

“When you’re no longer playing football, you’re trying to figure out who you are.”

The Impact of Early Retirement on Self-Concept in Former Irish Footballers

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July 2022

## Submission of Thesis and Dissertation

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**Title of Thesis:** The Impact of Early Retirement on Self-Concept in Former Irish Footballers

**Date:** 29/07/2022

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### **Acknowledgements**

Firstly, I would like to thank the participants for giving their time and effort for the study. I would like to thank them for being so open and honest in revisiting their retirement period. This research would not have been completed without your contributions.

I would also like to thank my supervisor, April, who has helped me along every step of the way, not just in thesis, but as a beacon of knowledge and support throughout my three years at NCI. I would also like to thank all involved in the NCI student support services and in the Psychology department, who have been supportive of my learning and circumstances outside of college in the past 18 months.

Then to my mother and brother, Jeannine and James, who have had to endure all of me the past six months, the highs and lows, periods of stress, those closest to us are usually on the frontline of our periods of difficulty.

I would also like to thank all of my friends inside and outside of college, offering an ear when I needed to talk, and a space when I just needed to be. You know who you are. I would not have been able to get to this point without your unconditional love and support.

### Abstract

Retirement in the general population can be time of personal growth but also period of difficulty. Athletes have a shorter career span which leaves them at increased risk of difficulty. Involuntary retirement such as injury or deselection proves a greater risk to an athletes retirement transition. Involuntary retirement in football is considered to have a negative effect on mental health of those compelled to retire. Considering this and its impact on broader society, this study sought to investigate this in an Irish context, This study looked to explore the experiences of Irish footballers, and the impact of their involuntary retirement on their self-concept, and secondarily investigate their support systems during this period.. Three key themes were found (i) The Influence of Athletic Identity and Impact on Physical, (ii) Grieving and Separation, and (iii) Cultural Influence on Availing of Support and Coping. All themes were discussed in contrast in previous research. Implications were discussed and recommendations for future research were made.

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**“When you’re no longer playing football, you’re trying to figure out who you are.”**

## **The Impact of Early Retirement on Self-Concept in Irish Footballers**

### **Retirement, athlete retirement and career transition**

Retirement is a transition period of life experienced by many. It comes with its unique set of challenges and obstacles. For some it represents a healthy transition, giving the individual more time to achieve personal goals and increased time with family, but for others it is a period defined by loss of social contacts, loss of identity and self-esteem (Bleidorn & Schwaba, 2018). Preparation for retirement is a major factor in determining a positive or negative transition (Quick & Moen, 1998). Noone, Stephens & Alpass in (2009) found that those who engaged in financial planning and psychosocial planning, such as discussing post-retirement life with family and friends and joining membership clubs and societies, were associated with greater psychological wellbeing post-retirement. Subsequent research found that those who had not planned for retirement (Ju et al., 2017), or those who were forced to retire due to redundancy or health issues (Elder & Rudolph, 1999), are at an increased risk of depressive symptoms or a dissatisfactory retirement.

An athlete’s career span is a lot shorter than that of the general population, with Stambulova (2000) stating it’s a ‘miniature course’ of one’s lifespan. An athlete’s career is shorter than that of the general population, with The Player Football Association (PFA) suggesting that the average career for a professional football player to be eight years (PFA, 2021). Thus leading to expectation that an athlete must transition into a new career. Athletes also run the risk of involuntary termination of their career through either career ending injuries or deselection. Allison & Meyer (1988) proposed 14% - 32% retire to due career ending injuries. Retirement in athletes has been researched and theorised in terms of a transitional period.

Schlossberg (1981, 2011) defined 'transition' as a crucial life event where an individual's role might change, challenging assumptions and a sense of self. In her Human Transition Model, Schlossberg defined three types of transitions: (i) anticipated transitions; this is the occurrence of an expected life event, (ii) non-event transitions; a non-event transition is when an anticipated life event or transition does not occur, and (iii) unanticipated transition when an event occurs that is not expected, and for which individuals are often not prepared. In a sporting context this could relate to events such as a career-ending injury or deselection at a young age.

This last is picked up by several researchers Stambulova (1994), Alfermann, Lavee, & Wylleman (2000) who have identified periods of transition in athletic careers which can be challenging. Of all the transitions an athlete must make in the course of career development (Stambulova, 1994), there are two relevant to this current study: culmination to the end of the sports career and the actual ending of the sports career. These have been theorised as the most high risk for emotional difficulties. Alfermann, Lavalley & Wylleman (2000) proposed that 15% - 20% of athletes have transition difficulties that requires psychological intervention. Stambulova (2000) adds that more normative transitions such as age-related deselection or changes in team management can be expected by any athlete but that a career ending injury is unanticipated. It is also one for which players are unprepared.

Schlossberg's and Stambulova's conceptual models prompted a review into the causal factors for athlete retirement and what variables influence either a smooth transition or a crisis-ridden one. This next section of the review will focus primarily on the variables that have predicted a positive transition and a negative transition.

### **Variables Influencing Transition Outcome**

#### *Pre-retirement preparation*



Retirement planning has been associated with improved cognitive, emotional and behavioural adaptations (Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004). Athletes who tend to look beyond their career and anticipate retirement in avenues such as education, retirement programmes, business, finance management and interests away from the sport have an increased chance of experiencing a healthier transition. There can be a resistance in athletes to do this as this may feel like a 'beginning of the end' initiation (Avery & Jablin, 1988).

#### *Voluntariness of career termination*

A closely related variable to retirement planning is the voluntary or involuntary nature of the retirement. Those who have control over their decision to retire, or voluntarily retire in due course have an easier adaptation to retirement and post-retirement (Cecić Erpič, Wylleman & Zupančič, 2004; Kuettel, Boyle & Schmid, 2017). Athletes who experienced an involuntary termination to their career, whether it be immediate deselection or a career ending injury have a significantly more difficult experience transitioning out of the athletic career, with higher risk of negative emotions, psychological distress (Wippert & Wippert, 2010; Blakelock, Chen & Prescott, 2016), and loss of identity (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Lotysz, & Short, 2004; Butt, & Molnar, 2009).

#### *Athlete Identity (Athletic self-identity)*

Athlete identity is how much an athlete identifies themselves with their athletic role (Brewer, van Raalte & Linder, 1993). The stronger the athletic identity the more the individual identifies with the career and attaches their self-worth to their athletic career output. Strong athletic identity has been associated with more difficult retirement transitions (Lavalley, Gordon & Grove, 1997; Webb, Nasco, Riley & Headrick, 1998; Alfermann, Stambulova & Zemaityte, 2004). Lally (2007) found that those who reduced their athletic identity, through planning,

exploring different roles, were at significantly lower chance of experiencing an identity crisis. Grove, Lavallee & Gordon (1997) also found higher athletic identity to be associated with a resistance to pre-retirement planning, coping mechanisms and anxiety of a future career. The possible underlying mechanism could be explained by Marcia's identity foreclosure. Identity foreclosure is when an individual stops exploring identity pathways and aligns with one, without sufficient exploration. This primarily happens during adolescence (Marcia, 1966). It can be due to parental or peer pressure, or cultural expectations. As talented athletes get recognised at such a young age, and then throughout adolescence are required to commit time and resources to their career, there may be an identity foreclosure towards athletic identity at this time (Warriner & Lavallee, 2008).

#### *Social and Organisational Support*

Social support has shown to be associated with an athlete's transition to retirement. When an athlete has to retire from a team or organisation, the social support they had ceases to exist (Ogilvie, & Taylor, 1993). Ford & Gordon (1999) found that those who had close support with regards to reassurance, encouragement, personal assistance and financial assistance had a smoother transition with involuntary career termination. A systematic review by Park, Lavallee & Tod (2013) covering 29 studies on retirement concluded that familial and social supports alongside workplace organisational support contributed positively to a healthier transition.

#### **Self-Concept and The Current Study**

Self-concept is how an individual perceives themselves, their behaviour and their abilities (Bailey, 2003). First theorised by Carl Rogers (1951, 1959), self-concept is made up of three parts, (i) the ideal self; what one desires to be, (ii) self-image; how one sees themselves, traits, physically and their social roles and (iii) self-esteem; how much one likes themselves. This can

be impacted by how others see the individual, or how one thinks they compare to others. Rogers proposed the more closely aligned these three aspects are (congruency), the less psychological distress in the individual occurs, and conversely, the less aligned they are (incongruency), the more likely the occurrence of psychological distress (Rogers 1951, 1959). In their research considering self-concept and its impact on mental health and mental wellbeing, Mann et al. (2004), found positive self-esteem is associated with good mental health and well-being, whereas low self-esteem was a causative factor in depression, anxiety and other mental health difficulties. Previous research has explored the individual aspects of self-concept in athlete career termination such as body image (Stephan, Torregrosa & Sanchez, 2007), effects on self-perception (Lavalley & Robinson, 2007) and social identity, however there has been limited research on the impact of athlete career termination on self-concept as a broad construct.

### **The Current Study**

Kilic et al (2021) found in their cross sectional study of 281 footballers, both male and female that mental health symptoms among active footballers and former footballers was sport-related psychological distress (63%) and alcohol misuse (69%) respectively. Woods et al. (2022) reported that retired footballers reported higher rates of mental health compared to active players, and possibly higher than the general population, although further research is required to clarify this definitively. This study will choose to use footballers as its cohort of study, to attempt to alleviate variation in results and differences that may be found across team sports and individual sports.

This current study aims through the use of semi-structured interviews to qualitatively explore the impact of involuntary termination on Irish footballer's career on their self-concept, and in an Irish context, the social and organisational support that are available. Kerr & Dacyslyn

(2000) suggested qualitative analysis for research into athlete retirement difficulties to account for more idiosyncratic experiences. Breslin, Shannon, Haughey, Donnelly & Leavey (2017) highlighted the lack of awareness in mental health for Irish athletes, and recommended further investigation. This current study seeks to develop what is heretofore a limited body of research.

## **Methods**

### **Participant Recruitment**

Participants were recruited using a mixed method of convenience and snowball sampling. Firstly, the researcher contacted several support groups for retired athletes, player associations and clubs outlining the nature of the study, such as, but not exclusive to: Head in the Game IE, Players Football Association of Ireland (PFAI) & Willow Grove Mental Health Consultants. Those who responded shared the researchers recruitment post on their Twitter and contacted those who met the participant criteria. The participant inclusion criteria were as follows: all participants must be Irish, must be over 18, must have participated in their sport for at minimum three years and must have been retired from their sport at least one year. Once a participant had shown interest and completed the interview phase, the researcher then asked participants if they were aware of any other professionals in their field who fitted into the inclusion criteria. The researchers contact details were then shared to relevant individuals who matched the criteria.

### **Sample Size**

The research body is inconclusive on precise sample sizes for qualitative research. Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson (2002) proposed sampling and data collection in qualitative research continues until themes are fully formed and that any future sampling would be redundant and data would become repetitive, this is called data saturation. Qualitative research investigating data saturation ( $N=60$ ), found saturation occurred fully within twelve

participants, but emergence of concrete themes could be seen as early as six participants (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). In Braun & Clarke's review (2019), they proposed that sampling should not be decided in advance of collection, but during data collection, to give the best opportunity to interpret meaning from the data and explore the complexity of the research topic. This study took a data saturation approach to determine its sample size.

In total eleven former sports people expressed interest in partaking in the study. Due to interview cancellations, incongruent scheduling and cessation of interest, the final sample size of the study was four. One participant was recruited through a local soccer club, three were recruited through expressing interest after seeing a social media post, and finally one was recruited through another a participant via snowball method. All four participants were former soccer players. All participants identified as male and were Irish. The participants age range was between 36 and 42 years ( $M= 39, SD= 2.45$ ). See Table 1 for the demographic details for each participant.

**Table 1**

*Descriptive statistics for participant characteristics.*

	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3
Age	42	36	39
Gender	Male	Male	Male
Marital Status	Married	Married	Single
No. of Children	0	2	0
Years at the Highest Level	7	4	13
Years Since Retirement	19	15	6

### **Design**

This research was qualitative by design. Data was collected by the researcher by the way of one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The study used an inductive method to allow for

former athletes to speak freely about their individual experience of retirement and its impact, as a rigid schedule may restrict the exploration of their idiographic experience.

### **Materials**

The interview schedule was devised by the researcher drawing from the research discussed above. Questions were open-ended to allow for more complex responses. They included general questions relating to life since retirement, the original transition period, available supports at the time and then quite specific questions relating to self-concept, such as self-image, ideal self, body image, social concept and self-esteem. The schedule can be seen in the appendix (See Appendix A), the researcher used this schedule flexibly, omitting some questions, or exploring certain areas further, depending on the context for each participant. Participants were also required to fill out a demographic questionnaire after giving consent and before the interview commenced (See Appendix B).

### **The Pilot Study**

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the interviews could work smoothly with the intended questions and this helped refine the final interview approach. The data from the pilot was included in the final data set.

Both parties required a stable internet connection and laptop or mobile device. The inbuilt software provided by Zoom was used to record the interviews. Otter.ai was then used to transcribe the recordings.

### **Study Procedure**

After expressing interest via email and social media posts, participants were sent a full information sheet (See Appendix C), the interview schedule and the informed consent sheet (See Appendix D). Once consent was obtained, the researcher then proposed a time and date for the

interview to take place. After the interview was scheduled, participants were asked to fill out the demographic questionnaire. This questionnaire included questions related to age, gender, marital status, family composition, years competing at the highest level, and years since retirement.

Due to the need to observe safety for participant and researcher because of the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted over Zoom. Participants were then sent the link to the Zoom interview. When participants joined the call, we discussed first the topic of self-concept, and they were again made aware of their rights to withdraw at any time and their right to skip over any questions they were not comfortable with answering. Interview length ranged from 36 – 54 minutes ( $M = 43$ ,  $SD = 7.87$ ). Not every participant answered every question, with the researcher having to be fluid with what was relevant, for example; Due to allowing the participants to expand on their experiences, some participants may have answered a later question in the schedule when responding to an earlier question. After completion, participants were thanked for their participation and sent a debriefing sheet (See Appendix E) to their contact email provided.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The current research was in adherence with the guidelines of the Psychological Society of Ireland Code of Ethics and National College of Ireland Quality Assurance Handbook for Research (Psychological Society of Ireland, 2019; National College of Ireland, 2018). The research proposal was granted approval by the National College of Ireland's Psychology Department's Undergraduate Ethics Committee.

Informed consent was obtained by the researcher before commencement of data collection. Participants were made aware of their rights to withdraw at any stage of data collection and their rights to access their data under the Freedom of Information Act. Informed

consent and the information sheet made participants aware of the full nature of the research study, its aims and potential risks. Potential risks of this research were mental health risks. Participants would be required to speak about a potentially difficult transition in their life at length. To ensure transparency and further enhance the participants understanding of the current study, the researcher also sent on the full interview schedule before asking for consent.

Participants data was treated with strict confidentiality. Participant's names were collected when obtaining consent, but were only known to the researcher. Data and participant information were stored in a password protected file, with only the researcher having access. Participants were then given a coded name when analysing the data, for example: 'John Smith – P1'. As some participants were high profile media figures, further measures were taken to ensure anonymity. Any identifiable information was redacted during data analysis and production of results, such as club and organisation titles, and names of former teammates and coaches.

As aforementioned, as participants were at risk of emotional distress, they were reminded during the interview of their right to withdraw or skip questions. After the interview, participants were also sent a debriefing sheet which detailed the importance of their participation and a list of relevant support services to contact if needed.

### **Declaration of Researcher Bias**

This research used a qualitative approach to analysis of the data. It is important to declare the assumptions and beliefs of the researcher that may influence the interpretation of the data. The researcher believes retirement to be a time of transition, and a time of difficulty, if not prepared for correctly. The researcher also has their own assumptions on early termination and injury. They are a 26-year old Irish male, who gained significant community fame for participating in marathons in aid of charity. The researcher sustained an injury that has hindered



their ability to run at any long distances. This has been a difficult transition for the researcher, especially as their belief of themselves and others was that they were the 'marathon runner'. This is important to state as it may influence how the researcher interprets a similar transition in professional footballers.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

The epistemological approach to data analysis was a social constructivist approach. This was to allow for data to arise from the participant's own unique and complex experiences of early retirement. Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis (2006; 2017) was used to analyse the data set for the current study. This method of analysis allows for identification of patterns within the data. It has also been noted as being an effective method of qualitative analysis in sport and exercise research as it can highlight patterns in questions relating to but not exclusive to; the individuals relationship to a transition or issue, how a topic is presented in the media or a perspective on a certain issue or topic (Braun, Clarke, & Weate, 2016). The researcher allowed for 'semantic' and 'latent' themes to be identified within the data. Semantic themes are surface level themes, that are stated explicitly within the data, whereas latent themes are more implicit, and may arise as underlying assumptions and patterns in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

There were six stages to identifying, analysing and reporting the themes found within the data. Firstly, the interviews were listened to and transcripts read repetitively. Broad notes were taken about the general tone and impression the data gave. Codes were then highlighted within the data. Codes refer to any words, quotes or ideas that may relate to the research question and aims, or are repeated within the data. This was over multiple sweeps of the data. Related codes were then clustered together to start generating initial themes. These first three steps were repeated several times to allow for rigorous interpretation of the data. Initial themes were then reviewed

and developed into overarching themes and sub-themes, with the use of a thematic map (See Appendix F). These themes were then refined, named and reviewed in relation to the data set and research aims. Finally, the themes were reported and analysed as a coherent narrative in the results section.

## **Results**

This section will describe the themes captured by Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). Three overarching themes emerged from the data set: (i) The Loss of Athletic Identity & The Impact on Physical Concept (ii) The Grieving & Separation Process, and (iii) Cultural Influences & Individual Differences on Availing of & Seeking Support. See the Appendix section for a thematic map illustrating these themes and their respective sub-themes.

### **(i) The Loss of Athletic Identity & The Impact on Physical-Concept**

This first overarching theme is split into two sub-themes: (i) The Influence of Athletic Identity on Retirement Transition, (ii) The Negative Impact on Physical Concept(Body Image)

#### **The Influence of Athletic Identity on Retirement Transition**

It was evident from the data that how strongly each participant identified themselves with their athletic role was a key factor in the outcome of their retirement transition. In response to a question asking to describe themselves before their injury, Participant 1 responded:

In really simple terms, I was the centre-forward [...] that's the only terms in which I would have described myself, was in terms of what role I'd have within a team on a pitch [...] And which gives you an indication of how it was so difficult then to move from that world into a world where I wasn't a striker, I could never be one, no one would ever ask me to be one again because I can't be one, [...] up until I had to stop playing. All I was, was someone who played.

This loss of identity and hopelessness for the future was echoed by Participant 3:

It's like football, like [name in third-person], the footballer, when you're no longer playing football, you're trying to figure out who you are. [...] I was trying to figure out, who I was before I started playing football? [...] did I really learn how to live life before I got carried into the bubble of football?

Both participants explain how their engagement with football began at such an early age, with P1 recalling:

Because I suppose from the age of eight, [...] playing football was my passion. [...] when you're a kid you go down to your uncle's [...] or wherever you go, and you meet new people, any chitchat with adults from the age of eight or nine, someone asked me how did your match go last week? [...] It was all football focused. And then throughout my teenage years, [...] all who spoke to me asked me about football [...] my whole, the world interacted with me almost explicitly in terms of football and what I could do as a footballer, or my interest or opinions about football, and to right up until when I retired, I was just like, [name in third-person], the footballer.

The intensity from such a young age is mirrored in Participant 3's transcript, when he states, "I played football from six, seven years of age [...] I would have played and played obsessively as a child [...] it would have been full on from the get go.", and then followed this

up with,” If I’d a ball at me feet, I was happy [...] your identity goes, the comfort of having a ball at your feet where you can be creative”. The identity foreclosure to the athletic role at an early age, and the social world interacting with the individual primarily in terms of football, appears to be a major deterrent of a high athletic identity upon retirement.

Conversely, Participant 2 does not echo the same experiences of early retirement from football. When reflecting on his experience of having to transition:

I didn’t see a future. I didn’t see where I’d be able to pay for a house [...] have a family [...] So when I got back to Ireland, I knew pretty quick, I had to get a job. So I went and started doing a trade. [...] My experiences of finishing up was where I knew that I had to quickly get something else, I couldn’t just wait around, there’s no backdrops, no cushion for me, I really had to get into a job straightaway.

P2 reiterates this when discussing how he coped at the time, ”I just said ‘Just find something, you’ll be fine.’ You’re a bit lost, I knew I had to get something quick, I didn’t dwell on it too much.” He also gives more insight to his motivation behind transitioning into a new career quickly, ”I didn’t want to be a 30-year-old still living with me ma.”. He also remarks on two occasions, ”I don’t wear it as a badge of honour...”, and that he ”wouldn’t lead with the conversation”. Furthermore, when discussing what he says when people ask him what he done when he was younger, he remarks, ”I’ve had two careers since then [...] I wouldn’t turn around to people and tell them I was at [Club Name] in the [Competition Name].”

This quick turn of attention to another career is not present in other participants.

Participant 1 recalls:

And when I realised [that he had to retire] that, my thought was like, okay, I don't even want to talk about this, let alone entertain the possibility of it. And then when I did [...] it was actually quite traumatic. Because it wasn't just like changing jobs. [...] I just assumed that enjoyment wise and things like fulfilment or satisfaction or being motivated or driven [...] I just assumed all those things are now gone. [...] And I felt like that throughout my twenties.

[Participant 1's career ended through injury at 24.]

Likewise, Participant 3 echoes this experience, 'It was [football] a massive part of my life, and then quite suddenly to stop playing, it was a shock to the system [...] I wasn't prepared for anything else.' He expands on the immediate effects of retirement, 'My whole routine, I love routine, was wiped from under me, then I struggled without any structure, struggled for a long time.' And then when talking about pursuing other careers he describes, '[I was just] constantly going 'quickly, give me something that I can replace football with [...] I just couldn't like. [...] when you are spat out the end and you're looking to do something different, it can be quite scary.'

Participant 1 and 3 played football at a higher level for a longer period (P1: 7 years, P2: 4 years, and P3: 13 years), and from a younger age, as opposed to Participant 2. Whereas P2 reflects on his period as a footballer as more of a 'career', that he attempted to be successful in, but ultimately moved on from, P1 and P3 view their career as a footballer as being intrinsically linked to their self-image and self-worth, presenting them with more intrapersonal challenges upon transition.

### **Negative Impact on Body Image**

*“My mind and body were totally at odds with each other for and in some kind of a conflict for ages.” -P1*

All three participants experienced difficulty with their body image and presented with body dissatisfaction upon retirement and right up until present day. Participant 2 reveals his frustration contrasting his thoughts around his body performance pre and post retirement:

Yeah I was big into fitness, I could run all day, felt strong and trusted me body. Nowadays I couldn't trust it at all [...] I try to play one casual game and my knee is at me for six weeks. [...] It kills me. I see able bodied lads who don't bother playing, where I'd love to be out there, just to be playing at any level [...] but my body just won't let me. (P2)

This distrust and disdain for his body's performance is echoed in other participants. Participant 3 expressed his frustration regarding not being able to play a casual game with his friends, “It does bother me to be honest [...] It's a shame I can't play a bit of 5-a-side, it's great for the mental health, physical health and blowing off that mental energy [...] I tried to play a bit over Christmas but me knee was just too sore, it wouldn't cooperate with me at all.”

Participant 1 described in great depth how his injury complete flipped trust in his body to distrust and dissatisfaction, and how that spiralled in maladaptive coping:

I just felt so fit and strong... [...] And then it stopped. And then I got a hip injury and then every day became about trying to interpret the symptoms or the pain I was feeling in my body, going... Is that just a niggle? Is this a setback? [...] this constant like hyper vigilant every day, like what's going on in my body and I just kept being kept constantly let down by my body.

[...] it was just not wasn't playing ball at all. [...] I had accept reality and to stop playing and tthen it was a constant thing then after that I've gone kind of hating my body hating myself just being totally at odds with my body. Going this fucking lump of shit, let me down.[...] There's no fixtures. I don't need to be pain free just to go and sit in a pub. The more I drink or do drugs, the less pain I feel. And it was just kind of a mess, just my relationship with my body, then for years, it became quite difficult.

## (ii) Grieving & Separation

When reflecting on the expectations of their career and the initial transition from football, all participants expressed feelings of loss and regret, with Participant 1 and 3 noting that the grieving process had to take place to reach improved psychological wellness. Participants also conceptualised their retirement as a separation of a relationship, or a 'breakup'.

*"I wasn't just walking away from the career that I was having. I felt I was grieving the loss of the career that I could have had."* (P1)

Participants displayed explicit and implicit aspects of the grieving process in their transition from football. P1 reiterates the process that had to take place, "The bitterness of how my career ended is been overtaken by the gratitude that it happened [...] And it took a long, long time to get there [...] But the stages along the way were difficult [...] like the grieving process had to take place.". This is mirrored by P3 when asked for any closing statements, "I just have down here, I wanted to say... Like that... It's like a death. I feel that it's nearly like a death like you know, because I've completely let go of football now."

The current study is going to use some of Kübler-Ross's (1970) stages of grief as reference in understanding each participants individual challenges with career termination. Particularly; Denial, Bargaining, and Acceptance. The stages are not present in every participant's data, and do not sequence chronologically.

Both Participant 1 and 3 presented explicitly with denial. Participant 3 initially told himself that his early retirement was just a good thing, but soon he began to struggle without structure and purpose to his day:

Yeah I'd say probably the first three months was a holiday and was like, 'God this is great, I can go gym, I can go for a drink' [...] So I initially I thought 'Oh this is great', but that was quite a childish way of thinking... Yeah, it slowly changed.(P 3)

He may have been in denial of the reality of his situation. Participant 1's experience of this stage was slightly different. His retirement came in two phases, his initial injury in March 2002, and then his retirement in September 2003.

I got an injury. And I was told within a month by the surgeon this possibly career-ending. I didn't even tell my family [...] I didn't tell the [Club] physio. [...] And my approach was ignore it, overcome it, just stay playing, there's not going to be an issue. [...] My mum was over, I didn't even tell her it was my last game [...] I didn't tell my girlfriend at the time that I was retiring.



This stage is characterised by the inability to accept the reality and consequences of your loss. P1 may have been avoidant of telling anybody about the finality of his situation, as it would mean he would have had to face the reality of the end of his footballing career.

The bargaining stage of grief was present in P1 and P2. A major characteristic of the stage is experiences of regret, 'What if?' questions, or rumination of what one could 'done differently' about their loss. When discussing former teammates, who subsequently had major success within football, P2 remarks, "You'd see [former teammate] you think that could be me [...] there was no difference ability wise [...] I was actually ahead of him, but there he is and here I am." Furthermore, when discussing his overall image of self, and if there was anything he would have done differently regarding his transition, P2 noted, "You hear lads saying 'I don't have regrets', to me that's a lie, everybody has regrets [...] I should have stayed, got me head down, got fit. That's a regret of mine, I feel I downed tools."

Participant 1 also discusses thinking in the hypothetical sense when asked about his career expectations being met:

How many more times would I'd have played for Ireland? What club would I've gone to? It was tough, it left me with all those 'what ifs' [...] if you're sitting there thinking 'what ifs' you can go wherever with answer. There's no time limit on how long you can ponder those questions. And I racked myself for years with those questions. There was a lot of feelings of unfulfilled potential.

Both Participant 1 and 3 conceptualised football, or their career as a footballer, as a previous relationship that had ended. Initially, they said, "I've often used that analogy, like this

relationship ending and it just felt really, really difficult to accept.” (P1), and then likewise P3 stated from the outset of the interview, “It’s been like a bit of a break up from a relationship.”

Both go on to expand on these statements as the interview went on:

I think the work I’ve done through counselling has helped me let go of football, [...] I realised in life, if you’re in a relationship and it’s not a very healthy one we can hold on to them because it’s all we know or you’re comfortable [...] it’s very hard to go, do you know what, I don’t need that anymore, that’s not right, I’m going to move on. (P3)

Participant 1 recalls of a similar experience when talking about social encounters with his teammates while he was injured and then after he retired:

I’d meet them and their discussions would be training that day [...] dressing room dynamics, all the stuff important to them. Obviously, they keep discussing it and I felt like it’s like hanging around with your ex. Why would you put yourself through the torment of sitting with them, you kind of just have to make a clean break.

Participant 3 echoes this sentiment of being constantly reminded of the loss when he was exposed to anything football related, “ To let go of that [Football], it was like the breakup of a relationship [...] Like when I see someone with a tracksuit on, or kicking a ball, it’s kind of like seeing a toxic ex-girlfriend.” P1 then explains how this process of grieving was so difficult, because his identity was intrinsically linked to the object of loss that he was trying to move on from:

It was really difficult because football was just all around, not just in the TV, but it's what people spoke to me about, it what I liked, it's the natural thing I'd read in the paper, and so there's no real escape from it. Like if you break up with your ex, you can just forget about them and move to a different part of the world if you want.

But if the athletic identity is so high, it may be a necessary sacrifice for long term stability, as P3 refers to how he has reached a better place in his life now, "So I think since I've let go of the tag of being a footballer, I feel better in myself, because I'm not just a footballer, there's more to me, there's more to everyone, than the title we put on people [...] the past two years I've begun to accept and that I'm not just [Name] the footballer, I'm [Name], the whole person." Participant 1 also reached this stage of acceptance, "I'm an uncle, I'm a TV presenter, I'm a therapist and I'm a writer... Not just a footballer. I'm genuinely happy now."

### **(iii) Cultural Influences on Availing of Support & Coping**

*"I just thought my job was to just present myself to the world as someone who is going to deal with this."* – P1

When participants were asked about how they were supported during the period of their injury and career termination, answers varied. Participant 1, upon his retirement 18 months after first receiving his injury, recalls, "I sought support from nobody. [...] and there was no support at time, like a sports psychologist, at least at [Club Name] anyway." Furthermore when discussing organisational and club support he remarks, "When a footballer retires, who's jurisdiction does it fall under? Is it the player? The club? His schoolboy club? The [Organisational Body]?, The [National Organisational Body]? Well I fell through the cracks,

because I didn't ask anyone for help at all." Although taking a lot of personal responsibility for not seeking support, P1 does highlight the lack of practical support at the time contrasted to today, "There was nobody at the time who said, here's the number for a counselling service or here's a therapist. Or go and speak to that Health and Welfare Officer, there was none of that, but those roles exist now.[...] There was no appreciation of the emotional impact of retiring."

For Participant 2, he found support from family and close friends following his retirement. P2 recollected, "My girlfriend, who's now my wife, and my mam were the good supports. She let me move back in with her until I found something. I had a nice bunch of friends that were great with me after it all, so no more than anybody else?". He also availed of this support when transitioning into his next career, "Me cousin and uncle were building during the housing boom [...] he (uncle) started me off, got me a trade in that area.". Although social support was present for P2, he did express his frustration at his former club for not providing any practical or emotional support:

If there had have been more educational programmes that would have helped, as in to keep in or around the game. [...] It would have been nice to have something available or someone say, 'Listen you've got a great knowledge of injuries and what happens with the body composition, would you like to do a physio course?' I would've liked something like that to have been there.[...] And maybe someone to talk to about the whole thing, if I needed it.

Participant 3 primarily found support through his counsellor, and an ex-girlfriend. He expanded, "Through my counsellor mostly [...] I would have learned over time to trust my counsellor and would open up a lot more to her. She supported me, and still supports me to do

this day.” P3 was the most successful footballer in the sample, having played at the elite level of football for 13 years, so conversely to P1 and P2 upon his retirement he was offered practical support from his governing organisation, “There was lots of courses and jobs being offered [...] I was offered six sessions of counselling by the [Organisation Name][...] so there is an awareness there that it's going to be difficult.”. However, he did not avail of the support, presenting a similar attitude to Participant 1, “I kind of took the choice to go, I don't need you anymore. I'm gonna go do my own thing.”

Both Participant 1 and 3 highlight that the culture within football, to which they were exposed to for considerably longer than Participant 2, may contribute to the maladaptive attitudes towards seeking support:

You could have the best, shiniest, most well developed service across the road but everyone looks at it and says it's not an option for me. It doesn't matter how well structured it is, if the culture prevents you from knocking on the door saying I want what you have or I need help, it's useless [...] the culture at the time was that not only is this not needed but you're a fucking [derogatory slang] if you access them. – P1

Participant 3 gives insight to this culture when discussing former teammates and friends not keeping in touch following his retirement:

Like I could never go to anyone within the game and say I'm struggling and that [...] Let's take the child that feels though they might be put out of the group [...] I can't be in that group anymore because I don't play [...] When I'm the footballer, maybe I've no right to be in

that group but what about [Name] the friend, why can't they pick up the phone then? [...] I think sports, fame, prestige... Puts titles on people that can ultimately lead to separation. – P3

Participant 1 revealed that he eventually did start therapy but could not tell anyone within football because of the attitudes towards availing of support, "Those kind of words fucking [derogatory slang], fuckin' it's just weak. That word stigma [...] it would be seen a source of shame, sign of failure, or inadequacy, or weakness or just you're something at odds with what you're meant to be." Participant 3 shared a similar experience, "Maybe I could have been more honest. But I was afraid (of sharing) about drinking, taking drugs, depression... I didn't want to share any of that with anyone in football circles, because I was afraid of the judgement."

Both Participant's described that the way of life as a footballer at the elite level may be a contributing factor to maladaptive attitudes towards support, maladaptive coping skills and an overall emotional immaturity, "You're in a world as well where you're surrounded by people who tell you things like, you're great, you focus on Saturday, but let us do the rest [...] it's quite infantilising, it's quite belittling of people [...] I know you're an adult, but we're gonna treat you like a one trick pony if that's okay with you." (P1). Participant 3 describes this world in more depth:

They're not a functioning member of society [...] It's not making well-rounded individuals [...] Football is a bubble [...] When you're in that bubble, your institutionalised, you're kept safe [...] and you're mollycoddled. You're told you're brilliant and everything is moved around you so you can be at your best on the pitch, but it's not like that in the real world. The real world is a lot different.

Participant 1 and 3 both suffered with alcohol and drug abuse during and periods after their transition, with Participant 3 having to enter an addiction treatment centre. Participant 1 recalled his last day at his club, ‘I was in [Head Coach]’s office, I was in tears. He asked ‘What you gonna do now son?’ I said ‘Go get pissed and feel sorry for myself.’ And all he said was ‘You deserve it.’ And that was it, that was the way at the time, just go get pissed.’ Later in the interview, Participant 1 encapsulates his coping behaviours for a long period after his injury:

I think the drugs and drinking was to numb the emotional pain of having to retire. There’s an excitement... On a Thursday evening cracking open a can of beer, and you’ve got six days’ worth in the fridge. Taxi number where they can bring you anywhere. No, responsibility, there’s no end to this. You’re jumping on a train and God knows where it’s taking you. [...] You’re going ‘My life is shit, I’m not gonna have a job I like, everyone feels sorry for me. I can’t stop crying so fuck it. [...] It was my way of coping, to replace the buzz of football, to anaesthetise the pain.

This culture of stigmatisation of help-seeking attitudes and behaviours, and emotional vulnerability, coupled with the difficult transition of involuntary retirement, ultimately led to Participant 1 and 3 to develop maladaptive coping strategies.

## **Discussion**

The aim of the current study was to explore the experiences of former Irish footballers who were forced to retire due to injury and deselection and the impact this experience had on their self-concept. A secondary aim was to investigate what supported them through this period and were there any support systems put in place by their organisations or clubs. Upon analysing the interview transcripts, three overarching themes were identified: (i) *The Influence of Athletic Identity & The Impact on Physical Concept*, which was split into two sub-themes of *The Loss of Athletic Identity On Retirement Transition*, *The Negative Impact on Body Image*; (ii) *Grieving and Separation*; and (iii) *Cultural Influences on Availing of Support & Coping*.

All participants had some aspect of their self-concept impacted by their involuntary retirement from football. Those participants who presented with a high athletic identity had a more difficult retirement transition, more intense negative impact on their self-concept, experienced grief and separation more intensely, had difficulty availing of support, and developed more maladaptive coping mechanisms during this period. Conversely, the participant who presented with low athletic identity did not experience a difficult transition through retirement overall, but still had aspects of their self-concept negatively impacted, with feelings of regret, and frustrations with their body's performances more than a decade on from their retirement.

The first theme pertains to all aspects of the self-concept that were influential or impacted in the current participants experiences. The presence of a strong athletic identity negatively impacting the retirement transition is consistent with previous research which found the same loss of identity upon retirement (Sparkes, 1998; Lally, 2007; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997), particularly those who retired involuntarily while presenting with a strong athletic identity (Marin-Urquiza, Ferreira, & Van Biesen, 2018). Murphy, Petitpas, & Brewer in



(1996) discuss how athletes presenting with high athlete identity may interpret injuries more seriously as its an ‘attack on their sense of self’, and are more likely to view as a crisis moment. Participants in this study with high athletic identity showing unwillingness to avail of support, and feeling they can go through the retirement transition alone, is also consistent with previous literature (Brown & Potrac, 2009).

The negative impact on participant’s body image, or physical concept, corroborates with previous research which found body image difficulties in retired athletes (Stephan, Torregrosa, & Sanchez, 2007; Stephan & Bilard, 2003). Further research found these difficulties to be particularly intense in athletes exiting their sport (Buckley, Hall, Lassemillante, Ackerman, & Belski, 2019), with one research paper finding retired athletes attempting to return to their physical former self as a deterrent of increased intensity of body dissatisfaction (Papathomas, Petrie, & Plateau, 2018). Research in former professional footballers has suggested a regular exercise regime post-retirement as a protective factor to body dissatisfaction (Melekoğlu, Sezgin, Işın, & Türk, 2019). This further highlights the difficulty for the injured cohort of retired athletes, as seen in the participants in this study, even a regular regime of light exercise may be unattainable due to their injury history.

The second theme can be characterised as participants viewing the loss of their athletic career as grieving the death of a loved one. Furthermore, two participants conceptualised football as a previous romantic relationship, and upon retirement presented with all the characteristics of a person going through the separation of a relationship. Early research had conceptualised athletic retirement as a ‘social death’ (Rosenberg, 1984; Lerch 1982), citing the retirement phase being characterised by loss of one’s primary social role and withdrawal from the sporting social group (Drahota & Eitzen, 1998). This withdrawal is consistent with the experiences of two

participants in the current study. The current studies findings builds on top of previous research that found similar themes of complex grief and loss upon athletic retirement (Fortunato & Marchant, 1999; Yelsa, 1995). In the current study the participants who experienced the feelings and multiple stages of grief the strongest were also the participants who presented with higher athletic identity, suggesting a possible relationship between the two, but further research would be need to support this.

The final theme pertained to the participants support systems available to them upon retirement, and their help-seeking behaviours. Organisational and social support varied among participants. Those participants who competed at the highest level for a longer period, were offered more organisational support, but found it more difficult to avail of it. They also perceived less social support, as they felt family and close friends would not understand, and felt ostracised from their sporting social group. The participant who competed for the least time, and who also had lower athletic identity, had no difficulty in accessing his social support network, but was offered less organisational support. It must also be highlighted that his participant had more of a financial priority following his retirement, as he did not make a living income from football. This could be a significant factor in availing of the social support, and quickly transitioning into a new career. Consistent with previous research, social support was found to be aid in a smoother transition (L. Green, Robert S. Weinberg, 2001).

Another significant finding from this theme was the culture within the sporting environment predicated maladaptive coping behaviours and stigmatised help seeking behaviours. The unwillingness to avail of support and seek help with transitions is consistent with previous research (Kola-Palmer, Lewis, Rodriguez, & Kola-Palmer, 2020; Weiss & Ekerdt, 2005). Stigma towards help-seeking attitudes has been found to be prevalent in sporting environments

(Gulliver, Griffiths, & Christensen, 2012). Research has also found male dominated sporting environments to predicate averseness to help-seeking and maladaptive attitudes towards mental illness (Jones, 2016). These findings have important implications for sports psychologists and policy makers. It is clear in some cases, the individual may have access to support, but they are unwilling to avail of them when they need it the most. Research has found mental health literacy and education around transitional challenges as an athlete are beneficial in reducing stigma in sporting environments (Bu, Chung, Zhang, Liu, & Wang, 2020).

### **Implications**

There are a number of implications to be drawn from the current study. For sports psychologists and mental health providers, the presence of the grieving process for involuntary retired athletes may inform future practitioners treating this cohort to approach the treatment through a grief lens. It also informs practitioners that when engaging with this cohort that they may be presenting with issues regarding many aspects of their mental health, such as loss of identity, body dissatisfaction, isolation and grieving. This research may also inform football clubs, sporting organisations and policy makers on the importance of mental health literacy and education pertaining to the retirement process. Currently only two elite Premier League clubs, Crystal Palace and Southampton, have player after care programmes in place for young footballers who retire early through injury or deselection. It is not an unusual story present day to hear about a former footballer who had difficulty in their retirement transition or substance use problems, which indicates growth and diminishing of stigma, but there is still a number of practical interventions that can help alleviate these crises in the first place.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Further Research**

A major strength of this research was its qualitative approach. This allowed for participants to express freely their idiographic experiences of retirement, resulting in the complex expressions of grief and separation. Allowing the participants to speak at length about their experiences provided the research with rich data that a quantitative approach may not have provided. This same strength applies to the findings on the help-seeking attitudes being influenced by the culture. The participants were able to expand and describe in depth their experiences of their sporting environment. This research also helped build on self-concept and retirement transition research and fill a gap in the Irish literature which previously wasn't accounted for.

Limitations of this research was firstly it's small sample size. Through the course of recruitment there were eight cancellations for interviews. This may indicate a bias sample, as the participants that partook in the study were former footballers willing to speak about their experience of retirement. The data is not generalisable to all involuntary retired athletes as it doesn't account for those unwilling to speak. It is also not generalisable as all participants in the study were male. The averseness to help seeking attitudes may not be present in a female sporting environments, and due to the gender inequality pay gap, female athletes may be under more pressure to transition quicker due to financial reasons, or may already be skilled in another career alongside football, as many female footballers also work part-time jobs.

In conclusion, this study recommends further research should be undertake to investigate the difference in help-seeking attitudes in female sporting environments contrasted to male environments. Prospective research could also employ open-ended questionnaires instead of interviews in attempt to recruit more participants. Subsequent should also attempt to investigate 'Athletic Identity' as an anchor for other co-morbidity issues. The presence of this variable may

be an initial predictor of proceeding difficulties. Further investigation should also explore the antecedents or early developmental risk factors for development of a high athletic identity, as a way to focus on early intervention.

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## Appendix

### A. Interview Schedule

#### A. Introduction/General

1. Tell me about your experience of retirement to date.
2. How did it feel having to transition from participating in your sport?

#### B. Self-concept/identity

##### Identity/Image

1. How would you describe yourself before your injury?
2. How would you describe yourself in this current chapter of your life?

##### Ideal Self

1. Do you feel your career lived up to the expectation you had prior to your injury/deselection?

##### Physical Concept/Body Image

1. How would you describe your relationship with your physical performance before your injury?
2. How do you feel about your physical performance at the present?

##### Social/Family Concept

1. How do you feel others view in this current chapter?
2. Is this different to when you were playing? **(If yes, how?)**

**Prompts:** (Family, partner, friends, ex colleagues, acquaintances, general public etc.)

#### C. Self-esteem

1. How do you feel about your image of yourself that you described?
2. How are these feelings different to prior to your injury?

#### D. Support

1. Where did you find support after your injury? (Family, friends, teammate, colleague)
2. How did you feel supported by your organisation/governing body after your injury?

#### E. Closing questions

1. Was there anything I haven't mentioned that you found supported you after your injury? **(If not, is there anything you would have liked available?)**
2. Is there anything you wish you had have done differently at the time of your retirement?

3. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about with regards to retirement that perhaps I have not mentioned?

**Prompts:**

Tell me more about that.

Can we explore that more?



## B. Demographic Questionnaire

**This will be a short questionnaire just to get a know a little bit more about you.**

**Age:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Gender:**

- Male
- Female

**Other:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Marital Status**

- Single
- In a relationship
- Married
- Divorced
- Separated

**Other:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Do you have children?**

- Yes
- No

**If yes, how many?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**For how many years were you competing at the highest level of your sport?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**How many years has it been since your early retirement?**

\_\_\_\_\_

### **C. Participant Information Sheet**

National College of Ireland

School of Business

Psychology Department (2021)

**Title of Study:** A Qualitative Exploration of the Impact of Early Career Termination on Self-Concept in Former Irish Footballers

**Student Researcher:** Steven Webster

**Research Supervisor:** Dr. April Hargreaves

You have been invited to take part in this study as outlined. The aim of this study is to explore the impact of involuntary retirement on self-concept in retired athletes.

This research is entirely voluntary, you have the right to withdraw at any point without penalty if feel you want to do so, and you are able to ask the researcher about any queries you may have at any point. You are also entitled to receive a full explanation of the study after your participation.

This study will take place in one session approximating 45 minutes in total. During these 45 minutes you will be asked questions relating to your retirement from your career and its impact on your self-concept, and supports you received at the time.

Self-concept can be defined as how someone perceives their own behaviours, abilities and identity of themselves and in contrast with others. Questions will be focused on how you perceived this during your retirement from your career.

The purpose of this research is to investigate if the termination of said career had an impact on self-concept, in areas such as self-perceived identity, self-esteem and body image. A secondary aim is to evaluate social and organisational support. The research aspires to add to previous research, but also to inform future research and highlight an important period for this cohort of athletes, to improve future interventions.

The questions asked in this study may cause you distress or upset and it is important to note that you can withdraw from this study at any time. Some of these questions will ask personal information about you that you may consider private or confidential. Therefore, we assure you that your answers will only be accessible by the researcher, the research supervisor and you if you wish to access.

You will be assigned an identification number that only you, the researcher, and the research supervisor will know. This number is used to protect your identity and ensure your privacy. All the data that is collected will be kept in password protected files on a password protected computer owned by the researcher. This information will be kept secure in accordance with the National College of Ireland Ethical Guidelines and Procedures for Research involving Human Participants and the Code of Professional Ethics of The Psychological Society of Ireland.

Any queries about the study or your participation in it may be directed to:

**Researcher:** Steven Webster

**Email:** x19502993@student.ncirl.ie

Once again it must be stressed you decide to withdraw from the study you can do so at your discretion at any point in the study.

#### **D. Informed Consent**

In agreeing to participate in this research I understand the following:

This research is being conducted by Steven Webster, an undergraduate student at the School of Business, National College of Ireland, under the research supervision of Dr. April Hargreaves

The method proposed for this research project has been approved in principle by the Departmental Ethics Committee, which means that the Committee does not have concerns about the procedure itself as detailed by the student. It is, however, the above-named student's responsibility to adhere to ethical guidelines in their dealings with participants and the collection and handling of data.

If I have any concerns about participation, I understand that I may refuse to participate or withdraw at any stage.

I have been informed as to the general nature of the study and agree voluntarily to participate.

There are some psychological risks to this study. I may be asked questions about potentially distressful times of your life. I am free to skip over a question or withdraw at any time.

All data from the study will be treated confidentially. The data from all participants will be compiled, analysed, and submitted in a report to the Psychology Department in the School of Business. No participant's data will be identified by name at any stage of the data analysis or in the final report.

At the conclusion of my participation, any questions or concerns I have will be fully addressed.

I may withdraw from this study at any time, and may withdraw my data at the conclusion of my participation if I still have concerns.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher: Steven Webster

Date \_\_\_\_\_

### **E. Debriefing Sheet**

I would like to thank you for participating in this research study. The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of involuntary retirement on Irish athletes' self-concept, and the supports received at the time of retirement process. During the data analysis phase, the ideas derived from each interview will be investigated and contrasted, to try and find some broader themes regarding self-concept and involuntary retirement. I repeat again that all data generated is fully anonymous and will be treated with discretion.

Should you have any further questions or concerns please feel free to contact me at x19502993@student.ncirl.ie or my supervisor Dr. April Hargreaves at April.Hargreaves@ncirl.ie for more information. You can contact me to access your data should you wish to view it under the Freedom of Information Act. Data will be stored for five years under NCI policy.

If you feel you need any help or support, don't hesitate to visit or call:

IACP (Counselling & Psychotherapy) - [www.iacp.ie](http://www.iacp.ie) - Tel: 01 230 3536

Pieta House - <https://www.pieta.ie/> - Tel: 1800 247 247

Grow (Mental Health Support & Recovery) [www.grow.ie](http://www.grow.ie) - Tel: 1890 474 474

**Steven Webster**

**X19502993@student.ncirl.ie**

**F. Thematic Map**

