



“When you're coming from the reserve you're not supposed to make it”: Stories of Aboriginal athletes pursuing sport and academic careers in “mainstream” cultural contexts



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 11 March 2015

Keywords:

Cultural sport psychology
Praxis
Indigenous
Student-athlete
Dual career

ABSTRACT

Objectives: This project responds to the call for athletic career development and transitions research that centralizes the constitutive role of culture in athletes' experiences (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Within, we explore the cultural transitions of Aboriginal hockey players (14–22 years old) relocated into “mainstream” (Euro-Canadian) cultural contexts to pursue dual careers as students and athletes.

Design: The research was framed as a cultural sport psychology initiative. The project was rooted in a local Indigenous decolonizing methodology, which was brought forward via a participatory action research approach.

Methods: Mandala drawings and conversational interviews were employed as open-ended data collection processes that enabled the participants to share their stories and meanings through their own cultural perspectives. Vignettes were then used to present their accounts.

Results: The participants' careers as athletes and students were precariously navigated within larger cultural tensions to: (a) deal with a loss of belonging in the Aboriginal community; (b) break down negative stereotypes and attitudes that Aboriginal people are not able to “make it”; and (c) give back to the Aboriginal communities they relocated away from.

Conclusions: Through a culturally resonant mode of knowledge production, the research uncovers contextual understandings of the cultural transitions experienced by Aboriginal athletes, revealing how this transition intersects with and shapes their dual careers. The project offers insight into the central role of culture in shaping athletes' dual careers, and provides impetus for more idiosyncratic approaches to be adopted in future research.

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Introduction

Reflecting the increasing globalization and mobility of society, there is a growing trend of athletes moving across national and cultural borders to pursue sport aspirations as well as broader life opportunities (Ryba, Stambulova, Si, & Schinke, 2013; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013a). These border crossings can be understood as critical and cultural turning points, or transitions, in athletes' careers. As Wylleman and Reints (2010) explained, transitional events (in general) define athletes' careers because they confront athletes

with questions about what/who they are and what/who they want or ought to be, and bring forward new demands and challenges related to their development. Specific to the cultural transition, Adler (1975) noted that individuals who move across borders are likely to experience new demands and challenges related to cultural change, reflecting their attempt to comprehend, survive in, and grow through immersion in a second (host) culture. Individuals must make sense of a new culturally-constructed reality which is different from the one they were originally socialized within, and attempt to create a meaningful position for themselves *in* and *between* their home and host contexts (for contextual examples in sport, see Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, Coholic, et al., 2014; Schinke, McGannon, Battochio, & Wells, 2013). Their career decisions and development, within and outside of sport, therefore unfold within larger (shifting) cultural dynamics that are part of a

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cultural transition (Ryba, Stambulova, Ronkainen, Bundgaard, & Selanne, 2014).

Given that athletes are people who are pursuing other goals and activities in life in addition to sport (Stambulova & Ryba, 2013b; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), their relocation is not always driven exclusively by sport aspirations. More commonly, as intimated above, athlete relocation is predicated on dual career aspirations. Ryba et al. (2014) defined the dual career as “the challenge of combining a sporting career with studies or work, which remains a source of concern for most high-performance athletes” (p. 1). At the crux of this definition is the assertion that integrating dual careers is a highly precarious activity. A number of national studies have affirmed this assertion by highlighting the difficulties and constraints athletes experience as they seek to combine sport with educational/vocational careers and successfully manage transitions within each career context (e.g., Aquilina, 2013; Christensen & Sørensen, 2009; Cosh & Tully, 2014; Debois, Ledon, & Wylleman, 2014). However, researchers have scarcely accounted for the cultural transition that is catalyzed by athletes who relocate across physical and/or discursive borders to advance their dual careers. The few exceptions include Ryba et al.'s (2014) examination of the dual career pathways of transnational athletes in Nordic countries; Agergaard and Ryba's (2014) research on transnational career development in professional sports, drawing on women soccer players' experiences; and Ryba, Haapanen, Mosek, and Ng's (2012) exploration of acute cultural adaptation experienced by Finnish swimmers during short-term relocation. Each of these studies, in addition to recent conceptual writings (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2013b, 2014), highlights the pertinence of cultural transitions in shaping athletes' careers. There remains a need to further explore how the cultural transition process is experienced by athletes in diverse contexts, and how it intersects with and compounds the intricacies of navigating dual careers.

It is important to explore how cultural transitions coincide with relocated athletes' dual career experiences because “implicit in the conflict and tension posed by the transitional experience lies the potential for authentic growth and development” (Adler, 1975, p. 14). Reciprocally, if these transitions are not navigated and coped with effectively, they open up potential for a host of negative consequences including social and cultural withdrawal, career disruption, identity foreclosure, premature sport dropout, neuroses, mental breakdowns, and stunted growth and development (Adler; Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009). More than a determinant of athletic success, an athlete's ability to cope with transitional demands and challenges has pertinent implications for their well-being and development on psychological, psychosocial, and academic/vocational levels (Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004). Thus, by exploring the cultural transitions of relocated athletes, more meaningful knowledge can be developed around how to support diverse athletes in their dual career pursuits (recognizing their distinct needs and broader life circumstances) and facilitate positive developmental outcomes. These efforts would contribute to the larger movement within sport psychology to become more culturally attuned and embracing of diversity, as advocated under the auspices of cultural sport psychology (CSP; Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2014; Ryba et al., 2013).

CSP and the cultural praxis of athletes' (dual) careers

CSP is a contextually informed mode of inquiry that is developed within local cultural contexts to generate knowledge more deeply aligned with the lives of diverse (often marginalized) sport participants (Ryba et al., 2013). The overarching intent of CSP research is to challenge the ethnocentric biases of traditional sport psychology paradigms which have long excluded the experiences and

subjectivities of various participants, such as those from minority racial and ethnic groups who relocate into “mainstream” sport contexts to pursue careers. This CSP agenda intersects with and can be used to inform dual career research on the cultural transitions of border-crossing athletes, where emphasis is on recognizing the sociocultural contexts of athletes' lives and accounting for diversity in career development (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Indeed, it is generally acknowledged within the career transition literature that athletes' career development and transitions are always culturally situated, and that knowledge is therefore contextual rather than universal (Ryba & Stambulova, 2013; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Much cross-cultural scholarship has affirmed this cultural perspective by highlighting differences as well as similarities between athletes' careers and transitions in different countries (see Stambulova & Ryba, 2013a). Moving beyond the cross-cultural scholarship, however, there has been little consideration of culture as an internal process (more than an external entity) that fundamentally shapes athletes' sense of self and the way they create meaning around their dual career experiences and transitions.

From a CSP lens, it is necessary to shift away from simplistic categorical understandings of culture and to re-conceptualize culture as part of shifting discourses and exchanges that produce situated meanings (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2014; Ryba & Schinke, 2009). This re-conceptualization better accounts for the fluidity and multifaceted nature of athletes' identities and lived experiences, and how these are subject to change in different sociocultural settings (Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Schinke, McGannon, Parham, & Lane, 2012). When integrated into dual career research, this understanding can foster insight into how athletes' thoughts and actions regarding their careers and transitions are (re)negotiated and (re)articulated within shifting sociocultural dynamics and discourses (Ryba & Schinke, 2009).

To begin advancing more in-depth CSP projects, it has been suggested that researchers move away from the (post)positivist paradigms that have long been favored within career research, and engage in interpretivist modes of inquiry (Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Stambulova & Ryba, 2014). Drawing attention to the subjective and socio-culturally constructed nature of meaning and knowledge, these latter approaches demand that contextualized research processes be engaged to facilitate localized understandings of diverse sport participants. To date, only a handful of studies have employed such idiographic cultural approaches to elicit the cultural nuances in athletes' careers and develop local insights into how their experiences can be enhanced (e.g., Carless & Douglas, 2009; Nicholson, Hoye, & Gallant, 2011; Ronkainen, Ryba, & Nesti, 2013; Schinke et al., 2006). Furthering these initial efforts, it has been recommended that scholars integrate local interpretivist approaches with a praxis sensibility in order to blend theory/research with applied work and lived culture (Blodgett, Schinke, McGannon, & Fisher, 2014; Ryba & Schinke, 2009; Ryba et al., 2013; Schinke et al., 2012). In particular, Stambulova and Ryba (2013b, 2014) explicated the need for more comprehensive career research which considers theory, research, and action as interwoven and culturally saturated – a paradigm they refer to as the *cultural praxis of athletes' careers*. The paradigm is articulated as a set of conceptual and applied challenges that encourage researchers to embrace sociocultural differences, and generate knowledge that is meaningful in the lives of marginalized sport participants. These challenges have been engaged in recent dual career projects to elicit the meanings of transnational Nordic athletes (Ryba et al., 2014) as well as to embrace the local context of Swedish dual career programs (Stambulova, Engstrom, Franck, Linner, & Lindahl, 2014). Similarly, cultural praxis was taken up in the current work as part of a CSP approach to stimulate culturally resonant knowledge around the dual careers of Aboriginal athletes.

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