



Finding one's footing on foreign soil: A composite vignette of elite athlete acculturation



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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The focus of this manuscript is the challenges associated with newcomer athlete acculturation within a sport system. The research question was as follows: What acculturation challenges do immigrant athletes have to work through as they attempt to integrate into new sport environments and facilitate their athletic careers within shifting cultural dynamics?

Design: The research was framed as a critical acculturation project (see Chirkov, 2009a, 2009b). The project aligns with broader calls in sport research for innovative qualitative approaches that reveal the complexity and multifaceted aspects of acculturation. Using creative non-fiction (e.g., a composite vignette), this project sought to illustrate the fluidity of acculturation, based on athletes' stories.

Methods: Conversational interviews were gathered and an interpretive thematic analysis was performed. The data were then developed into a composite vignette to illustrate the fluidity of the athletes' acculturation experiences.

Results: The acculturation vignette revealed four major themes: (a) navigating the Canadian Sport System without local support, (b) adjusting to new sport programs and training approaches, (c) dealing with cultural differences in Canadian athletes' mindsets, and (d) searching for balance.

Conclusions: This project reveals how immigrant elite athletes experience continuous acculturation. These fluidities are best captured through emerging methodological approaches, where acculturation can be storied as non-linear.

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Athlete acculturation is quickly becoming a central topic in sport psychology due to the transnational movement and migration of developing, elite amateur and professional sport athletes (Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013; Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selanne, 2015). These relocated athletes bring religious, dietary, linguistic, and dress habits acquired in their countries of origin into cultural exchanges with athletes and coaches from the receiving culture (Kontos, 2009; Schinke, Yukelson, Bartoloacci, Battocchio, & Johnstone, 2011). Immigrant athletes then enter into their receiving sport contexts, and these are situated in broader sport systems (Schinke, McGannon, Battocchio, & Wells, 2013; Yukelson, 2008). Schinke et al. (2013) and Brandão and Vieira (2013) have found that the stress load and awkwardness that ensues among these newcomers and sport participants from the receiving culture can then layer onto the performance

related stress for all concerned (i.e. not only the relocated athletes, but also their peer athletes and coaches from the receiving cultural context). Though athlete acculturation might be regarded as stressful, it can offer enrichment in terms of a wider diversity of cultural and sport practices, whilst creating a space for athletes' cultural identities to be centralized through sport, which could in turn contribute to performance enhancement (Schinke & McGannon, 2015; see also Rudmin, 2009).

Sport psychology scholars have recently begun to examine the topic of elite athlete acculturation (e.g., Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013; Schinke et al., 2011). This line of scholarship began with the applied experiences of sport psychologists working with immigrant athletes relocated to one receiving country – the United States (Kontos, 2009), though it should be recognized that this topic is becoming increasingly important to sport psychologists across countries (Ryba et al., 2015). Athletes relocate to a larger number of developed countries, as they pursue educational opportunities and sport careers. The intended focus of the foregoing research was largely on supporting these athletes, including their heritage

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identities, as they navigated the sport contexts embedded within their new cultural context (Ryba et al., 2015; see also Blodgett & Schinke, 2015). In addition to literature on “settler” athletes, literature from the fields of sport sociology (e.g., Magee & Sugden, 2002; Weedon, 2011) and sport psychology (e.g., Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Battochio et al., 2013; Meisterjahn & Wrisberg, 2013) has been written about sojourners, who relocate temporarily to pursue opportunities in professional sport. One project also focused on acute cultural adaptation when athletes visited a receiving country for only a few weeks (Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, & Ng, 2012).

While there are many definitions of acculturation within anthropology and psychology (Chirkov, 2009a), there is consensus that it is a lengthy process characterized by stress, resulting from relocation and a confrontation with unfamiliar cultural practices (Berry, 1997; Rudmin, 2009). The most encompassing definition of acculturation found by our authors, reveals that it is a lengthy process of “... second culture acquisition” (Rudmin, 2009, p. 109). Layering onto the aforementioned description, acculturation is also a social process among people who are newcomers and those from the receiving country (Berry, 1997; Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010), that is fluid, and undertaken in local contexts (Chirkov, 2009b).

According to recent critical perspectives regarding acculturation, the focus within this project, the acquisition of second culture learning is not achieved over a finite period of time; it can resurface each time a new or unfamiliar practice is encountered (Chirkov, 2009a; Rudmin, 2009). The athlete re-enters acculturation each time an unfamiliar social convention is asked by peers and coaches, or when training practices, such as a strange structural format, are undertaken in a manner that does not match with formative experiences (Schinke et al., 2013). Within sport contexts, this same outlook toward acculturation, as a process without an end point, reveals that it is prevalent throughout the relocated athlete's entire career, whilst in a receiving country. The newcomer athlete is always navigating norms and practices of two worlds; the experiences and practices derived in the home country and the less familiar practices useful in the receiving country (Schinke et al., 2013). The fluidity caused by these two competing sets of norms is further complicated by the educational and skill levels newcomers bring to their receiving countries, with less educated people more challenged by the receiving country's societal expectations to contribute value (Steiner, 2009). Precisely, these people have been regarded as bringing less immediate value to the receiving country, due to their limited formal training. This is not to say, however, that current skills and future skills are synonymous. Also layered into a critical approach to acculturation, Rudmin (2009) proposed that acculturation needs to be examined locally, as opposed to being regarded as a singular cross-cultural phenomenon shared experience across all people, regardless of national background. In the current project, acculturation is contextualized in a national sport context, where particular expectations are asked of athletes, including compliance with culturally infused training practices and standards (Schinke et al., 2013).

Some of the formative sport psychology research focused on acculturation has been undertaken not with immigrant athletes, but with Canadian Aboriginal (see Blodgett et al., 2013; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015) and Australian Aborigine athletes (see Campbell & Sonn, 2009; see also Hanrahan, 2009). This indigenous focused scholarship delineated how athletes from marginalized cultures encountered elite sport level contexts in a mainstream culture that historically served to marginalize them. From such efforts, a few brief points relate to this project. Among these, the best-regarded acculturation experiences were ones where relocated athletes entered into shared acculturation with athletes and coaches from the receiving cultures (Schinke et al., 2013; see also Chirkov,

2009a). Contexts that place the onus of acculturation solely onto the athlete, serve as catalysts to acculturative stress, isolation, and performance decline (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Coholic, 2014).

1. Situating the project

More recently, the acculturation scholarship within sport psychology has included approaches that reveal how projects might be undertaken to provide a more holistic, elaborative, and critical understanding of this complex process as fluid, aligned with the previously mentioned definition (see Chirkov, 2009b). The criticisms leveled at much of the scholarship follow below, and a more elaborate review can be found in Chirkov (2009b), where the author identified contentious issues in relation to conceptualizations, epistemological approaches, and methodological practices, followed by suggestions. First, acculturation appears to be understood as a linear process that culminates in resolution (i.e. a type of acculturation as found in Berry, 1997; see Rudmin, 2009). Second, acculturation is also often paired with acculturative stress and framed as a negative process for the relocated member and also those from the receiving cultural community. Though acculturation can be negative depending on how it is navigated, the move on the part of the relocated person and the enrichment to the receiving cultural context might also be regarded as a positive change when compared with the newcomer's previous living condition (Rudmin, 2009). Third, acculturation research is often undertaken psychometrically, where richness in the understandings of the social and historical aspects is limited. Parsimonious approaches have been heralded because they simplify acculturation as a universally shared process (Rudmin, 2009; Weinreich, 2009). Qualitative approaches that focus on the idiosyncratic aspects, meanings, and social exchanges would augment what is presently known about acculturation. Finally, what is known about acculturation can have limited utility for people committed to easing (and sharing in) this process (Chirkov, 2009b).

Though these omissions have recently been discussed in relation to psychology literature as compared with sport psychology, similar concerns resonate in sport psychology, where acculturation is taking place among athletes and coaches (Schinke et al., 2011). Yet, sport psychology consultants, national teams, and broader national sport systems have yet to develop a full appreciation of how best to support these athletes in their development and in acculturation. Undertaking such research would create opportunities for acculturation processes for immigrant athletes and those from the receiving culture, while providing a broader understanding of how best to develop an inclusive, multicultural sport context. Strategies that support positive acculturation might also retain relocated athletes in sport systems, thus augmenting training and competition standards at the local, national, and international levels (Schinke et al., 2013).

This manuscript is part of a funded project conceived to examine the aforementioned concerns, to develop a richer understanding of immigrant athlete acculturation, from the vantage that it is a fluid and continuous process. Though recent work identifies this fluidity (e.g., Schinke et al., 2013), scholars have yet to extend explorations through the integration of a methodological approach that reveals how this fluidity is storied as athletes enter into and begin to navigate acculturation, with one exception (see Ryba, Stambulova, & Ronkainen, 2016). Understanding these navigations provides sport psychologists with a better understanding of how to support immigrant athlete retention and psychological adjustment. The particular focus in this manuscript is the challenges associated with newcomer athlete acculturation within a sport system. The current athletes were asked to share meaningful acculturation stories,

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