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Transnational Athletic Career and Cultural Transition

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Transnational movement of sports participants is an important dimension of the internationalisation and globalisation processes in sports industry and also has become a crucial element of athlete professional development in the 21 century. Since Bale and Maguire's (1994) pioneering work on athletic talent migration, sports sociology and human geography scholars made strides in mapping international movement flows of skilled sports migrants. Furthermore, with a recent shift in sports labour migration studies from macro to micro-sociological perspectives, there has been an increased interest in agency and multidimensionality of migrant professionals' life and work experiences across national borders. However, research on the psychological aspects of transnational career development and transitions is a fairly recent phenomenon. As Ryba and Stambulova (2013) noted, there is a void in sport psychology with regards to understanding psychological mechanisms which produce (subjective) transnational careers, in part due to methodological nationalism—that is, a traditional view on talent and career development as contained within national borders. To fill this gap in the literature would require (1) "refocusing the study of athletes' careers on processes and connections between psyche and context" (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013, p. 13) in order to understand how psychological processes are enacted by social institutions and

cultural patterns, as well as (2) opening up the 'local' field of psychosocial phenomena to processes that occur above and below the level of the nation. In this contribution, we review the sport psychological literature on transnational career development and cultural transitions and also provide suggestions for how receiving sport organisations as well as sport, exercise, and performance psychology (SEPP) professionals can support migrant athletes in cultural transitions.

Theory

Transnational Athletic Career

The closely intertwined relationship between temporary international migration and professional development of employees has emerged within transnational corporations and has become viewed a key mechanism for the career advancement of some highly skilled workers (Beaverstock, 2005; Vertovec, 2004). The extended internationalisation and globalisation of private as well as public business practices have been forging the production of growing forms of labour migration also in the sports industry. Migration scholars have increasingly studied movement of work migrants from a transnational perspective, emphasising short-term contracts and regular border-crossing activities that migrant athletes establish between the countries of origin and destination (Agergaard, 2017). Although many international sports organisations facilitate the transnational movements of athletes and their entourage by, for example, incorporating temporary migrations in their training, development and upskilling programmes, transnationalism is understood as a bottom-up process of globalisation in which migrants and their households create multiple ties between sending and receiving societies (Carter, 2013; Smith & Guarnizo, 2006). Therefore, Agergaard and Ryba (2014) suggested that a transnational athletic career should not be taken as an international career when the nation-bound athletes start competing in international competitions; and asserted that transitioning from a national to a transnational career is

particularly crucial for those who have limited professional opportunities in their country of origin. Thus, albeit the movements and experiences of individual transnational athletes result in distinct career patterns, it could be argued that transnational careers are self-produced and situated in migratory practices and processes that cross the borders of one or more nation-states.

Cultural Transition

As transnational flows of sport migrants have dramatically increased, Stambulova (2016) proposed to conceptualise cultural transition as a quasi-normative career transition; that is, cultural transitions have become an expected part of most elite athletes' career development. The production of mobility and adaptation to a (temporary) receiving site are critical for initiating and maintaining the transnational career because migrant athletes are expected to 'fit in' by quickly creating social relations and situated knowledge in order to sustain their levels of performance. However, psychological mechanisms underpinning the cultural transition have been poorly understood. Working from a critical realist meta-theoretical perspective, the present authors conducted several published (e.g., Ronkainen, Harrison, & Ryba, 2014; Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, & Ng, 2012; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selänne, 2015; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013, 2014) and unpublished projects that led to development of the empirical Model of Cultural Transition for highly skilled transnational migrants (see Fig 1; Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen, 2016).

[insert Fig 1 about here]

The temporal model depicts three phases of cultural transition: pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, and sociocultural adaptation. The pre-transition phase refers to activation of psychological mobility which can involve various ways of planning for future relocation and psychological disengagement from the athletes' current origin. The two latter phases occur post-relocation; acute cultural adaptation refers to the phase shortly after the relocation

when athletes learn to fit into the team and broader society, whereas sociocultural adaptation occurs when athletes establish a longer term settlement and intend to stay more permanently. Each transitional phase presents developmental tasks that shape acculturation pathways. The authors theorised that three underlying mechanisms facilitated the cultural transition: (1) repositioning in social (transnational) networks, (2) negotiation of cultural practices, and (3) meaning reconstruction. These three basic processes are viewed as adaptive responses that can manifest within a range of culturally patterned behaviours and discursive practices. Together, they sustain adaptive human functioning.

Research

Psychological research into transnational athletes' development and experiences of cultural transitions rapidly increased within the last decade when it was recognised that migration had become a common practice for many sport participants and a quasi-normative career transition in the elite sport pathway (Stambulova, 2016, 2017; Ryba, Schinke, Stambulova, & Elbe, 2018). There are a handful of studies that examined the transnational athletes' athletic career (Ryba, Ronkainen, & Selänne, 2015) and dual career (Ryba, Stambulova et al., 2015) development, which are reviewed first, followed by the review of the more extensive literature on cultural transition and acculturation experiences.

Ryba and colleagues (Ryba, Ronkainen et al., 2015; Ryba, Stambulova et al., 2015) drew on narrative career construction and life design (Savickas et al., 2009) to trace the gendered pathways of professional and elite migrant athletes, revealing the complex socio-cultural underpinnings of transnational careers. Although the participants pursued transnational migration primarily to advance their athletic careers, many also considered education and lifestyle opportunities in the receiving societies important. A gender-specific pattern was discerned where young women's experiences often conflicted with both traditional feminine norms and cultural scripting of a 'good life', whereas young men's life

choices aligned better with societal expectations and were more often supported by important people in their lives. With student-athletes, Ryba, Stambulova et al. (2015) identified three different pathways—that is, within EU mobility: the sport exile; and mobility to the U.S.A.: the sport mercenary and the nomadic cosmopolitan—by employing the direction of geographical movement and the typologies of sport migrants, developed in the sport labour migration research (Maguire & Falcous, 2011), to signify meanings associated with the choice to migrate. In both studies, the authors' analysis indicated that various career discourse practices (e.g., performance, dual career) exist alongside each other in the transnational space, but being uniquely reconstructed in subjective careers to bring meaning and authenticity to individual life projects. The aforementioned research contributed to a better understanding of the agentic capacities of individual subjectivity to enact its cultural and social multiplicity in producing transnational careers.

With respect to cultural transitions, a number of studies started to identify specific stressors and challenges that transitioning athletes encountered in the new cultural reality. For example, studies illustrated the challenges in 'fitting in' and adjusting to new training routines and playing style of the new team (e.g., Battochio, Schinke, McGannon, Tenenbaum, Yukelson, & Crowder, 2013; Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013; Richardson, Littlewood, Nesti, & Benstead, 2012; Schinke, Gauthier, Dubuc, & Crowder, 2007). Khomutova (2016) also explored coaches' perceptions of working with migrant athletes, illustrating value differences between foreign and domestic athletes/coaches, the potentially problematic ways in which coaches addressed race, and the existence of ethnic subgroups in multicultural teams. In addition to sport-related issues, studies also described various broader challenges such as learning a different language, adjusting to a different diet, doing shopping and trying to understand the local cultural norms (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Light, Evans, & Lavallee, 2017; Schinke et al., 2011). Studies commonly described the

experiences of loneliness, especially after the initial excitement associated with the receiving site has diminished (Kontos & Arguello, 2010; Schinke et al., 2007).

Schinke and colleagues (2013, 2015, 2016) started to study cultural transitions through the lens of critical acculturation (Chirkov, 2009) where acculturation is understood as a nonlinear and ongoing process involving moments of satisfaction, dissatisfaction and ambiguity. Their research sought to illustrate the fluid processes of acculturation and the context-specific and unique ways in which athletes adjusted and made sense of their new situation. For example, some athletes constructed their cultural transition as a condition for fulfilling their athletic dreams, narrated their country of settlement in a positive tone and became increasingly distanced from their countries of origin (Schinke et al., 2013, 2016). However, other stories demonstrated the complexity of acculturation experience, inequality of opportunities and the difficulty of developing a sense of belonging which could not be established by being an official member of the team alone (Schinke et al., 2016). Their study also demonstrated the precarious nature of athletic careers and the conditional acceptance of athletes dependent on the continuous ability to keep performing and contributing to team success (see also Ekengren, Stambulova, Johnson, & Carlsson, 2018; Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).

A body of literature drawing on the concepts of cultural transition and acculturation also specifically focused on experiences of Indigenous athletes who migrate to a mainstream cultural context (Blodgett et al., 2014; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Light et al., 2017; Schinke et al., 2006). For example, Campbell and Sonn (2009), as well as Light et al. (2017), examined cultural transitions of Indigenous Australian athletes from learning to play in local communities shaped by Indigenous culture to the global culture of the Australian Football League and National Rugby League. Although geographically in the same country, the profound cultural differences constituted a border that the athletes had to

cross. The authors indicated the ways in which the mismatch between the athletes' own, inherently cultural, mode of being and their new social and cultural contexts manifested in challenges in the athletes' performance and lives outside their sport. With Canadian Aboriginal athletes, Schinke et al. (2006) moreover showed that, in addition to self-management (e.g., adjusting to a different sport structure), the athletes also sought for resources from their environment including culturally relevant social support and peer acceptance. These studies illustrated participants' feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from their home culture and the challenges of countering racism and negative cultural stereotypes in the mainstream Euro-Canadian and Australian cultural context. The culturally appropriate data collections techniques, such as the use of mandala drawings (Blodgett et al., 2014; Blodgett and Schinke, 2015) allowed research participants to connect the research encounter with their cultural ways of knowing, therefore giving them space to choose how to best express their cultural transition experiences.

Ryba and colleagues (2012) were the first authors to explore cultural transitions from a transnational lens. Focusing on experiences of acute cultural adaptation (ACA) of Finnish female swimmers who relocated for a short-term training camp in Australia, the authors explicated the socially constructed nature of the cultural transition and how the adaptation process was primarily facilitated by the athletes' experience of relatedness, through which their psychological needs for competence and autonomy were also met. The transnational framework was subsequently used to explore both elite (Ryba, Stambulova, et al., 2015; Ryba et al., 2016; Ronkainen, Khomutova, & Ryba, 2017) and non-elite (Ronkainen, Harrison, Shuman, & Ryba, 2017) athletes' cultural transitions. With elite athletes, Ryba and colleagues (2016) conducted extensive life story interviews to map the temporal processes of cultural transition (pre-transition, ACA, and sociocultural adaptation) and to understand the developmental tasks at each phase facilitating adaptation. It was observed that those who

migrated for non-athletic reasons prioritised different tasks; moreover, relational contexts at both the destination and places left behind were implicated in acculturation trajectories, influencing migrant athletes' motivation and psychological well-being. In a subsequent study, Ronkainen, Khomutova et al. (2017) analysed a professional and an amateur athletes' transition experiences through the cultural transition model. Drawing on the cultural relational paradigm (Schultheiss, 2007), they suggested that relational contexts (of family, teams and transnational networks) were crucial for the successful navigation of cultural transition and reconstruction of meaning in the sport life projects.

In studying non-elite athletes' experiences of transnational migration and its implication for their athletic (runner) identities, Ronkainen, Harrison et al. (2017) showed that three overall transition narratives (possibility, necessity, and growing up) shaped meanings assigned to running in the host site. Two sport-specific narratives (community and running to feel like oneself) provided the participants resources for sustaining well-being and developing new meaning in running separated from performance-oriented discourses of the sport. Also for non-elite athletes, however, their sport life project remained a central dimension of their identities, which highlights that sport-related concerns in cultural transition are not only relevant for elite and professional athletes.

Taken together, the aforementioned research problematised linear models of adaptation and illustrated the fluidity of acculturation pathways with moments of progress and return to confusion as new experiences are encountered (Schinke et al., 2016). It was shown that acculturation may take place in different ways, either requiring the (im)migrant athlete to do all the work of adaptation, through limited reciprocity, or through immersed reciprocity where people in the host site equally shared responsibilities in facilitating the cultural transition (Schinke & McGannon, 2014). It was suggested that immersed reciprocity was potentially the most adaptive approach that could engage both parties in learning about each

other's cultures and become aware of their own cultural standpoints. The studies adopting a transnational approach have argued that transnational athletes' transition experiences may differ from those of settled immigrants: that is, while all migrants tend to engage in on-going cross-border mobilities, settlement intent is likely to mould psychological openness to further mobilities if an opportunity (or need) arises. Transnational networks and centrality of acquired identities (of an athlete or a student/professional) rather than the country of origin often shape the stories of transnational athletes' cultural transitions, providing them with resources to develop psychological continuity amidst change. Given that they may not have an active intention to settle in the receiving site, their degree of integration (e.g., in terms of learning the local language and community engagement) may also differ from immigrant athletes. These patterns of cultural transition have different implications for sport psychology consultants working with transitioning athletes, which will be addressed in the next section.

Supporting Athletes in Cultural Transitions

Moving from research to applied field, we will focus on four interrelated questions: *why* athletes need support in cultural transitions, *who* provides this support, *what* kinds of support athletes need depending on type of mobility and their temporal situatedness within the transition, and *how* to provide such support in order to facilitate meaningful transition experiences. Existing literature provides many useful insights to answer these questions; and our intention is to summarise the best of them.

Answers to the question "why?" can be traced from the cultural transition/acculturation research demonstrating that each case of international migration (e.g., for a professional sport contract or education and sport abroad) is perceived by athletes as an important milestone in their career construction and also as a kind of adventure that opens new opportunities, but also brings challenges putting career progression under threat (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ekengren et al., 2018; Ryba, Stambulova et al., 2015; Ryba, Ronkainen et al., 2015). The

typical emotional reactions to geographical/cultural relocation include being overwhelmed with numerous changes, feeling alone, disconnected, at a loss and not being the "normal self"(Ryba et al., 2012; 2016; Schinke et al., 2007). Consequently, migrant athletes may need help in the pre-transition phase to increase their awareness and readiness to what athletes call a "culture shock" at the acute cultural adaptation phase (Ekengren et al., 2018). A cultural transition shapes other concomitant transitions (e.g., athletic, academic, psychological, psychosocial) by integrating their demands (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ryba, Stambulova, et al., 2015), and it is not rare that athletes cannot cope on their own and appear in a crisis-transition marked by a set of sub-clinical symptoms (e.g., chronic emotional discomfort, decrease in self-esteem, disorientation in decision making and behaviour – Stambulova, 2003). In the crisis situations social and especially professional support is crucial to prevent development of clinical mental health issues (e.g., deep frustration, burnout, depression, suicidal intentions) requiring a long and serious treatment (Schinke, Stambulova, Si, & Moore, 2017; Stambulova, 2017). As a result, athletes may return home not finishing education or accomplishing a professional contract and perceiving a cultural transition as athletic career or even life career rupture. Therefore, *whys* of providing with support in cultural transitions are many and relate not only to lives of individual athletes but also to a global level of sport and sport industry (e.g., a number of successfully accomplished professional contracts vs. dropouts).

Cultural transition is a social affair, and many people and organizations are involved in, and expected to, support transitioning athletes (Ryba et al., 2018). In reality, as research shows, family members, especially spouses/partners, as well as friends from the home country are major providers of social support, and the athletes' coaches, agents, experts (e.g., sport psychology consultants) and transnational networks deliver both social and professional support, especially in the pre-transition and acute cultural adaptation phases (Battochio et al.,

2013; Blodgett et al., 2014; Ekengren et al., 2018; Ronkainen, Khomutova et al., 2017; Ryba et al., 2012; Samuel, 2013). But the further athletes come along the cultural transition process, the more they rely on support of their new teammates, coaches, friends, and experts at the destination and get more distant from the home support network (Schinke et al., 2013; 2016). This tendency might be seen as related to their social repositioning, participating in cultural practices of the receiving society, and meaning reconstruction (of words, phenomena, concepts and situations) that altogether move them closer to understanding the local life and better psychological functioning (Ryba et al., 2016). Research shows a crucial role of acculturating environment in providing support to transnational migrant athletes. Especially, the coaches as team/group leaders should facilitate creating an open and autonomy supportive motivational climate in the receiving environment that helps to integrate the newcomers (Elbe et al., 2018; Ryba et al., 2018). On the organizational level, logistic and professional support (e.g., from the sport club or university) can be expected but it is not always the case according to research studies (Schinke et al., 2016). It is important to note that all the mentioned social agents can also be sources of short- or long-term pressures and stress for the transitional athletes. Sport psychology consultants are seen as professionals who help to navigate social influences and facilitate acculturation and performance (Kontos & Arguello, 2010; Schinke & McGannon, 2014; Schinke et al., 2015). Below we will focus on what kinds of support migrant athletes need and how SEPP professionals might help.

The ISSP Position Stand on transnationalism (Ryba et al., 2018) provides useful information for SEPP professionals by explaining distinctions between athletes' short-term *mobility* (e.g., traveling abroad for a competition or a training camp), long-term *migration* (e.g., working on a professional contract abroad), and *immigration* (moving abroad with an intention for a permanent stay). Transnational athletes with mobility and migration experiences go through cyclic acculturation processes, where each new cultural transition

potentially adds to their resources to cope with the following ones. The SEPP consultants might help them to learn from their successful and less successful acculturation experiences to prepare them to become more autonomous and self-reliant in the future. For example, many athletes reflect that not knowing local language at the destination is always a barrier to their acceptance by the hosts and hinders own feeling of belonging (Ekengren et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2011). Therefore, in addition to proficiency in the English language that is helpful almost everywhere, learning a basic vocabulary of the host country language might be recommended and supported even for a short-term stay (e.g., traveling to the Olympic Games) but it is a key issue for the athletes who intend to immigrate.

The content of SEPP consultants' assistance with cultural transition may vary depending on the cultural transition phases as well as with whom they work. For example, for those planning long-term migration and especially permanent settlement/immigration, the decision making process (i.e., to go or not; if yes, on what conditions) can be difficult, and the consultant might help to negotiate this decision with sport related stakeholders on both sides and (sometimes even more important) with family/partners (Ronkainen, Khomutova, et al., 2017). With respect to short-term mobility, the decision to go is typically derived from the athlete's plans and only if some adversities get under way (e.g., not fully healed injury) the consultant's support in the decision making can be appreciated.

Facilitating mobility/migration/immigration decision-making is just one aspect of the SEPP consultant's support in the pre-transition phase with the other one being informational support both before and after the decision (Ryba et al., 2016; 2018). The more information about the country, climate, city, club, culture, team, coaches, potential teammates and educational mates, living and financial conditions the athletes get in advance, the more informed and responsible their decisions are, and the better they can prepare themselves for the relocation. The consultants might use their professional networks to get necessary

information or help the clients to sort out information from different sources to identify gaps or contradictions that need clarification. The consulting situation can vary depending on whether or not the consultant travels with the athlete. This is also known as “mobile practice” meaning that both the athlete and the consultant will be undergoing the cultural transition (see more in Ryba et al., 2018) and will be able to work on-site which might be beneficial compared with the distant work if the consultant stays at home.

After the relocation (i.e., in the acute cultural adaptation phase) most athletes would benefit from emotional support to decrease feelings of loneliness; reflective dialogues to do the “work of cultural transition” (i.e., to analyse and sort out their initial experiences), and acute help with performance issues and various everyday adversities. In the case of the athlete’s long-term migration or immigration it would be useful to get in contact with the local consultant in the athlete’s new environment and if possible to cooperate (at least during the beginning of the athlete’s adaptation). Keeping in mind that a typical trajectory of cultural transition is non-linear and acculturation is a fluid process, the further the athletes move through it, the more help they need in the mental construction and reconstruction of their values identities, and lifestyle. These processes are often uneasy, and the SEPP consultant (preferably at the destination) should be able to enhance the athletes’ awareness that adaptation to a transition takes time as well as does the psychological work of regaining the equanimous mind and the sense of home in a novel sociocultural context (Ryba et al., 2016). As criteria for the athlete’s adaptive/maladaptive acculturation, the consultant might use performance indicators (e.g., playing time) and satisfaction of basic psychological needs of competence, relatedness, and autonomy (e.g., optimal functioning in new environments, meaningful relationships within the receiving community) that reflect the athletes’ mental health, well-being, and adjustment (Ryba et al., 2018; Schinke et al., 2017).

The cultural transition process is "relational, meaning that it does not merely unfold, but is rather constructed within a transnational sociocultural field" (Ryba et al., 2016, p. 149). Therefore, the question of *how* to support transnational migrants is about how to facilitate these construction processes; for example, supporting the migrants' negotiation of their cultural life scripts with opened-up discourse practices at the destination to make self-changes while keeping authenticity of the self. To stimulate the athletes' meaningful "work on the cultural transition" (Ryba et al., 2016), SEPP professionals may utilise different forms of account making, such as art-based and narratives approaches (e.g., Blodgett et al., 2014; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Carless & Douglas, 2008; Lavallee, Nesti, Borkoles, Cockerill, & Edge, 2000). For the benefits of their athlete-clients, consultants at the destination should be able to discuss the cases with the athletes' previous consultants (e.g., former settlements), and therefore, development of a transnational consultants network could be on the agenda for international sport psychology organizations.

The consultants at the athlete's receiving site may play an important role in optimizing the club or team environment by promoting ideas of "shared" or two-way acculturation (Schinke & McGannon, 2014) with coaches and teammates from receiving environment being truly interested in the migrants' cultures and initiating the intercultural exchange and sharing (e.g., peer mentoring, joint social events). This approach is opposite to "shouldered" acculturation when the newcomers are left alone and/or confronted with racism, exclusion, and stigmatization from the receiving side (Ryba et al., 2018; Schinke & McGannon, 2014). Yet, SEPP professionals should also keep in mind that the culture of elite sport and the hegemonic masculinity ideals might hinder the newcomers' support-seeking as athletes are taught and often expected to be tough and self-reliant (see Ronkainen & Ryba, 2017).

The work of a cultural transition is specific but also comparable with other athletes' transitions, and therefore, approaches, methods, and strategies developed in career assistance

(e.g., Stambulova, 2012; see also the relevant entry in this section) can be involved in delivering services to athletic migrants. The “must” for SEPP professionals is to use *a holistic approach* with focusing on the whole person (Wylleman, Reints, & De Knop, 2013) and the whole environment (Henriksen & Stambulova, 2017), *an individual approach* rejecting stereotypical understanding of athletes, and *an empowerment approach* with increasing autonomy support, making athletes more confident in their decisions and feeling in control.

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