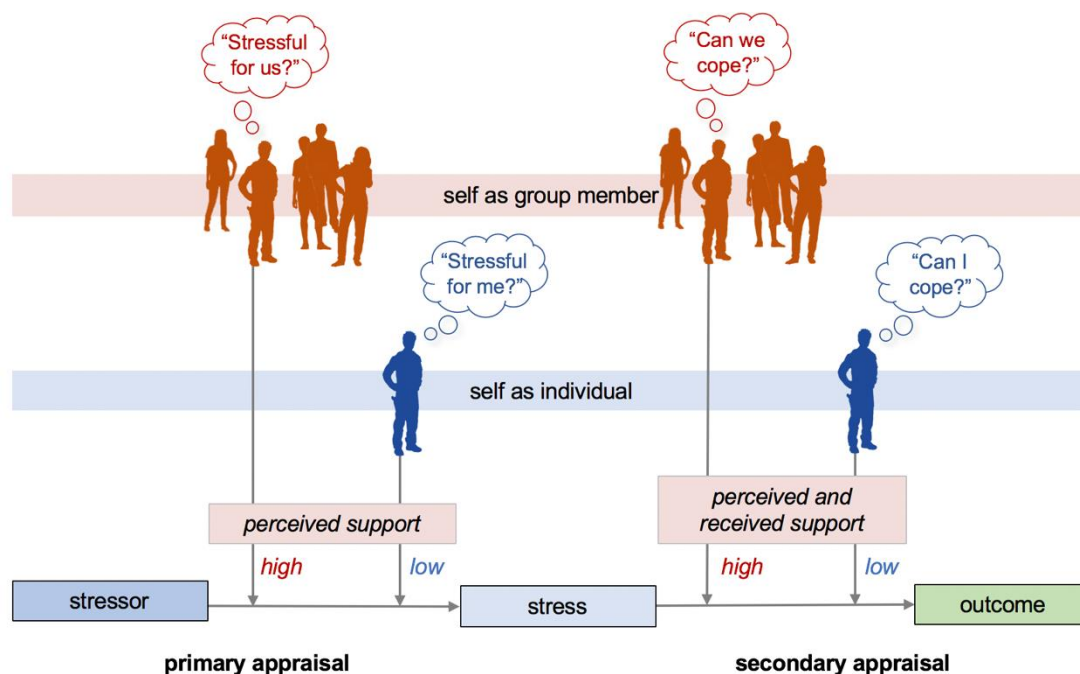


Figure 10.5 The role of social identity in primary and secondary stress appraisal

Note: This figure makes the point that whether a person self-categorizes as a group member (vs. as an individual) is likely to influence their primary stress appraisal by affecting how they interpret a stressor (in particular, whether they see it as stressful for 'me' or for 'us'). At the same time, group membership and the nature of that group membership is also likely to influence secondary stress appraisal by affecting a person's perceptions of the resources they have available to cope with a given stressor. In particular, salient group membership is likely to increase their levels of perceived and received social support.

This observation suggests that the stress-buffering process (and the terms of the transactional model more generally) will be moderated not only by a perceiver's salient self-categorization but also by the resources that a salient ingroup is able to provide. For example,

observing a poor performance by a football team is likely only to be stressful for those who identify with that team (Burnett, 2002; Davis & End, 2010; Wann et al., 1999, Wann et al., 2005). Indeed, those who support a rival team are likely to find the poor performance *eustressing* rather than *distressing* (see Boen et al., Chapter 16 below). Similarly, a person's sense of their ability to cope with the stress that the team's poor performance causes is likely to be greater to the extent that they get support from fellow ingroup members. So while they may be consoled by the commiseration and encouragement of a fellow fan, the same words on the lips of the fan of a rival team may leave them cold or even more depressed. In the context of coaching too, while the support of trusted team members may increase a person's sense of mastery and competence, that of outsiders is more likely to be experienced as intrusive, controlling, and as undermining an athlete's sense of autonomy and competence (Bolger & Amarel, 2007; Bolger, Zukerman, & Kessler, 2000).

Evidence that supports this hypothesis emerges from experimental research by the second author and colleagues (2004) showing that when they confronted a challenging test, students were only reassured by feedback that the test would be not be stressful if that feedback was provided by an ingroup member (i.e., a fellow student; Haslam, Jetten, O'Brien, & Jacobs, 2004). In health settings too, social identification with support providers is a critical component of the *therapeutic alliance* and as such is generally associated with favourable mental health and wellbeing-related outcomes (Cruwys et al., 2014a; Cruwys et al., 2014b; see Cruwys et al., **Chapter 11** below). Similar patterns are also seen in the domain of sport. In particular, a series of experiments by Rees and colleagues (2013) found that encouraging performance feedback in a dart-throwing task helped to improve future performance when it was delivered by an ingroup member (i.e., a student at the same university) but not when it was delivered by an outgroup member (i.e., a student at a rival university).

And speaking to the capacity for social identity to 'get under the skin', research by Jan Häusser and colleagues (2012) showed that students' physiological responses to a threatening stressor were attenuated by supportive feedback from others only when the students were induced to self-categorize in a way that defined those others as ingroup members. Critically, this meant that when participants were encouraged to self-categorize as individuals, support proved unhelpful. This speaks to the observation that in sport athletes' stubborn determination to 'go it alone' can often work against them. This, for example, is something that the American golfer Brandi Jackson recognised in her own early career where:

I was afraid to ask for help and I didn't utilize some very valuable people and resources who were available to me during that time. There is a healthy level of stubbornness among athletes that keeps them determined to get better and overcome setbacks, but there is also an unhealthy level of stubbornness that prevents them from being coachable and willing to try new things in order to work on the weaker areas of the game.

(Jackson, 2019)

Again, then, we see that whether or not support functions *as support* depends very much on the identity-based relationship between support providers and recipients. Amongst other things, this means that people often resist seeking out support (especially from outgroups) because they believe that it will not be helpful or will come at too great a cost to themselves or their ingroup. As a supporter of the Cork hurling team eloquently put it on a fan website: "Cork are Cork. They don't need or want anyone's support except their own" (The Free Kick, 2013).

Key point 3: Social identities can constrain access to social support

We have already noted several times that one of social identity theory's core insights is that people are generally motivated to define themselves and relevant ingroups positively. Clearly, though, they do not always succeed in this endeavour — not least because they are often constrained by social and structural realities that limit opportunities for self-enhancement (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). As one very simple illustration of this point, research by Nik Steffens and colleagues (2019) found that footballers who play outside their country of birth need to score 32% more goals in a season to win a 'player of the season' award than players who are locally born. Such data speak to the non-trivial fact that access to support (in this case esteem support) is structured by group membership — so that it is harder to obtain for members of some groups than it is for members of other groups. This indeed is the central theme in ongoing debate about racism, sexism, and other forms of discrimination in sport (e.g., based on class, sexuality, and religion; Hardin, Genovese, & Yu, 2009; Krane & Barber, 2003).

At the same time, it would be a mistake to assume that shared social identities always leads to favourable support-related outcomes. Indeed, despite a considerable amount of support often being available (e.g., in the form of holistic programmes that provide them with education, career development experience, and proactive mental health awareness; Lavalley, 2005, 2019), there are many cases where athletes report feeling inadequately supported within their own teams and sports. So, what's the issue? One problem is that the receipt of support can sometimes be seen to be inconsistent with ingroup norms. For example, athletes

in groups that embrace masculine norms (e.g., of ‘toughness’) may experience barriers to seeking out social support that attends to their emotional or physical needs. Amongst other things, such norms have been found to be a barrier to male athletes seeking out mental health support (Moreland, Coxe, & Yang, 2018) as well as treatment for concussion (Kroshus, Kubzansky, Goldman, & Austin, 2014).



Figure 10.6 Social identity can get in the way of support seeking

Note: An athlete may be unwilling to seek support if this is seen to be inconsistent with the norms of a group with which they identify (e.g., norms of toughness).

Source: Pxhere

More generally, the way people engage with social support behaviours depends on how they define the self. Specifically, to the extent that a person defines themselves as a member of a given group, then the defining features of that group (i.e., its identity *content* — e.g., the values, norms, and ideals that characterise the meaning of that group; Cerulo, 1995) will shape their understanding of social support (and much else besides). This means that what support is expected to look like — and hence what *counts* as support — may be very different for a group of French rugby players, say, and a junior softball team.

As research by the first and third author suggests, this process influences athletes’ responses to multiple facets of support including (a) its design (e.g., their acceptance of what it is trying to achieve), (b) its provision (e.g., their satisfaction with the way it is delivered), and (c) its receipt (e.g., their interpretation of its impact; Hartley & Coffee, 2019b). Groups, differ, for example, in what they want the support to achieve, who they want the support to be provided by, and how gratitude should be demonstrated for receiving such support. In other

words, when they identify with a given group, athletes' membership of that group will shape their sense of what social support behaviours are *normal* (Butler et al., 2018). As research by Tamara Butler (2016) shows, this can facilitate engagement with support when that support is seen to affirm ingroup identity, but lead to disengagement if support is seen to conflict with the prescriptions of ingroup identity.

Along these same lines, research suggests that *identity threat* can drive athletes' concerns that engaging with atypical forms of social support (e.g., mental health support) will threaten a core characteristic of the ingroup (e.g., athletic 'toughness') and therefore be embarrassing or attract social disapproval from other ingroup members (Tarrant & Campbell, 2007; see also Salvatore et al., **Chapter 8** above). To the extent that this is the case it is likely to aggravate individuals' stress responses. Moreover, by appearing to signal an inability to cope with, or conform to, group norms, support-seeking can compromise a person's sense of self-esteem (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982) because it threatens their standing within the group (e.g., leading them to fear deselection; Nadler, 2002; Nadler & Halabi, 2006). For example, research in medical settings has observed that trainee doctors are often unwilling to seek help because the possibility of engaging with professional support units evokes identity-threatening stigma in being seen to be incompatible with the ingroup characteristic of 'performing at work despite stress or illness' (Wainwright et al., 2017). Likewise, in the context of sport, many athletes shun support — both on and off the field — for fear of how they will appear to their teammates. As the Ohio State footballer Jarrod Barnes observed when reflecting on his own unwillingness to get help with his academic studies:

It goes back to fear of failure. In class, you don't want to seem dumb if you don't know the answer so you don't answer and don't participate... I was afraid to ask for help because I didn't know if the professor would view me differently. I didn't engage with my peers because I was afraid of looking stupid.

(Chenoweth, 2016)

Conclusion

A key message of this chapter is that the dynamics of what makes social support effective are heavily conditioned by the social identities that inform this process in ways specified by both social identity and self-categorization theories. Apart from anything else, this fact helps explain why support for the mainstream approaches to social support that we reviewed in the first half of this chapter is often very mixed. For while social support certainly has the capacity to ameliorate stress, whether or not it does depends critically on the

identity-based relationship between support providers and recipients. As we saw in the second half of the chapter, this means that support really only ‘works’ when it is provided by a person or group with whom a person sees themselves as sharing social identity. If this is not the case then support will often be unhelpful and may even prove counterproductive. At the same time, though, we saw that even when it is provided by an ingroup source, support can still be ineffective if it is seen as inconsistent with ingroup norms or as threatening to a person’s standing within the group. All this means that the dynamics of support are both complex and nuanced — so that where it *is* effective support needs to be recognised as a supreme collaborative achievement rather than as something to be taken for granted.

Yet while the social identity approach offers a comprehensive framework for rethinking the psychology of social support in sport, it remains the case that many of the key points we have outlined remain to be properly tested in this domain. Moreover, although key support providers within the sport environment clearly value support, most evince a rather unsophisticated orientation to this process (Knights & Ruddock-Hudson, 2016). Many thus adopt a ‘support is support is support’ approach, where we have suggested that what the field needs is an approach that is altogether more sensitive to the ways in which precisely the same support can be both supportive and unsupportive depending on social contextual factors that structure the identities of those who are party to it.

One very basic practical conclusion that this leads us to is that those who are interested in providing effective support to athletes need to attend closely to the identity-based perspectives that key stakeholders bring to this process — not only athletes themselves but also friends and family, support staff, and professional bodies. In line with this point, in some of our own research we have found that attention of this form is beneficial because it helps to build a sense of shared identity that improves the perceived credibility and trustworthiness of the support that is on offer and provides a platform both for shared understanding and for shared endeavour (Hartley & Coffee, 2019b). In short, helping athletes to better understand ‘who we are’ is a good basis for them being able to understand ‘how we can help’.

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