

Case study of collegiate Division I diver: perseverance, acceptance, and shifting identity

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Abstract:

This instrumental case study focused on the experiences of John, a Division I collegiate diver and his battle with acrophobia, or fear of heights, as well as Wilson's disease. This condition causes the body to store excess amounts of copper in the body, especially the liver, which can lead to long-term damage to vital organs. Through thematic analysis of interviews, field notes, and participant observations, the central themes that emerged from the data were those of perseverance, acceptance, and shifting identities. John used a range of mental skills such as imagery, relaxation exercises, and exposure to heights in order to learn to manage his fear of heights. However, John also had to accept the fact that he was not chosen to be on the traveling team, would probably never fulfill the early expectations placed on him of becoming an Olympic diver, shifting identities from that of student athlete to that of student and diving coach, and a lifetime of managing a chronic disease. The instrumental case study allowed for an exploration into the sociological and psychological complexities of being a high-level athlete. This case study highlighted that helping an athlete from a sports psychology perspective is a complex undertaking and that athletes can have a combination of cognitive and motivational factors that impact their performance. This study could be useful for sport psychology consultants, athletes, and coaches working with athletes struggling with phobias and chronic illness and/or injury.

Keywords: *acrophobia, diver, identity, perseverance, sports psychology, Wilson's disease*

INTRODUCTION

This research study followed an instrumental case study design and focused on the experiences of John, an NCAA Division I collegiate diver, and his experiences of overcoming acrophobia or an extreme and irrational fear of heights (Depla, ten Have, van Balkom, & de Graaf, 2008). John's struggle with this fear dated back to when he was a young child and ultimately influenced his decision to retire from diving and to become a coach. The primary investigator, with a background in sport psychology, focused the research study questions and observations on what mental training techniques and skills John had used in order to overcome his fear of heights in order to compete at the Division I level of collegiate diving in the United States (Division I is the highest level of competitive collegiate sport in the U.S.). An instrumental case study design was adopted for this study because "an instrumental case study is the study of a case (e.g., person, specific group, occupation, department, organization) to provide insight into a particular issue," in this case an athlete overcoming acrophobia and Wilson's disease (Grandy, 2010). This case study followed John through his final season of competing and his decision to retire from competitive diving and focus on a career in coaching. In addition to focusing on his process of managing his acrophobia, the primary investigator also became interested in other sociological and psychological aspects of John's career as a diver. The instrumental case study design allowed for an exploration of the diversity of factors influencing John's performance and career as a collegiate diver, focusing not only a diver overcoming a fear of heights, but also on a young collegiate athlete dealing with Wilson's disease, a genetic condition that causes the body to store excess amounts of copper in the body, especially the liver, which can lead to long-term damage to vital organs (Rodriguez-Castro, Hevia-Urrutia, & Sturniolo, 2015), as well as unfulfilled expectations, pressures of balancing diving and other interests, and searching for future direction in his life. This instrumental case study design helped to capture the complexity of John's situation, and the study ended up exploring aspects of John's performance and identity that went far beyond his acrophobia.

METHODOLOGY

An instrumental case study design was selected in order to capture a meaningful, thorough, and in-depth look at the complexities of John's situation. Marshall and Rossman (2006) indicate that "in applied fields . . . a strong biographical element often drives the study" (p. 29), and it is important to understand the background and history of a participant's experience. Instrumental case studies provide an ideal methodology for researching

“real people in real settings” (Hatch, p. 6), and throughout this study, John was observed and interviewed in his sports environment, around the diving pool. This study was praxis driven and was intended to provide and prepare sport psychology consultants, athletes, and coaches with a better understanding of the complexities of a diver working through acrophobia, or working through similar mental performance challenges. This case study was conducted under a constructivist paradigm where the primary investigator recognized that “the objects of inquiry are individual perspectives or constructions of reality” (Hatch, 2002, p. 15) and that much insight and information can be gleaned from these perspectives.

The original research questions for this case study were intended to explore and better understand the experiences of Division I collegiate diver who had learned to manage acrophobia, at least enough to compete at a high level of diving. Typically, in an instrumental case study, “the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue” (Cresswell, 2007, p. 74). According to Willig (2008), in such studies, “the cases constitute exemplars of a more general phenomenon. They are selected to provide the researcher with an opportunity to study the phenomenon of interest” (p. 77). Willig believes that individuals who are experiencing this phenomenon “constitute suitable cases for analysis” (p. 77), and the case becomes the “concrete manifestation” of the phenomenon (p. 79). Originally, the phenomenon under investigation was John’s ability to overcome, manage, and deal with his fear of heights. However, as the case study evolved, it focused not only on a diver overcoming a fear of heights but also dealing with a chronic disease; it evolved into a study of a sometimes stressed out, disappointed, confused, and always complex 20-year-old athlete balancing the demands placed on his time, and seeking to deal with failed expectations and dreams while also searching for future direction and meaning in his life.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected through formal interviews, participant observation, and field notes. Six one-hour formal interviews were conducted with John over the course of six months. Typically, there was about a month between the interviews, and the principal investigator would typically observe John a couple of times during practices or diving meets in between the longer more formal interviews. The principal investigator would typically talk with John for 10-15 minutes during these observation periods, which were carefully recorded and written down as field notes later on that same day. The topics of the conversations were recorded, as well as notes about John’s body language, tone, and overall emotional state. The field notes were recorded in a notebook, and the six formal interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Although initially most of the interview questions focused directly on John’s fear of heights, as the interviews progressed, the questions focused more holistically on John’s experiences as a collegiate diver. Interviews two through six began with more general open-ended questions such as “tell me about how your diving is going” or “how do you feel about how your season is progressing?”

Data analysis involved multiple readings of the interview transcripts, field notes, and observations with the primary research highlighting the in vivo codes that emerged from the data sets (Glesne, 2006). The in vivo and sociologically constructed codes emerging from the data were then organized into dominant themes from the data. Smith and Osborn (2003) explain that when coding, it is important to note the number of times a theme occurs in the text, as well as to include “the richness of the particular passages that highlight the themes and how the theme helps illuminate other aspects of the account” (p. 76).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Themes were coded based on both frequency and richness of information to determine that John’s experience was not only a story of a diver overcoming acrophobia, but a layered story of perseverance, acceptance, and shifting identity. The instrumental case study of John is first and foremost a story of perseverance. He was a very successful junior diver who got a lot of satisfaction and confidence from his diving accomplishments. He brightened up when discussing the days when he was a nationally ranked junior diver traveling around the world to places like Canada and Brazil, soaking in the experiences of being one of the top young divers from the United States, and considered by many diving experts to be a potential future Olympian. After narrowly losing the high school state championships during his freshman year, he went on to go undefeated his next three seasons and reflected on the successes that he had.

For the next 3 years, I won every city and state meet and set the [name omitted] city diving record for the men, and it's still holding today. I was named Texas Roadhouse athlete of the week my freshman year, and when I got back from Brazil was a four-time all American.

He was accustomed to “always” being among the best, was used to being at the “highest level,” and expected to continue having many “big accomplishments” after his junior diving career. His was a success story, and he had the confidence, bordering on cockiness, that is often necessary for many athletes to reach the elite level of the sport. John had laid the foundation for what was expected to be a successful collegiate career and possible Olympic team member.

Perseverance

John's was a story of perseverance from early on as he had to overcome an extreme fear of heights that dated back to his earliest memories. Despite this fear, John learned how to overcome it and continued to work on it through the entirety of his collegiate career. John viewed this fear in a very mature framework as he did not see diving as bringing out his fear, but rather as helping him to deal with it. John explained, “Diving has definitely helped me cope better with my fear of heights, just from exposure to it.” He was also very vigilant about practicing techniques that helped him deal with the fear of heights. He explained some of what he did to deal with his fear:

I was doing a lot of my pre-practice stretches, and ab work and conditioning on the 10 meters. I dragged a mat all the way up those stairs and stretched out and tried to become more acquainted with the height. . . . I also did a lot of imagery and relaxation exercises in order to be as mentally prepared as possible to go up on the 10-meter platform, which is the highest that we have to dive from.

This is consistent with cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), which encourages individuals who are trying to overcome phobias to have exposure to the event or triggering mechanisms of the phobia (Weinberg & Gould, 2015). It also supports the research that suggests that imagery, visualization, progressive muscle relaxation, and other anxiety reducing techniques can help with a phobia like an acrophobia (Black, 2018). John diligently adhered to these training techniques and exercises throughout his final two collegiate seasons in order to not let his fear of heights control him.

John faced a much greater obstacle to his diving when he was diagnosed during his freshman year of college with Wilson's disease, a genetic disorder where the body stores too much copper, and it can be fatal if not treated. John briefly mentioned his illness during his initial interview for this study but did not open up about it until the second interview. During the second interview, he used words such as “frightened,” “scared,” “confused,” “angry,” “helpless,” “mad,” and “frustrated” to describe his emotions as he had when he had to drop out of school due to illness and was not allowed to dive for almost a year. Diving had been such a huge part of his life, and it was very difficult for him to have to step away from it for a year. He described the difficulty of dealing with his illness and having to take time off from diving:

That was hard for me to deal with, and then besides that, dropping diving. I had been diving every day for close to eight or nine years at that point, so that's just like my life. It was almost like leaving everything behind and hoping it would be there when I came back.

John's story is one of perseverance as he came back, enrolled again in school, and started diving once again. After returning to diving, however, John admitted that while he still loved diving, he also realized that his diving skills were behind where they had been before he had been diagnosed with Wilson's disease: “Yeah, my diving had gone downhill quite a bit.” He knew that he was not on the same level anymore with the guys that he had been competing against and defeating for junior national titles a few years earlier.

Acceptance

John's case was not only a story of perseverance, but it was also one of acceptance. As the case study progressed, what emerged was the story of a relatively young athlete dealing with the reality that he would never fulfill the expectations that he once had and that he was an athlete in the transition from being the star to taking on more of a supporting role. His description of how he felt during this time incorporated words such as “relief,” “acceptance,” and “realization,” as well as being “better off” and having the “pressure off,” which contrasted significantly with his memories of being the young athlete who “was always put on the starting

lineup” and who was “always” used to being one of the best. At the beginning of the case study, John seemed full of optimism about the continuation of his diving career, as he stated, “I am excited and nervous and am ready to travel and be with the team and to see what happens.” However, the night before the first traveling meet, John got a call from the coach leaving him off the traveling team.

Although he emotionally withdrew from his team for a few weeks, about a month later when he was interviewed again, he stated that it was actually a good thing that he was not traveling because it allowed him to get caught up with school and helped him to keep a better balance with everything. Although he was saying these things with the words that he spoke during the interview, the principal investigator’s field notes included the following description of John’s demeanor: “John was saying that everything was fine, but there was still a look of disappointment in his eyes. He looked at the ground a lot, and he seemed to be hurting over this, but was trying to convince himself that it was really for the best.” It appeared that John had lost a lot of motivation and drive after not making the traveling team for his university.

As time passed over the course of the study, John used the word “relieved” multiple times to discuss the fact that he was not on the traveling team. His fight and determination waned, and it looked likely that he would have even less of a chance of making the traveling team the next semester. He explained his situation:

We have two nationally ranked French divers that look like they will probably be joining us in January. It would be great if they come because it would really help the team. Um, it would mean that there is pretty much no way that I could be on the traveling team, but really that’s okay. I can still dive into the home meets and see how I can do.

John further used the phrases “better off” and “pressure off” to emphasize that he really felt a sense of relief to not have to worry about the pressure it took to be one of the top divers and part of the traveling squad. Although divers are part of a team, it is still very much an individual sport with individual honors, and John’s language and attitude represented a major shift from the athlete he described himself as once being.

John continued to dive in home meets through much of the time frame of this case study, and he dived in the last big invitational meet of the fall. As John was interviewed for the final time for this case study, a few days before the final invitational of the year, his words going into the meet were “I’m going to make a go of it, and I’m going to try to do well.” These were not the same words that would have come out of his mouth as a confident sixteen year old, but instead were the words of an athlete who had persevered and was still willing to give it a go. John finished a very respectful 8th place and seemed relieved that he would now get a break for a month. He used the word “breaking” six times during the final interview and stated:

I can’t wait for the break, you know. Everything seems to be breaking down. My body is breaking down, I’m tired, my family is moving, my sister is having issues, I’m moving out on my own for the first time, and everything seems to be happening at once. I just need to make sure that I don’t fall apart during finals, and then I can deal with everything else. John’s perseverance was notable, but there was also a fragility to his situation. This was particularly salient during the final interview in which John had the added stress of the end of semester pressures, as well as transition and change going on in his family and personal life.

Shifting Identity

In addition to being a story of perseverance and acceptance, John’s was also a story of shifting identity. So much of his identity had been that of a diver, but towards the end of this case study, John was searching for jobs and activities that would give him the same feelings of satisfaction and purpose that diving once had. Diving no longer provided him with the same sense of accomplishment and pride, and he was actively looking to fill that void. For the better part of a decade, John saw himself as a “diver” and a successful one at that. Even through the course of the interviews, his talk shifted as he focused less on a conversation about diving and more on the many other commitments and interests that filled his life. During the final interview, John stated:

Before it was all diving. Really that’s all that I would do. Diving meant everything to me. Now I want to make sure that I do well in school, I work at the movie theater, and I would like to do some more acting [he did some when he was younger]. My aspirations are also more looking at being a diving coach right now rather than a diver. I thought that the kids would be really annoying, but now I actually can’t wait to get there and help them out.

John's life had become more complicated than when he was younger, and his primary focus had been on diving. Part of this was a healthy move to maturing and having a diversity of interests, while some of it is also was a way for him to deal with the disappointments of not being at the level of diving that he had expected of himself. At the end of the case study, John had decided to become a diving coach and shared the lesson plans that he had come up with for some of his young divers. John seemed the most excited that he had been since the initial interview when he described his early success as a diver. He was someone who seemed to really enjoy helping young divers and seeing them improve. John stated, "I'm still diving because I love it, and I want to be a diving coach. Now it is my turn to help other young divers improve." He set up a detailed plan for his young divers, which included video analysis and extensive one-on-one attention and feedback. John's closing words in the last interview were "trust me I know it's crazy, but of all the things I have going on, this is what I am looking forward to the most over the break. The pool is still my retreat, and now I get to help others, which is really cool."

John was a very complex and interesting case study. His is a very layered example of a once promising athlete persevering through fears and health concerns, accepting and dealing with unfulfilled expectations of the diver that he thought that he would become, and a shifting identity from that of the diver to coach, student, and whatever else his future had in store for him. The complexity of John, the diver, as well as John, the person, made him a fascinating case study and sheds light on the many identities, responsibilities, and demands placed on Division I athletes competing in the United States.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The instrumental case study design allowed for a broader and in-depth understanding of a combination of factors that impacted John's performance and, ultimately, motivation to continue training and competing at the Division I level of collegiate diving. Further study could have focused even more in depth on the tensions and relationships that John had with his family, more on his decreasing expectations as time progressed, more on his dealing with Wilson's disease, and more analysis and discussion of his fear of heights. However, this case study ultimately provided insights into the intertwining factors that influenced John's diving career and the recognition that athletes are not defined by one challenge or situations, but the interplay of many sociological and psychological factors. For this study, the three themes that stood out the most and were most significant were John's perseverance in being able to manage a fear of heights and the implications of being diagnosed with Wilson's disease in order to dive again at the collegiate level, as well as his acceptance of his performance states and limitations, and his shifting identity from diver to student and coach. Future research could focus on other case studies of athletes dealing with similar phobias or health issues, and cross-comparison of themes between cases could be very insightful for coaches, sport psychology consultants, and athletes.

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