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'Baby Ban' and 'we are not the same': creative non-fiction dialogue exploring pregnancy and motherhood for a funded Paralympic and unfunded Olympic athlete

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ABSTRACT

Elite athlete mothers are an under researched population. This is remiss given their increasing prevalence, sporting successes, and importance as role models that challenge dominant and traditional views of pregnancy and women in sport. Indeed, sporting organisations are gradually adopting policies to support elite athlete mothers. That said, elite sport is part of a complex social and economic environment that is likely to shape support available to elite athlete mothers. Accordingly, the purpose of this study was to explore the shared and different experiences of elite athlete mothers in and out of UK national funding programmes. Longitudinal semi-structured individual interviews with two elite athlete mothers, one Paralympian receiving funding and one Olympian not in receipt of funding, were conducted. Bengtsson's 4-stage process was adopted to analyse data through the bioecological model. Data were merged and reorganised into two creative non-fiction dialogues; 'Baby Ban' and 'We are not the same'. These reveal that national funding bodies' pregnancy and motherhood guidelines, and funding policy were found to conflict, causing confusion and unsupportive experiences. Inconsistencies appeared in the exosystem guidelines and policy, and resulted in differences in communication, pressure, and support that prompted more positive interpersonal experiences for funded athletes than unfunded. Effective communication appeared as crucial for understanding athletes' needs and to foster a supportive environment, irrespective of funding status. This study was the first to apply a creative non-fiction approach and a bioecological lens to elite athlete mothers' postpartum experiences and explore the inequalities between those who are funded and unfunded.

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Introduction

Motherhood and elite sport can co-exist in mutually beneficial relationships meaning athletes no longer have to choose between the two roles and experiences (Massey and Whitehead 2022). Sports organisations such as national governing bodies (NGB) therefore have an instrumental role to play in providing support during postpartum return to sport (Davenport et al. 2022b). Indeed, there has been a gradual change in attitude towards female athletes which has brought about greater acceptance and support for elite athlete mothers (Davenport et al. 2023). For instance, in the UK, provision of funding up to nine months postpartum and guidance for elite athlete mothers have

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been made (UK Sport 2023b). Yet, high profile accounts of discriminatory contracts and policies by elite athletes such as Allyson Felix and Alysia Montano (Scott et al. 2022) suggest support for elite athlete mothers is not universal. Indeed, obtaining the elite athlete mother identity is not without struggles (Massey and Whitehead 2022; McGannon, McMahon, and Gonsalves 2018; McGannon et al. 2015). Thus, although gradual improvements in support from organisations such as NGBs may have taken place, existing changes may remain insufficient to address marginalisation of athlete mothers. Therefore, the support provided to mothers within elite sport environments warrants further exploration.

In the UK, elite athlete funding and support is provided via a national agency (UK Sport) routed through NGBs and eventually to athletes. Funding is, however, subject to annual review (UK Sport n. d). To enable the review process, each NGB has a selection policy and panel who apply specific criteria using a performance matrix to determine which athletes will be part of the World Class Programme (WCP) and what level of funding they will receive (British Athletics 2020). Demonstrating a top-down power dynamic influenced by performance measures and outcomes (i.e. winning medals at international events) (Poucher, Tamminen, and Wagstaff 2021), where funding can be cut due to changes in policy or performance outcomes. Indeed, many athletes will move in and out of the WCP, while others will not attain that status at all. A particular anomaly here are athletes who will represent Great Britain internationally but will not be part of the WCP because their performances are not considered of a medal winning standard. To date, little research has explored these athletes' experiences. This system demonstrates a hierarchical structure in elite sport that may pass pressure from policymakers down through NGBs, coaches, and to individual athletes (Poucher, Tamminen, and Wagstaff 2021). In this performance orientated climate, pregnancy, and its influence on sporting outcomes, was previously considered a viable reason for removing or prohibiting funding for an athlete.

Reflecting performance and patriarchal narratives, feminist informed research has shown that pregnancy and motherhood is associated with female elite athletes' resistance, fears of discrimination, diminished support, and cultures of silence in elite sport (Darroch et al. 2019; Pullen et al. 2023). For example, some sponsors have been shown to exploit elite athlete mothers as reactive changes in contractual agreements remain discriminative, ambiguous, and allow the discontinuation of support due to pregnancy (Darroch et al. 2019; Scott et al. 2022). Such stressors are not experienced by male counterparts (Darroch et al. 2019) which links to biocultural considerations (e.g. peak performance and fertility synchronicity) and patriarchal management structures in elite sport (Pullen et al. 2023). Feminist theories have been useful for exploring motherhood in sport as they provide a diverse and multidimensional lens which can highlight instances and sources of gender inequality. In doing so, these works, not only demonstrate the impact of interpersonal factors on athletes' perinatal experiences but identify the role of wider social and economic structures. Conversely, content analysis has shown that positive athlete mothers' experiences have been linked to sporting organisations subsidising childcare, allowing children at sporting venues, and easing breastfeeding logistics which allow elite athlete mothers time to train and be the primary caregiver (Davenport et al. 2022a; Davenport et al. 2022b). Such practices clearly require support and funding but can facilitate a successful postpartum return and feelings of support amongst athletes (Davenport et al. 2022b). Beyond funding, supportive teammates and athlete support personal (ASP) who enable effective communication can also help to reduce anxieties around pregnancy disclosure (Darroch and Hillsburg 2017; Davenport et al. 2022a). These studies demonstrate the importance and need to understand macro to micro-level social and economic support available to athlete mothers across both summer and winter sports (Davenport et al. 2022a).

Alluding to the complex interaction between mothers' experiences and wider social and economic structures, narrative inquiry has been utilised to explore gendered expectations and experiences of motherhood within sport (McGannon, Graper, and McMahon 2022; McGannon et al. 2023; Ritondo and Trussell 2023). For example, the novel use of social media analysis demonstrates that elite athlete mothers learn, adapt, and perform to audiences during their pregnancy, whilst resisting

and conforming to wider societal motherhood expectations (McGannon, Graper, and McMahon 2022). Additionally, narratives can show complex interaction between individuals and their environment such as disempowerment, discrimination, and empowerment of women in sport contexts (McGannon et al. 2023; Ritondo and Trussell 2023). Furthermore, creative non-fiction (CNF) studies, as a form of narrative inquiry have been employed to explore how athlete mothers juggle multiple identities (McGannon, McMahon, and Gonsalves 2018), how identity is reimagined, and the connection to physicality and physical activity (McGannon and McMahon 2022a), how exercise identity and relatedness develop through physical activity interventions (Walsh et al. 2018), and how amalgamating family and running reduces tensions and facilitates engagement (McGannon and McMahon 2022b). Thus, narrative inquiry provides means for making sense of, and giving meaning to, subjective experiences and stories (Papathomas 2016), and is appropriate for studying elite athlete mothers' experiences. Moreover, creative analytical practices such as CNF can produce stories based on real events (Sparkes and Smith 2014), may highlight experiences easily accessible to a wider audience (McGannon and Spowart 2022b), and challenge morality (Selbie and Clough 2005). Thus, providing an opportunity to explore the complex multi layered elite sport environment and suitable for exploring the connection between such environments and experiences.

Research purpose

Notwithstanding the work above, gaps remain in our understanding of pregnant and postpartum elite athletes' experiences (McGannon and Spowart 2022a). Specifically, while existing research in this area remains in its infancy (Davenport et al. 2023), work undertaken thus far has predominantly examined experiences of athletes with professional contracts or on WCP. There has been little investigation of the experiences of elite athlete mothers without these financial contracts. Yet, it appears that social and economic support is crucial for elite athlete mothers (Tekavc, Wylleman, and Cević Erpič 2020). Moreover, while research has identified elite athlete motherhood as a socially situated experience (Pullen, Miller, and Plateau 2021; Tighe et al. 2023), little is known about the systemic and economic influences upon pregnant elite athletes or elite athlete mothers. This means our understanding of the growing population of elite athletes returning to sport postpartum is incomplete. Accordingly, the purpose of the present study is to extend knowledge within this field of study by exploring shared and different experiences of elite athlete mothers in and out of the WCP. We do this through a CNF approach, as called for by McGannon and Spowart (2022a), which builds on existing research within this space. To do so, we introduce the bioecological theoretical lens to this area of study for the first time. This is done with the aspiration to understand the interaction between elite athlete mothers and hierarchical sport systems as a means of informing future policy and practices for elite athlete mothers.

Theoretical considerations: bioecological model

Elite sport is a complex and unique environment with particular cultural norms that are often characterised as hyper-masculine and outcome focused (Pedersen 2001). Holistic models such as the social ecological model (SEM) (Bronfenbrenner 1977) attempt to describe this complex environment through a multicomponent approach which demonstrates how interconnecting structures influence athlete development. The SEM shows how macrosystem policies translate into provisions and practices at the exosystem and microsystem level to influence interpersonal experience of individuals. In time, Bronfenbrenner's SEM has evolved beyond identifying ecological systems that influence individuals by examining interactions between person and context (e.g. Rosa and Tudge 2013). Specifically, the updated 'bioecological model' encompasses the role of person, proximal processes, context, and time (PPCT) upon human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). For instance, the person includes individual characteristics such as personality, disability, or status which explain how individual experiences within the same socio-ecological system may differ. The

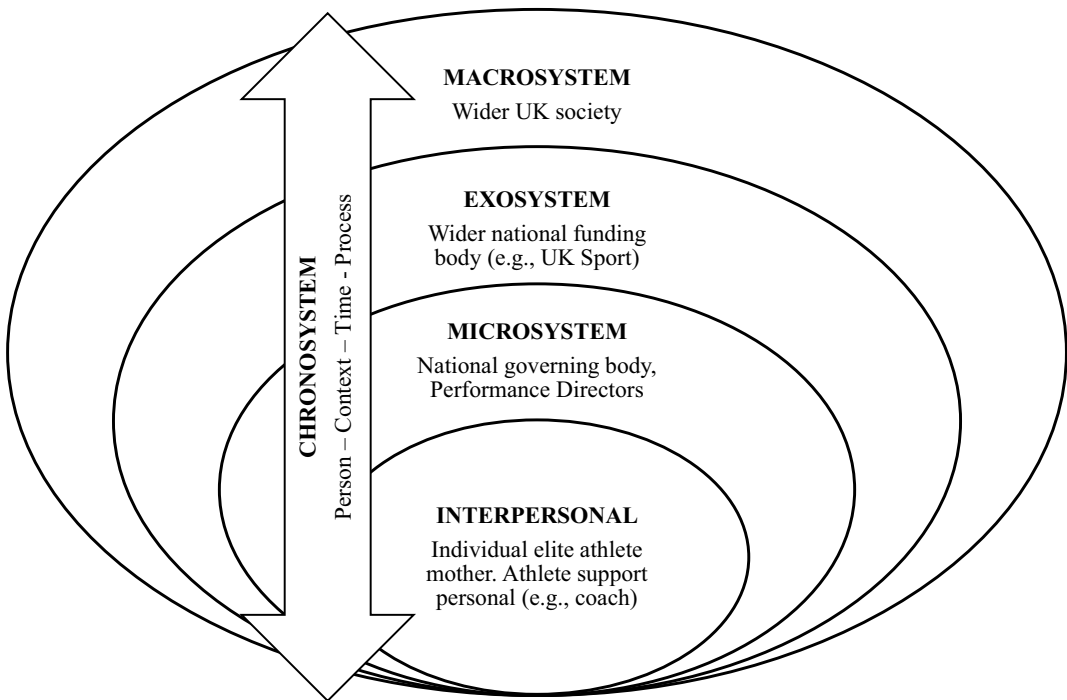


Figure 1. A bioecological model of elite athlete mothers.

context explores the impact of socio-ecological systems on the person and vice versa. Time considers both temporal development of person and context, and the historical setting (Rosa and Tudge 2013). Crucially proximal processes (i.e. regular everyday activities) result from the interaction of person-context-time. For example, the training experiences of an established Paralympic athlete such as timing and access to facilities which are dictated by the exosystem level WCP. Through these concepts the bioecological model advances the SEMs identification of social and ecological influences on development. To date there has been limited application of the SEM model to the experiences of motherhood within the elite sport environment. Albeit, Tighe et al. (2023) utilised the earlier three layer SEM model within their scoping review of barriers and enablers of female athletes' return to sport. Separately, the SEM has been used to examine areas such as breastfeeding and exhaustion by considering mothers' interpersonal experiences through to macrosystem laws and policies on public breastfeeding and maternity leave (Snyder et al. 2021). More broadly Bronfenbrenner's work has been used to understand a wide range of athlete experiences (e.g. transition into retirement) through the bioecological model (Küettel et al. 2018). Thus, Bronfenbrenner's concepts such as the bioecological model are versatile and relevant frameworks for analysing experiences in relation to wider systems (e.g. economic) and structures. It is therefore a suitable framework to explore shared and different experiences of elite athlete mothers in and out of the UK's elite WCP (see Figure 1).

Methodology

Research philosophy

Aligned with the quest of narrative inquiry (i.e. CNF) to seek personal truth (Smith and Sparkes 2016) and the research aim to explore shared and different experiences of elite athlete mothers in and out of the WCP, we employed a relativist view of reality and a social constructionist understanding of

knowledge. Through this we acknowledged the construction of reality unique to individuals and cultural contexts (e.g. ways of being an elite athlete mother relative to funding status) and through researcher and participant inter-dependence the social construction of knowledge via CNF (Sparkes and Smith 2014).

To evidence a reflexive approach to CNF (Smith and Sparkes 2016), it is important to be transparent (within reason) and to detail our own relative ontologies and subjectivist perspectives. The lead author, hereby referred to as 'I', has had an international athletics career spanning over 10 years, including two years on the WCP. Therefore, I had first-hand experience of the culture of elite sport in the UK and provided somewhat of an insider perspective. This allowed me to connect on a personal level through shared experiences and prompted me to explore topics of potential influence that may not be mentioned by the participants. However, in common with the rest of the research team I do not have experiences of motherhood or disability. Here I adopt an outsider perspective. Furthermore, I was completing my PhD which allowed me to apply a theoretical framework to make sense of the participants' experiences. Indeed, my academic experience allowed me to acknowledge personal bias and welcome the participants challenging of my predetermined assumptions of motherhood experiences in elite sport. The second author had expertise of qualitative research methods in sport which allowed for an academic and critical lens when acting as a critical friend. The third author was a registered sports and exercise psychologist who had over 10 years' experience working with athletes and acted as a consultant for several elite and professional sports organisations. Therefore, she had a sound understanding of the elite sport environment. She was a researcher specialising in sports psychology and coaching thus provided an alternate lens when acting as a critical friend. While we are much more than the experiences and qualifications presented here, we nonetheless felt these identities have reflexively shaped the research undertaken herein and acknowledged their influence on the construction of the study.

Participants

The participants were an Olympic field athlete who was not supported by the WCP (pseudonym Elizabeth), and a Paralympic track athlete who was supported by the WCP (pseudonym Lorraine). The participants were interviewed prior to the release of the current UK Sport pregnancy guidelines and therefore the UK Sport (2021) guidelines were referred to for the purpose of the interview guide and analysis. Both participants were former teammates of mine (first author). Both had competed for their national senior team in an international championship and training with the aim of returning to elite sport postpartum. Elizabeth's athletics career spanned over two decades and included national titles and Commonwealth games medals. Lorraine's athletics career also spanned 20 years including World and Paralympic titles. Data pertaining to the participants' pregnancy and postpartum experiences was collected within a previous study (Massey and Whitehead 2022) and uncovered subjects of scholarly intrigue related to funding status that deviated from the initial study aims. As the prevalence of elite athlete mothers was continuing to increase yet challenges and discrimination remained, it was important to explore these findings and the impact of the elite sport environment and funding further. To comply with IRB ethical approval conditions of the initial study, approved by the first authors' institution, pseudonyms were used, and raw data will not be made available. While pseudonyms were used, due to the uniqueness of each character and documentation of experiences through media and social media platforms, indirect identification of the athletes is possible. Both participants were aware of this and were still willing to participate in the study.

Data collection

Our research philosophy recognised diverse and individual reality, and how knowledge is socially and individually constructed through dynamic interaction between researcher and participant (Sparkes 2016). Consistent with this, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with each

participant. Open ended questions allowed for the social construction of subjective knowledge through the interaction between the researcher and participant and the opportunity to uncover personal truth as a requirement for CNF (Smith and Sparkes 2016). Interviews took place at 3-months, 6-months, and approximately 16-months postpartum to explore retrospective experiences of pregnancy and longitudinal postpartum experiences. The initial interview guide was formulated using existing knowledge of elite athlete mother literature (Darroch and Hillsburg 2017; Palmer and Leberman 2009; Tekavc, Wylleman, and Cecić Erpič 2020) and my comprehensive understanding of the elite sports domain. Subsequent interview guides took a similar approach but were additionally influenced by data gathered during the previous interviews and were therefore personalised to each participant's circumstance (e.g. What is your lifestyle and routine like now you're back into training properly and preparing for a World Championships? Last time you said you didn't know athletes who are in the same position as you [unfunded and a mother] how would you compare yourself to those who are parents and on funding?) All interviews were recorded and transcribed (*M* length = 64:37 minutes, range = 48:13–84:52 minutes).

Data analysis

As CNF is an analytical practice which systematically collects and analyses data to develop a fictional story embedded in factual content (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016), content analysis was employed. Content analysis utilises the subjective interpretation of interview data by the research team and was adopted to select relevant data within transcripts and identify topics related to the research purpose of exploring the shared and different experiences between elite athletes in and out of the WCP. Although there are many variations of content analysis (Elo and Kyngäs 2008), Bengtsson's (2016) 4-stage process informed our attempts to identify the similarities and differences between funded and non-funded elite athlete mothers (see Figure 2). This involved readings of transcripts within NVivo 12.6 software, during which I used inductive reasoning to identify similarities and differences because of funding status from the data as a means of comprehending the elite athlete mothers' subjective experiences. Within stage 2, repeated or extraneous dialogue, which did not closely align with the research aims was removed. In time, 15 initial codes of relevant data were produced that highlighted similarities and differences in the participants' experiences. Throughout the coding process, there was a dynamic interplay between stages 3 (categorisation) and 4 (compilation) allowing the other authors to act as my critical friends and to challenge my subjective interpretation of the data, gaining a deeper exploration, and refinement aligned with the research aims. This was in keeping with the relativist ontology of the study, but a departure from Bengtsson who advocates for triangulation. Further analysis of codes led to the compilation and refinement of data into two key findings 'Baby Ban' containing the codes training and childcare, NGB support, and communication: and 'We are not the same' containing the codes ASP support, communication, competition and qualification, and hobby vs job.

Data representation

We took a CNF approach to represent the findings and to connect with readers on a cognitive, ethical, and emotional level (Koivisto and Nykänen 2016). We drew upon the participants' own words and our content analysis of all interviews. By using (non-fiction) extracts of 'real' data, potentially untold stories can be understood more deeply and support social consciousness of elite athlete mothers (Selbie and Clough 2005). Additionally, to enhance understanding of elite athlete mothers' experiences (McGannon 2022) and encourage subjective interpretation (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016), we creatively reframed material from interviews and analysis as scenes, characters, and plots through two dialogues (i.e. 'Baby Ban', and 'We are not the same'). While rare, dialogues are an accepted form of CNF and can give the perception of 'real life', support comparisons (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016), and prompt further research

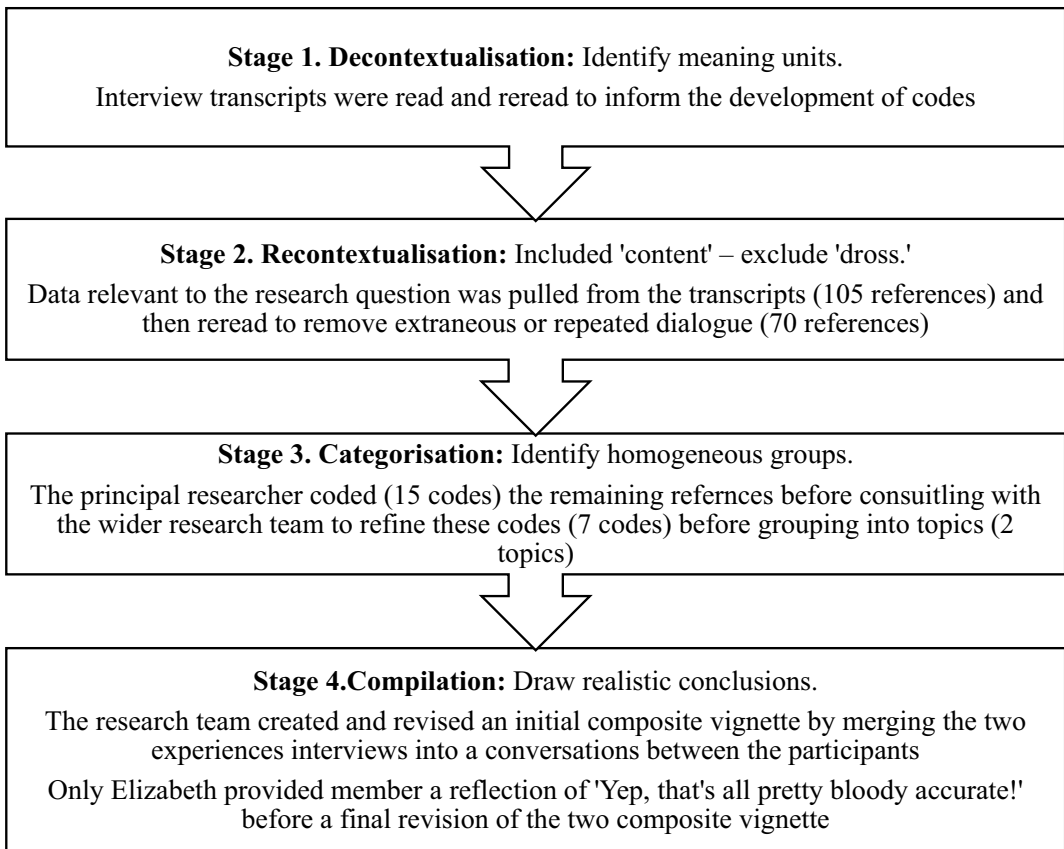


Figure 2. 4-stage content analysis process adapted from Bengtsson, (2016). Expansion on each of the four stages of the content analysis process.

questions (O'Brian and Pavlidis 2022). Dialogues were also appropriate as a means of amplifying the voices of the athlete mothers. Specifically, the exclusion of a third voice from the dialogue aspired to reduce the power afforded to researchers (Cavallerio 2022), recognise the participants' agency, and prioritise the voices of those who have first-hand experience of being an elite athlete mother. This is crucial because none of the research team have experience of being a mother. Hence, there is no narrator in the following dialogues.

To ensure a sense of verisimilitude, the CNF dialogues were presented to the participants for member reflections and elaborations on aspects such as tone, language, and responses along with suggestions for change or further development (Smith and McGannon 2018). Although only one participant took part in this, they confirmed the accuracy of the dialogue content in depicting their experience. This is not to say the authors are removed from the study. On the contrary, our creative aspirations contributed to the development of each CNF dialogue. Furthermore, reflecting our academic identities, our theory informed perspectives are subsequently positioned after each dialogue. Specifically, to make sense of the dialogues we turned to the bioecological model as an analytical framework to uncover latent insights into the multilevel influence upon elite athlete mothers' experiences, and the consequences of being a funded or unfunded athlete. Of course, other theoretical frameworks are available, but we chose this because it not only identifies the systemic influences upon athlete development but explores and appreciates how *process, person, context, and time* can shape athlete experience.

Quality

Considering the relativist nature of judging quality, we aspired for the suggested CNF quality criteria of substantive contribution and worthiness (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016). By adopting the underused CNF approach, this study contributed to the growing body of research on this worthy topic. Indeed, worthiness was enhanced as elite athletes have a prestigious status in society and are seen as role models, specifically those who become mothers (Davenport et al. 2023). In line with a social constructionist perspective (Sparkes and Smith 2014), we drew upon the first author's experience of the elite sport culture to ensure rich accounts of context are provided. Indeed, I spent a considerable amount of time with the participants during the data collection process and repeated the content analysis several times (Bengtsson 2016). However, mindful that researcher subjectivity may prompt misinterpretation or marginalisation of the participants' voice, the dialogues were predominantly comprised from direct quotes from the participants. Thus supporting good CNF practice through awareness of positionality and verisimilitude (Smith, McGannon, and Williams 2016). To further support this, member reflections were provided, granting an additional insight which in turn supports an 'intellectually enriched understanding' (Smith and McGannon 2018). Additionally, prior to submission, a critical friend outside of the research team who has research experience in using CNF challenged the interpretation of data in line and advised if the dialogues were engaging, provocative and relevant to the research aims.

Findings; dialogues and academic discussions

Baby ban

Breakfast, bags packed, and baby at nursery. The four-hour countdown to pick up beings with the familiar walk to the high-performance centre for Lorraine and Henry. Through the doors which slide apart on arrival, elite athletes warming up, Henry instantly settles down for the morning on the soft stretching mats before having his bright yellow jacket and harness removed. Lorraine halts as she can just about recognise two athletes darting around. She knows them, but why are they passing a baby back and forth?

Lorraine: What's this? Relay practice?

Elizabeth: Argh! I don't have anyone to look after her while we train. Katy looks after her while I lift my set. We swap. I look after her while Katy lifts her set. Literally handing her over like a relay baton.

Lorraine: That's bloody awful. I got pulled aside from training last week. They told me Ted [son] wasn't allowed at training and had to go upstairs in the office. I was like 'he's fine'. But they kept coming up with reasons. They bang on about listening to para-athletes. Yeah, they might listen about our disabilities, but they are not listening to me about my own bloody child. I felt completely backed into a corner.

Elizabeth: You couldn't bring your child to the track? My set, walk and talk.

Lorraine: What? Oh yes. There was no space at nursery. I had no other option but to bring him. They decided that wasn't ok. Instead, he was passed around like a parcel by staff he doesn't know. I don't want him man handled by strangers. My solution would be to bring him to the track. My coach and other parents are there. He is not in the way! My dog is more distracting, and he's allowed. You know they've brought in a baby ban?

Elizabeth: But I see lots of babies here. Speaking of which I need to go hold mine.

Lorraine: Yeh all because one person, who isn't even an athlete left their baby outside the gym to scream. I want Ted at the track, in an environment that's a huge part of my life, learning all the things sport can teach you. Their response to one person has ruined it for everyone. The decision was made a little too quickly for my liking, they didn't even consult anyone. Where's the equality? It's discrimination. We're meant to encourage women to feel empowered, equal opportunities. I know they made funding changes and the pregnancy guidelines, but I think they do this because they don't want other funded athletes having babies. Like they don't see it as something to be proud of. I'm going to say something.

Elizabeth: Well, I can't, I'm pushing my luck having her here now. I don't want to be judged for her having a crying fit. I don't want that for her either. That's why we got here so early.

Lorraine: There are support services.

Elizabeth: That's only true if you're on funding. Zero support sent my way. Here, hold her, I've got to do my last set.

Academic voice

For us, 'Baby Ban' reveals a tension between some UK sport policies, and supportive practices for elite athlete mothers. Drawing on the bioecological model we can see how exosystem (e.g. National funding body) level policy decisions are represented at the microsystem (e.g. NGB) and interpersonal (e.g. ASP) level, leading to a shared *context* with both athletes reporting feeling unsupported as a mother in an elite sporting environment. For example, both athletes express how their desire or need to have their child at the training venue is somewhat thwarted by local practices. This results in a *process* whereby as part of their everyday training, an ASP removes one elite athlete's child from the high performance training venue. Overall both athletes perceive the presence of a tacit view that does not encourage athletes to become pregnant.

The athletes' experiences reflect traditional priorities of the wider sporting system within the UK exosystem, which tend to mean NGBs fund athletes on a performance basis. For instance, reflecting 'new managerialist' approaches to public funding, there has been a singular focus or 'no compromise' approach to winning medals (UK Sport 2004) with little accommodation for pregnancy (Poucher, Tamminen, and Wagstaff 2021; Pullen et al. 2023). This may also reflect the historic marginalisation of women in UK society. However, demonstrating a gradual change in attitude to supporting female sport over *time* (Davenport et al. 2022a; Davenport et al. 2022b), NGBs have recently developed policies informed by UK Sport's (2021) pregnancy guidance (i.e. the exosystem), that aspire to support pregnant and postpartum women. Despite this, Baby Ban, demonstrates that at the interpersonal level such policies are not yet in place due to the absence, or inconsistent application of, policy by ASP. Thus, the 'Baby Ban' dialogue demonstrates the bioecological system may not work as a cohesive unit towards a shared goal. Rather, it is a complex system with multiple and alternative agendas and values. For instance, while disability is often marginalised and disruptive within neoliberal and ablist macro society (Goodley 2014), in the UK para sport context, where funding has been received by para athletes since the beginning of the UK Sport funding structure (UK Sport 2023a), disability is somewhat 'legitimised' and assimilated. For example, Lorraine's guide dog is an accepted part of her context. Yet, in 'Baby Ban' it is her maternal rather than disabled voice, which is silenced. This may be reflective of the elite sport *context*, where being a mother is an emerging identity that disrupts the dominant athlete identity (Massey and Whitehead 2022). Thus, in this *context*, elite athlete motherhood is not an easy experience (Massey and Whitehead 2022), but a complex and multifaceted experience influenced by the interaction or absence of interaction among various layers of the bioecological system.

Adding further complexity, the elite sport *context* is not divorced from wider UK social, economic, and political macro systems. For instance, the UK Equality Act (2010) highlights pregnancy and maternity as a protected individual characteristic from discrimination or unfavourable treatment for those in and out of employment. Consistent with this, UK Sport policy aspires to fund and support elite athlete mothers for nine months postpartum and recently introduced pregnancy guidelines which provides pregnancy and postpartum advice (UK Sport 2021). Demonstrating at this current point in *time* an alignment between macro and exosystem policies within wider social and elite sport *context* in relation to equality for pregnant and postpartum women within an inclusive and liberal western society. Yet, the experiences of both elite athlete mothers in our study suggests elite athlete

mother support at the interpersonal level is not always appropriate nor authentically consistent with exo-level views. Somewhat reminiscent of this, Scott et al. (2022) examined elite athlete mothers' experiences of sponsors' support. They found contract changes which protect pregnant athletes were considered reactive, and to greater and lesser extents, sponsors primarily sought to portray themselves in a positive light rather than provide genuine support to elite athlete mothers. Here, alternative neoliberal agendas encouraged by elite sport culture require or expect elite athletes to perform which mean that authentically supporting athlete mothers, as mothers, which may require a reduction in performance standard and time dedicated to sport, was a secondary concern. This and the lack of maternity leave in elite sport, may conflict with macro-level employment and discrimination policies where maternity should be a protected individual characteristic. Critically, it is worth recognising the UK WCP does not grant athletes employment status, rather they are considered a recipient of an investment award (UK Sport n.d). This may reflect a legacy of amateurism within the elite sport exosystem over time. Nonetheless, 'Baby Ban' and processes such as those applied by ASP, prompt further consideration of the implementation of policies which espouse aspirations to support athlete mothers. Likewise, organisations should reflect upon the extent to which practices meet the requirements of legislation (e.g. Equality Act 2010).

We are not the same

Elizabeth's eyes frantically scan for a quiet refuge to conquer this week's admin mountain. Coffee fills the air. The unremitting bustle is broken by a familiar cheerful tone, 'the usual please'. Before she can avert her eyes to avoid attention, Lorraine walks over. Large coffee and croissant in hand. A distraction with just two precious hours to pick up. Cup and plate slowly placed in a small space between paperwork, conversation begins and turns to their experiences of support from the NGB.

Lorraine: As I mentioned the other day, there are supposed to be support services, but it does seem like these only apply to the athlete part of who you are and not the rest.

Elizabeth: They are really bad at supporting people they don't have to. Like me.

Lorraine: You've been on teams longer than me and you don't get anything?

Elizabeth: My expectation of them is below zero. They have fulfilled that expectation. It was public knowledge I was struggling with pregnancy. All the staff know me and not one reached out. Supposedly there to support you with physical and mental health. Not one, single, person.

Lorraine: Staff forget to talk to athletes. They don't answer to you, they answer to their employers. But you're the most important person, they should talk to you.

Elizabeth: I don't expect constant communication like you get. But I've competed for them every year since 2006, they should talk to me more. I went to this throws competition and some selector guy said it would help me qualify for a throw's festival. They were going to fund it. I threw rubbish. Everyone threw rubbish. The throwing circle was rubbish. It was just...

Lorraine: Rubbish?

Elizabeth: Exactly. So, the team was announced for the festival, I wasn't in it. I just thought, if I don't qualify automatically for the Olympics then I needed those competition points to get a wild card. There was no conversation with me. Not even an email. Just a no!

Lorraine: Technically I shouldn't be going the Para World Championships. I didn't qualify properly. I've not even competed yet.

Elizabeth: Because you're in the 'clique'. I have to do it the 'official way'. If I could go into next year with the qualifying standard I can relax and not have to chase a distance.

Lorraine: I hate the pressure of chasing times. The selectors know I'm not the standard I was last year. I'm just going to go and see where I'm at.

Elizabeth: I wish I had that luxury. It's embarrassing having people compare me to the old me. I'm throwing 14 metres less! But I have to put myself out there if I want to qualify.

Lorraine: Seems I've had it easier than you. Probably because my performance director is amazing.

Elizabeth: Well, mine saw me for the first time when I was in here with Lyla [daughter] and he said 'Hi'. Literally just 'Hi'.

Lorraine: Well, she was an athlete mother so knows what it's like. She says she's proud of me and it's strengthened our relationship. She said stop training when you need to and start when you are ready. No pressure.

Elizabeth: I wish I could have more time.

Lorraine: Yes I've had so much support. Seen a women's health physio, normal physios check my abs and help me know when I can train or increase the intensity. The doctor's been great, support services have been great. My coach is like my team manager. He's great, does all the communicating, organising, takes the stress away. I use the governing body's S & C coach too. My other one charges loads, might as well get it free.

Elizabeth: I'm a PT so I sort my gym sessions. But support. I've only had an ex female athlete, but they have been the best helping me get back. I've never had funding or been sponsored. You are lucky you don't have to work. I still don't know of anyone who is doing what I am. I've a normal person's job, plus athletics, plus parenting. Juggling three very time-consuming things.

Lorraine: But para-athletes it's totally different it's not the same as an able-bodied athlete. I get something but I'm not like Jess Ennis, I don't have millions of pounds.

Elizabeth: When I was pregnant, I got compared to Jess. We don't have the same income or support network; she is not normal. She is at the top of her game. Getting free stuff and I'm researching what's good that I can get second hand. We are not the same.

Lorraine: Athletics is my way of earning money, so it is my job.

Elizabeth: It's not my job. It's my hobby. I'm a regular person competing at a level where others would be considered professional. Yet, the governing body haven't been helpful in any way shape or form. Then again, why would they? I'm not funded.

Lorraine: Thought you would have got something with the changes they made in the policy around pregnancy and that sponsors are making.

Elizabeth: No, I'm struggling. I'm poor to the point sometimes I go without eating. I turn up to training tired because I've been working. I can't take much time off because I wouldn't get paid. I've not even had maternity pay.

Lorraine: Isn't that illegal? For my maternity leave I've was told I could have 3 months off after he is born and take my time to work out if I wanted to get back into it.

Elizabeth: I needed to get back into everything, I'm always go, go, go.

Lorraine: You need chill time though. I love coming back from training, getting to do lovely mum things. Or when he's at nursery, I can nap if I'm tired or have me time.

Elizabeth: I leave work or training, get home, and tap my partner out. There's no chill time. You have no idea how much I would love a nap.

Academic voice

For us, 'We are not the same' focuses on the differences between the interpersonal experiences of elite athlete mothers with and without funding from the exosystem level (e.g. National funding body). From a bioecological view, these differences reflect influences of various systems and manifest within communication throughout the system, qualification for major championships set at the microsystem level (e.g. NGB), and nuances within ASP relationships at the interpersonal level.

Specifically, we can see that power (i.e. past medal success leading to WCP status), within the WCP, is held by those who have achieved greater sporting accolades. With less power, the unfunded athlete (Elizabeth), felt pressure to compete and perform to a high standard before qualifying for an international competition. She experienced little consideration and support for her postpartum recovery. She also experienced needing to undertake non-athletic work for income external to the elite sport *context*. She also did not appear to benefit from macro-level employment and maternity policy as she appeared to not receive maternity pay. Demonstrating complexity, our funded Paralympic athlete mother (Lorraine) highlights the greater power afforded to 'able-bodied athletes' in terms of unequal sponsorship income potential. This maybe connect to the lack of macrolevel visibility, interest, and therefore marketability of parasport (Beermann and Hallman 2023), reflecting a neoliberal and ableist society. This once more highlights how elite athletes' experiences of pregnancy and motherhood are part of complex systems.

The dialogue also suggests both athletes (*person*) interact with the elite sport *context* in different ways. Specifically, athlete power influences the ways in which the microsystem engages with the interpersonal. For example, the selection *process* was adapted for the funded athlete mother. In contrast, the unfunded elite athlete mother was required to undergo a traditional selection *process*. Here only the unfunded elite athlete mother's experiences align with Scott et al. (2022) and Davenport et al. (2022b) who found athletes feel pressure to return, require more time, and state that challenges could be overcome if time was granted. This demonstrates that funding status impacts experience at the interpersonal level and illustrates a top-down power dynamic within the high-performance sporting system (Poucher, Tamminen, and Wagstaff 2021). Thus, while some recent developments of pregnancy policy and guidelines appear to be benefitting funded athletes, a two-tier system of support for elite athlete mothers appears to be emerging, based on managerialist approaches to sport development. Further demonstrating a managerialist approach rather than holistic *context* and *process* of supporting athletes, the athletes' *proximal processes* (training, selection, and funding allocation) also vary by funding status. Here NGBs play an instrumental role in postpartum return to sport (Davenport et al. 2022b) that to greater and lesser extents, maintain the default agenda of performance first which has now been in place for some *time* in the UK (circa 2000's).

In another example of varied experience, the funded athlete (Lorraine) discusses positive communication with their performance director (PD) and effective communication between different ASP driven by her coach. In contrast, the unfunded athlete (Elizabeth) experienced less communication with their PD and ASP employed by the NGB. Here, both athletes' experiences of being an elite athlete mother were mediated by the *personal* characteristic of funding status. This replicates findings from Bostock et al. (2018) where those not in receipt of funding experience limited or non-existent communication from those at the exo, micro and interpersonal level. There are also parallels here with Pullen et al. (2023) who reported women were often nervous and uncomfortable to communicate upwardly from the interpersonal level and this was rooted in an exosystem culture of silence and expectations that pregnancy is 'not really discussed' (p 339). This area of practice should be improved because effective communication can enhance interpersonal feelings of motivation and appreciation (Palmer and Leberman 2009). Indeed, both elite athlete mothers suggest negative experiences can be overcome by simply creating better and more frequent communication *processes*. Nonetheless, it is worth recognising that the *processes* of communication differ between the elite athlete mothers, demonstrating that although they are within the same high-performance *context* at the same point in *time*, their bioecological system vary because of their *personal* funding status. With this in mind, future research should explore the *personal* characteristics, skills, knowledge, and practices of those who support athletes (e.g. ASP) because they are most in contact with elite athlete mothers. However, as part of wider system, performance directors and policy makers are also worthy of study. With regards to this, while we are cautious not to ascribe causality through gender determinism, we also note from Pullen et al. (2023) and others (Piggott 2022; Piggott, Matthews, and Adriaanse 2023) that there is a lack of females within UK elite sport leadership. This

absence of females at senior levels in sport may reduce the opportunity for shared understanding of elite athlete pregnancy and motherhood at the macro and exosystems (Pullen et al. 2023). This is reflective of the wider macro-level landscape where females remain underrepresented in senior positions in areas such as business (The Financial Times Stock Exchange Women Leaders 2024). Thus, the influence of broader social beliefs and cultural norms on exosystems, microsystems, processes, and contexts are also worthy of study.

Limitations

This study explores in-depth experiences of both an Olympic and Paralympic elite athlete mother and broadens the empirical investigations of elite athlete mothers. This population size is small, and the study does not include the perspectives of individuals outside of the athletics environment, policy makers, ASP staff, or those from varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Thus, whilst naturalistic generalisability may occur, readers should be cautious in interpreting these complex experiences (Smith 2018). The strength of our insider perspective prompted the exploration of elite sport experience that may not be mentioned by the participants. However, as non-mothers and non-disabled persons we acknowledge our outsider perspective on motherhood and disability, and support future research on disability and motherhood, from diverse research teams.

Conclusion

This study combined a creative writing approach with the bioecological model to explore shared and different experiences of elite athlete mothers in and out of the WCP. The study directly addressed a previously identified gap (McGannon and Spowart 2022a) in elite athlete pregnancy and postpartum research. The dialogues presented demonstrate a complex and interwoven environment that influences athletes' experiences. There are clear differences between the two athletes in terms of communication, pressures to return to sport, major championship qualification criteria, and staff support, which contribute to an overall positive experience for the funded athlete and a negative experience for the unfunded athlete. From a bioecological perspective, wider funding bodies create policies to support elite athlete mothers, while funding is still allocated to NGBs and therefore individual athletes on a performance narrative. This can create conflict and confusion leading to unsupportive experiences for unfunded athletes. Complexity is also added by wider dominant views on pregnancy, disability, and women in sport. Ultimately, there seems *some* areas of inconsistency between policy, guidance, and practice for elite athlete mothers. This demonstrates the need for further and specific support to be provided to and by NGBs and ASPs to effectively implement pregnancy policy and develop an equitable environment for all. For instance, although funding is awarded based on performance, effective communication appears to be a low cost and vital tool in the development of understanding athlete's needs, sense of support, and feelings of being listened to regardless of funding status.

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Data availability statement

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available.

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