



Perspectives of Elite Indonesian Athletes About Their Family: Evidence from a Qualitative Study

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Abstract. Family support, especially from the parents, was important as a coping and motivation in paving an athletic career for Indonesian elite athletes. In this qualitative study, 37 elite Indonesian athletes involved in a national training program and nine sport practitioners who worked with them were interviewed. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. Results of the analysis articulate three crucial themes related to perspectives of Indonesian elite athletes about their family: 1) Family as resources of coping and resiliency in adversity; 2) Responsibility to share financial earn with their family to raise their family's social and economic status; and 3) Psychosocial demands of the absence of family's support due to divorce, poverty or belong to stigmatised population. Implications of findings, particularly in addressing elite athletes' mental health and future research are also discussed.

Keywords: elite athletes · collective society · family · Indonesia · cultural sport psychology

1 Introduction

There has been a diverse strand of work in sport psychology concerning social factors supporting or hindering athlete's excellence. Sport does not stand remotely from the social elements. It has always been evaluated and recognised by the society based on the values and norms it holds; hence it will affect the people involved and also perceived meanings of their activities [1]. These paradigms brought a more profound understanding of elite athletes' involvement in sport that they also cannot be separated from their social identity of origin [2, 3]. Talking about social identity could also be discussing the social-economic background of a family they come from.

There have been many studies concerning the role of the family upon athletes, recognising the importance of family support in each level of attaining sports competence and achievement [4]. In the early involvement, fostering the talents of youth athletes required ongoing financial, temporal and emotional investment from parents [5] [6][4]. When sports talent has furnished in emerging adulthood, family support will become a protective factor contributing to resilience, a necessary psychological skill for attaining

elite-level performance [7–9]. In the Indonesian context, Rahayuni [10] argued that physical literacies instilled by elite athletes’ families could mitigate the path to an elite athlete career. From a genetic perspective, having a family member as an Olympic medallist could also increase the probability of an athlete being an Olympic medallist [11]. Hence, there has been scientific evidence of family importance in elite athlete’s pursuit.

Research concerning elite athletes’ families mostly comes from American or European backgrounds, representing the dearth of research in this area in other cultures [2, 12]. Recognising this gap, the International Society of Sport Psychology encouraged more diverse studies in a more diverse culture, opening a genre of research called cultural sport psychology (CSP) [2]. From the lens of CSP, questions about social and cultural nuances regarding the family of the elite athletes should be seen and understood from the cultural lens of the society where they come from [2]. Drawn from a larger project of understanding Indonesian elite athletes’ psychosocial demands [13], this article describes a strand of data found in the project related to how they view their families.

Indonesia’s society has been long known as a collective, religious and ethnically diverse society [14]. These characteristics should also be discussed when discussing Indonesian elite athletes, as they also brought their cultural values, norms and habits when interacting with the sport. As Coaxley [1] believed that sport has different meanings for every society, the way elite Indonesian athletes view their sport and their family might also have a distinct, unique pattern. The findings would be beneficial to add more understanding to Indonesian elite athlete challenges, enabling the development of a more effective, contextual approach to assist them through those challenges.

2 Method

A. *Qualitative research*

The data in this article were part of data gathered in a larger project titled “psychosocial demands of Indonesian elite athletes” [13]. The project gained ethical approval from the University of Birmingham ethics committee in 2017, and the data collection started from December 2017 to February 2018 in Indonesia. The project uses a qualitative approach, which Sparkes and Smith [15] defined as an effort to explore people’s meaning and interpretation through depth interaction in its natural settings. Particularly in this research, the depth interactions are based on my familiarity with the realities of elite athletes, as I was born Indonesian and was a former Indonesian national athlete. Rather than acknowledging this familiarity as bias, I embraced them as resources to enable a reflexive, culturally responsive, and in-depth analysis of the phenomenon [16, 17].

B. *Data collection and participants*

The main focus of data collection interviews is a process of understanding a phenomenon through interaction [18]. The interview was conducted in two rows; semi-structure interview and photographic elicitation interview (PEI) [19, 20]. The semi-structured interview is a process of interactions in which the question is previously planned [18], while PEI is the interview involving the use of photographs to initiate more information [19, 20]. Both interviews were taken flexibly, whether athletes

wanted them to be conducted in a sequential session or on separated days. As the publication of data differs from the publication of the image, a different consent form regarding the future publication of visual data is also given to participants [21].

Participants of this research were 37 athletes and 9 sports practitioners. Athlete participants consist of 20 males and 17 females, with an average age of 18 to 30 years (average 22.22 years). At the moment of the interview, all athletes are listed in the national training program (Pelatnas) under each sports national governing body or IOCO (Induk organisasi cabang olahraga). Interviews were conducted near their training venues and athletes' accommodation. Sport practitioner participants come from the more diverse profession: coaches, assistant coaches, masseur/physiotherapists, sports medicine doctors, and sports consultants. They consist of 6 male and 3 female practitioners, with the age range of 37 to 49 years (mean age 43.8).

Due to the high schedule load, 17 participants (10 athletes and 7 sport practitioners) could not continue to the PEI part. However, several keep sending pictures representing their psychosocial demands of being an elite athlete. All interview data were transcribed and coded following the reflexive thematic analysis procedure.

C. *Data analysis*

Reflexive thematic analysis occurred lately in 2019 when Braun and Clarke [22] redefined their highly cited work "*Thematic analysis in psychology*" [23]. Reflexive thematic analysis is a method of qualitative analysis to identify, analyse and interpret qualitative data by building underlying themes through the data [22, 23]. It consists of six phases: 1) coding interview transcriptions; 2) grouping and the codes; 3) combining, evaluating and regrouping group codes; 4) developing themes; 5) defining candidate themes, and 6) re-visit the candidate themes before reporting [22]. Each phase were discussed and revisited.

3 Results

The results of this analysis are the articulation of three underlying themes regarding the perspective of elite athletes toward their families.

A. *Family as resources of coping and resiliency in adversity*

An elite athlete career in Indonesia is still considered an uncertain profession as it will only last and generate a financial reward for a short period when an athlete is at their peak [13]. The challenges are even more complex when the organisation's climate has unstable policies, fully changing over time along with the persons in charge [24, 25]. Within these uncertainties, Indonesian elite athletes hold family as the most stable, the most assured coping resource and support them to be resilient during uncertainties or when they feel at their lowest moment. In other words, they believe that family will always care for them regardless of their athletic condition. This theme is divided into

two subthemes: 1) Family as the source of unconditional psychological security during adversaries, and 2) Family as the support system to attain success.

In the first theme, family as the source of unconditional psychological security during adversaries, Indonesian athletes understand that elite sports offer many challenges, often risky and uncertain. For instance, injury, undrafted from the team, conflicts in the team between teammates and coach, defeat or loss, demanding performance or pressure from the organisation, coach, and fans could become stressors to elite athletes. During those tough times, family members, especially parents, believed in giving unconditional caring. For instance, Ath-01 always call her parents to seek to advise to cope with rivalry within the national team:

Ath-01: There was an athlete from a region, and her coach was also in the team; both of them disliked me; they saw me as their rival. Then I get... sort of being bullied. I was very young at that time, 17 years old, (my mental was) very unstable, unable to think clearly. I always wondered "ya Allah, why do they treat me like that?"

Interviewer: And how did you cope?

Ath 01: I called mama, papa every single day. I told them what I felt. They gave me advice, 'do not overthink them. Gradually I started to cope, and in 2016, I started to get used to that kind of thing (rivalry) (Ath-01, female, 21 years old).

Uncertainties are a usual climate when involving the national team as an elite athlete. For instance, national elite athlete recruitment could be based on performance standards that are often unclear, making athletes unsure regarding their position in the team until the final drafting is established [13].

Parents often come as the best option when they seek advice to cope with uncertainties. As Ath-21 stated about the importance of family as coping resources who offer genuine trust and security during his career in sport:

I think they (family) are significant because people who understand us the most and the closest are families. When we do something, (then) we got things to happen, or get stressed, the first person I can trust is my family [...] Anything that happens to me will affect them too. Whether I am feeling blue, they will know it; and whether I need a solution or advice about (taking care of) things, they will give us (advice). They will always be on our side. Of course, that security is very crucial to our mental (Ath-21, male 21, wushu [13]).

As athletes are still considered a career that does not promise long-term financial assurance [26, 27], support from the family is essential. In other words, the family could also take the role of counsellor or sports psychologist when the service is in demand.

The second subtheme, family as the support system to attain success, is often associated with challenges of having the everyday routine, tasks and challenges to keep athletes still in their best performance, which required full support from others. For example, Ath-08 appreciated his wife as the best financial advisor during the uncertain times:

We all know how the sport runs in this country (unstable). So, all my money is managed by my wife, and she understands that situation. If the salary comes late,

she has already saved (for a living) for the next few months [...]. She knows well; I'm bad at managing money, it would make me agitated, so she is the one who takes that role for me to support my career [...] Yes, (she gave me) full support, (she) knows me well since I was nobody to somebody, and she knows everything about me (Ath-08, male, 27 years old).

The importance of how family encourage athletes through challenges in the pathway of elite athletes is also recognised by Ath-22:

Sometimes I feel tired and unmotivated, all day and night just training-training-training, and often, the coach is angry with me. But on the other side, (despite) all those things... I keep going on. Yes, I could feel bad, but also excited [...]. When I reflect on them (those experiences), it is clear that I can see them, my family with me along the way. Yes, my family always supports me; they mean a lot. They (my family) would not care about what others said (about me); they will always motivate me and keep me on the right track, despite everything (Ath-22, male, 21 years old).

From all extracts presented above, it is obvious that the existence of family along their career as the main support system during uncertainties and adversaries has provided safety and secured assurance to Indonesian athletes to maintain their careers. Hence, there might be reciprocal connections between athletes and their families, and these practices will be articulated in the next theme.

B. *Responsibility to share financial earn with their family to raise their family's social and economic status*

Chances of raising the social and economic status offered by involvement in elite sport [28]. The sport could also become an important financial source for elite athletes and their families [13]. There has been evidence that financial earn in for bonuses, scholarships, and even careers in government, military or related fields in sport [13]. They enter a stage where the sport is no longer a leisure activity, but is instead a profession in which they earn a financial reward. Athletes' recognition and achievement may bring more opportunities and respect for their families: popularity through sport, scholarship/education, job offers, endorsements and a more respectful position within society. Eventually, these opportunities offered by sport were acknowledged by Indonesian athletes. Financial earn was shared with family members and rarely kept for their own. These practices are divided into three subthemes: 1) Sharing financial earns to sponsor religious practices to their family, and 2) Sharing financial earns to raise family SES.

The first subtheme, sharing financial earns to sponsor religious practices to their family, is closely related to the main character of Indonesian society: religion. According to Lubis, Indonesians are mostly religious; they believe that Superior Being rules the universe beyond human capabilities. Hence, having religious pilgrimage, such as Hajj or Umrah the Muslim, is considered highly valued in society. It is a common practice that when athletes get a big amount of money as a reward for a medal they earn, they will share a special proportion to sponsor their parents to go for Hajj or Umroh.

Ath-36: From the SEA GAMES bonus, I bought land and Hajj savings for my parents

Interviewer: So have they already Hajj?

Ath-36: Not yet, Insya Allah at 2020 or 2021.

Interviewer: What makes you want them to go Hajj?

Ath-36: For me... their motivation. I mean, deep in my heart, (only) them. Parents, that's it.

Or, in the other way, they will spare their financial earnings for charity reasons related to religious values, such as giving *Qurban*, a Muslim religious practice where they buy cattle to get slaughtered, and the meat is shared with the poor.

*[...] last year, I offered my dad to go Umrah, but he felt unprepared, so I postponed. Then we alter the money to do *Qurban* when Lebaran Haji day (Eid-al-Adha). Alhamdulillah, I can routinely *Qurban* on behalf of my parents. [...] Yes, it is from my salary (in athlete). Since 2012 I always do *Qurban* (Ath-08, male, 25 years old)*

The second subtheme is sharing financial earns to raise family SES. When athletes entered the elite level, they became financially independent from their parents. In Indonesia, until approximately 19, the main financial sponsors of sports involvement in Indonesia are mainly parents [29]. Seemingly, when athletes reached the elite level where sponsors and IOCO were involved, pocket money, facilities and bonuses started to be given, often associated with the medal earnings. The bonus amount could be huge, enough to boost their financial status and eventually become the starting point where athletes began to pay back their parent's support in the path of paving athletic excellence prior to the elite level. Ath-04 and Ath-11 stated:

From this sport, I can raise myself. I mean, it was a hobby, but then it became leverage to raise my social status and my family too [...] I mean, my family was poor, and through this (sport), I can raise their dignity by buying them a house... possessions... well at first it was renovations (of the old house first) then I made it completely new. So from here (involving in the elite sport) I can live proper. (Ath-04, male, 34 years old)

...I opened three bank accounts [...]. For my expenses, for my parents, for my savings. If I got 1000, I divided them into 300-200-500. I came from a poor family, so I want to raise my family's dignity by carefully managing (my) earns, more like 'learning how to live properly. (Ath-11, male, 25 years old).

Sharing financial rewards or allowances from the sport is interpreted as a compulsory and socially acceptable practice rather than a negotiation. The socially acceptable norms entrenched in the realm of elite sport include the compulsory task of every athlete to bring their family dignity to a more proper, decent life through their earnings from the sport.

C. *Psychosocial demands of the absence of family support due to divorce, poverty or belonging to a stigmatised population*

Even though sports offer opportunities to climb the social ladder, different nuances are found to be distinctive for athletes coming from divorced, low SES or poverty, or stigmatised family backgrounds. For instance, Ath-24 told the story of how sport could aid.

My mom did not want her children involved in a crime because we were living poor and low; even tomorrow's meals were uncertain. My dad migrated to Jakarta to find a better job, any attempts to feed us. I motivated myself, 'I have to succeed [in sport], I do not want to be a hassle for my parents, I have to help them. I am always crying, recalling the old times. But it was so content; now I can raise their dignity, and I'm proud of myself (Ath-24, female, 24, sepaktakraw).

Several of the respondents in this population affirm that their succession in sport enables them to tackle the stigma. One respondent who comes from a divorced family, which is often stigmatised as problematic or dysfunctional in the Indonesian context, also admitted those by saying:

(showing an old photo) This was the photograph when they were still together. I feel happy every time I see this photo. If they were not divorced, would I be this strong in rowing? Perhaps I'll end up as a labour worker or studying at the university, and there was no 'something challenging to prove' [...] I felt shame they were divorced, I ever wanted to commit suicide, I ran away to the forest, and my mom was coming back just for looking for me [...]. I took any attempts that people will not judge, 'they are bad (children) because their parents divorced', by being morally right [...], so as my little sis [...]. My sis succeeded in college passed with good grades, and I'm here (in national). I was treated this way by people [show disgust expressions], even by our relatives (Ath-34, female, 29, rowing)

SP-04 (a physiotherapist) acknowledged the importance of family, the importance of 'giving back to family, how the sport's officials in their organisation recommend the practice, and also mentioned how the cultural backdrop of low SES and negative stigma of family, for instance from divorced families, could affect athletes:

If the family's financial condition is at stake, they will still be able to handle it, and it even becomes their strong motivation. These youth become the wage earner for their family. They do not feel inferior for that. Even they gave a lot to their family. If suppose they got money allowance, they will use only 500 and the rest will be sent home.

Moreover, from their (athletic) work, some brought their parents to go Hajj, build a house, or buy land. The chief usually monitored them by asking, 'What did you do to the money I gave you?' He was concerned that athletes should give back to their parents. So, the Chief has set 'rules', and the senior athletes set examples too. So, low-income family background made them tenacious instead of causing inferiority. However, if they come from a malfunctioning family, it is just harder

[...] What I see is that the most (demanding) from the social environment is if the athlete has divorced parents. That was affecting their psychology [...]. Moreover, it is tough to talk with them mainly because we have our parents okay (SP-04, female, 37, physiotherapist).

This theme has important notions to elite athletes' mental health. Special assistance or counselling might be needed for athletes coming from divorced families, as they have the negative stigma of not having the complete pair of parents to guide their behaviour [13]. While the stigma seems very subjective and negative, sports psychologists should know how this might become a psychological barrier to attaining maximum performance.

4 Discussion

The themes have described the interaction between family and elite sports participation. They also explore how Indonesian elite athletes perceive their meaning toward family relationships over their mutual relationship with sport. Athletes identified elite sport as providing the opportunities to enhance their family's SES and unconditional support for coping. Then, athletes would give back to their families by sparing their financial earnings, including raising the family's SES. However, when the family did not support their career, it became a psychosocial demand for a different approach to counselling them [13]. Hence, sports psychologists and everyone involved should also consider the mental health of athletes from divorced families or stigmatised backgrounds.

There is still a dearth of research on how elite athletes perceive the meaning of their career concerning family conditions, assigning that there are large potentials in this research area in Indonesia. There is a different meaning of viewing sport participation between individualistic society and collective society [29]. Considering Indonesia is a collective society, there have to be a different paradigm on examining how family reciprocate with elite athlete's career. A research by Nugroho and colleagues on disability athletes who followed Asian Paralympic games shown that coaches role is essential in excel athlete's career, but the early support from parents and family is essential to begin involvement in sport for disable person [30]. Other research suggest that parents' support early career could be started in grass level sport at local clubs or residential club [31, 32]. This is in accordance with Rahayuni's [10] discussion about the role of parents and family who set a supportive, inspiring environment for children to be physically active through sport.

However, there are still large uncharted areas in this field in Indonesia. For instance, for athletes from divorced families, who is often being negatively stigmatised in a collective society. How sport reciprocate in their life, helped their life or perhaps being a barrier to maximum performance, also how sport psychologist could provide definitive support for this population, those are areas which has not been discussed and investigated. In conclusion, this article are just the beginning and could be interpreted as a welcome invitation toward a cultural approach in sport psychology, which leads to more effective treatments and maximises athletes' potential [33].

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