

In a Football Bubble and Beyond: Cultural Transition Pathways of Swedish Professional Football Players

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Abstract

The objectives of this study were: (1) to explore cultural transition pathways of Swedish professional football players relocated to another European country, (2) to identify shared themes/features in their transition narratives. We interviewed three professional players who in their early twenties relocated to Italy, Turkey, and Switzerland, and then analyzed their stories using holistic and categorical analyses following the narrative oriented inquiry (NOI) model. The holistic analysis resulted in creating three core narratives (i.e., re-telling of the participants' stories) entitled: Preparing for the worst-case scenario and saved by dedication to football; Showing interest for the host culture and carrying responsibility as a foreign player; and A step for personal development: from homesickness to being hungry for more. The categorical analysis resulted in 12 shared themes or features from the players' stories arranged around three phases of the cultural transition model. In the pre-transition phase, all the participants were established players searching for new professional opportunities. In the acute cultural adaptation phase, they all prioritized adjustment in football (e.g., fitting in the team, performing). In the socio-cultural adaptation phase, they broadened their perspectives and realized that finding a meaningful life outside of football was just as important to function and feel satisfied as football success.

Keywords: *acculturation, football, narrative inquiry, professional migrants, transition.*

For decades, football players relocate abroad to advance their careers, play in a higher-quality league, increase their income, and/or explore football in other cultures (Magee & Sugden, 2002). Despite this trend of sport labour migration, few studies have focussed on professional Scandinavian football players' pathways when they relocate to new cultural settings. Existing studies in professional football focused on players' transitions from Africa to Scandinavia (Ronkainen et al., 2019; Ungruhe & Agergaard, 2020), from Iceland to other European countries (Egilsson & Dolles, 2017), and from various countries to England (Richardson et al., 2012). *Cultural transitions* are currently classified as *quasi-normative* that means predictable for transnational, professional, and immigrant athletes (Stambulova, 2016; Stambulova et al., 2020); their predictability means that athletes might plan and prepare for these transitions in advance. A cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016; Stambulova et al., 2020) emerged in the literature in 2016, and the authors emphasized the importance of exploring cultural transition pathways within different sports contexts and called for more studies of this kind (Ryba et al., 2016). We see our study dealing with narratives of Swedish professional football players about their relocation to other European country as contributing to researchers' response to this call.

Cultural Transition Model and Research

In the cultural transition model (CTM; Ryba et al., 2016) the transition process is structured in three phases: *pre-transition*, *acute cultural adaptation*, and *sociocultural adaptation phases* with specific tasks in each. The authors also described three underlying psychological mechanisms involved in adaptive responses to the new cultural patterns, including (a) repositioning and calibration of social relations and networks, (b) negotiation of cultural practices, and (c) meaning reconstruction. In the pre-transition phase, athletes are still in their home environment planning, making decisions, and preparing mentally and physically for the geographical/cultural relocation. Upon arrival, the acute cultural adaptation phase begins, and athletes are then exposed to new cultural settings and trying to find ways to fit in. For example, in their new club/team they may encounter new values and norms that collide with their own, which then requires negotiation strategies to feel adjusted. This phase is often centred around excitement and curiosity as migrants see new opportunities, but also around feelings of homesickness and loneliness. This acute cultural adaptation process is ongoing as "continuous negotiation between maintaining a psychological homeostasis ...and engagement in sociocultural everyday practices of the host site" (Ryba et al., 2012, p. 83). After some time, athletes feel more adjusted and congruent with

the host culture's values and norms, and thus, enter the socio-cultural adaptation phase. Ryba and colleagues (2016) emphasized that the transition process is non-linear, and athletes might go back and forth between the two later phases. Therefore, the three-phase temporal structure of cultural transition can be seen only as a lens for analysing individual transition pathways, which in this study we define as dynamic transition experiences shared by athletes in their narratives and derived from their perceived interplay of related personal and contextual factors. The transition is also seen as fluid with only "a symbolic exit characterized by migrants' optimal functioning in novel environments" (Stambulova et al., 2020, p. 10).

The growing body of research in cultural sport psychology indicates that migrating athletes often experience a number of challenges arriving to the host site. For example, they start rebuilding a social network and have problems with communicating in local language (Ronkainen et al., 2019). Lacking language skills further contributes to limited communication and relationships, as well as to migrants' feelings of being isolated and lonely (Ronkainen et al. 2019; Schinke et al., 2017). Often upon arrival and during the first days or even weeks in the new sociocultural environment (i.e., in the acute cultural adaptation phase) athletes experience "cultural shock" which is described as being out of one's element (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015), feeling lost and wanting to return home (Ekengren et al., 2020), or as being overwhelmed by change (Blodgett et al., 2014). African, Aboriginal and Indigenous athletes also face stereotyping and racism when relocating to mainstream societies which inhibit their adaptation (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Engh et al., 2017). Another challenge for many migrants, especially in adolescence and early adulthood, is leaving home (e.g., family, friends, home club). Athletes recall missing out on activities and relationships which were ongoing in the home culture, which then contributed to feeling homesick and isolated in the host culture (Samuel et al., 2020). Aboriginal athletes likewise recall missing their family and home culture, while simultaneously dealing with jealousy, loss of support, and rejection from people back home (Blodgett et al., 2014). Other Aboriginal athletes felt pressure to succeed in their new location to not let people down back home and also to break negative stereotypes in the host site (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015).

Athletic migrants need to do many adjustments in their training, games, and other behaviours within their respective sport setting in order to fit into the new team/group/club physically, psychologically, and socially (Richardson et al., 2012). Sport related challenges might include (but are not limited to) adjusting to new coaching style and new training methods with (often) higher intensity and frequency of practices requiring athletes to invest additional time and effort to keep up with the rest of the team (Samuel et al., 2020; Light et al., 2019). The status of being a foreign player may also create a pressure to prove oneself worthy of the investments (Ely & Ronkainen, 2019). In a study by Light and co-authors (2019) Indigenous Australian athletes had to adjust their playing style and values of the sport in order to fit into the mainstream professional sport context. Instead of having freedom and creativity in the game (as in their home team), they had to follow specific structures and tactics, and abandon their athletic identity that was shaped by their home culture when they grew up. Differences in mentality have also been recognised with the host culture focusing mainly on winning and results rather than the athlete as a person (Ekengren et al., 2020; Ryba et al., 2016).

The support from family and close relationships were found important across all phases of the cultural transition, from decision-making to negotiating with new cultural practices, as well as when reconstructing meanings in their life (Ronkainen et al., 2019; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Further, Ryba and co-authors (2020) stressed that professional support (e.g. from sport psychology practitioner) is fundamental, especially during the pre-transition and acute cultural adaptation phases. The term *kindredness* was described by Campbell and Sonn (2009) in relation to Indigenous players who shared cultural background and values, were on the same team, and looked after one another on- and off the field. Schinke et al. (2013) suggested that the transition adjustment is facilitated when acculturation loads are shared between migrant and hosts (i.e., a two-way process) in contrast with so called "shouldered acculturation" when migrants are left alone to deal with all the adjustments. The hosts demonstrating limited reciprocity in communication and cultural practices expect the migrants to fully align with the host culture, which could cause identity confusion in migrants as their own culture is silenced (Schinke & McGannon, 2014).

European and Swedish Football Context

Football is one of the most popular sports in the world (Dvorak et al., 2000), and talented players may get opportunities to pursue their career abroad which is a life-changing event (Richardson et al., 2012). The Union of European Football Association (UEFA) explains that football is more than just a game, it is a passion that is shared among the people across borders, cultures and languages (UEFA, 2020a). The Swedish Football Federation (SvFF) points out that football is the national sport for everyone, everywhere (Fogis, 2020). In 2018, two hundred fourteen Swedish male players had professional contracts abroad, 25 playing outside of Europe (Eiman Roslund, 2018) as for the rest, 136 players were playing in a better ranked league compared to the Swedish league (UEFA, 2020b). Sweden's World Cup-squad 2018 had only players who were at that time playing abroad (SvFF, 2018). One reason for this could be that there are better opportunities abroad to play in a higher level, as the Swedish top league "Allsvenskan", was ranked the 23th in European football leagues (UEFA, 2020b).

Objectives

To briefly sum up, a cultural transition is viewed as a complex, ongoing and fluid process that has only a symbolic exit (e.g. Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ryba 2017; Stambulova et al., 2020). Adaptive responses involving social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and meaning reconstruction can be facilitated by shared acculturation approach and professional psychological support to decrease cultural stress and enhance enjoyment and performance (Schinke et al., 2012; Ryba et al., 2020). The SvFF provided organizational support to this study with an intention to use the findings for player education and preparation for professional cultural transitions abroad. The objectives of this study were: (1) to explore cultural transition pathways of Swedish professional football players relocated to another European country, (2) to identify shared themes in their transition narratives.

Methodology

Design

This study is focused on exploration of the cultural transition pathways of three Swedish professional football players following the narrative oriented injury (NOI) model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) with the researchers' positioning in

the relativist ontology (i.e., recognizing multiple realities), and social constructionism epistemology (i.e., co-construction of knowledge with an interest in “personal truth” instead of “objective truth”; Papathomas, 2016, p. 37). In the NOI narrative-oriented research process is described as having several stages such as, formulating the research objectives, creating the narrative type interview guide, collecting the data, transcribing and analysing the data, reflecting on the findings and presenting report. Accordingly, the participants of our study were asked to share their stories and reflect on their transition(s) across national borders as professional football players. The authors of the NOI model offered six approaches in data analysis, and to answer the objectives of this study we have selected the *holistic content analysis* (for the first objective) and the *categorical content analysis* (for the second objective). Below we describe the research process how it unfolded in our study.

Participants and Data Collection

To recruit participants, SvFF assisted the authors by contacting players who were of interest and met the following criteria: 1) they had represented Sweden’s national U21 team earlier in their career, and 2) they had made the transition to play professionally abroad. Six males were contacted and finally four agreed to participate in interviews via Skype. One player dropped out after an initial interview, and three players have become our participants. The participants named Kim, Eric, and Oliver (all pseudonyms) were successful junior players (met the first recruitment criterion) and in their early twenties got professional contracts in European clubs (in Italy, Turkey, and Switzerland).

A semi-structured interview guide was created keeping in mind the three phases of the cultural transition (Ryba et al., 2016) to facilitate the participants’ recollections and storytelling. After introduction, the interviewer (first author) began exploring the participants’ background with questions encouraging their stories and reflections about the football career, current life, and their football mastery (e.g., “Please, tell what you find important about your football career up to now”, “What your current life is about?”, “Please, reflect on why you are a good player”, etc.). These questions helped to learn about the participants as players and people, but also to establish relationships between the interviewer and the interviewees. After that, more specific questions were asked regarding the players’ cultural transition moving from Sweden to their first club abroad. In terms of the time before the relocation, we explored each player’s first contact with the foreign club, physical and mental preparation, and social support (e.g. “Please, tell about the time when you first got in contact with the foreign club?”, “What thoughts and feelings did you have?”). For the time upon arrival to the new environment, the questions were asked about their first impressions, challenging experiences, support and coping strategies (e.g., “Please, share about the first day you came to the new club/team. How did it go?”). Then the questions shifted to the participants’ feelings of adjustment and what it meant for them to be a professional player abroad (e.g., “What signs did you have for feeling adapted in the host environment?”). Finally, the players were asked to reflect upon the outcomes of their cultural transitions, and how related experiences facilitated the next

transfer abroad (if they had any), and what advice they would give to the players who plan similar transitions.

The first author contacted the candidates by mail to inform about the research aims, explain ethical issues, and arrange appointments. The present study followed ethical guidelines for social science research in Sweden. Ethical considerations, such as informing participants about their right to withdraw, keeping data safe and the participants’ identity anonymous, were explained. The study reveals the locations where the players migrated, but leave out information such as, name, age, football clubs, and year of arriving. One main and one-two short follow-up interviews were conducted with each participant by Skype (main interviews) or phone (follow ups) and audio-recorded. Main interviews lasted between 45 and 90 min, and follow ups between 10 and 20 min.

Data Analysis

To begin the analysis, the first author transcribed the recordings and e-mailed transcripts back to the participants for a review and reflections. All participants agreed to the transcripts but also clarified some points in the stories by e-mail or follow-up phone calls. The final transcripts were read several times to become familiar with the data and divided into segments (i.e., self-contained episodes). Then the first author conducted the *holistic content analysis* as prescribed by the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) that is she created so called *core narratives* by retelling a quintessence of each participant’s cultural transition story. The first author discussed each core narrative with the co-author and revised them several times until the stories sounded meaningful and comprehensive enough but not too long. Then in the *categorical content analysis* we shifted from the story-teller role to the role of story-analysts (see Smith, 2016) and created themes describing shared transition features from the three stories (Hiles & Čermák, 2008). Based on reading core narratives and referring to the full transcripts, 12 themes (see Table 1) were created inductively and then arranged around three phases of a cultural transition (Ryba et al., 2016) as shared features in the participants’ individual transition pathways. To support the themes, the first author read the participants’ transcripts again to ensure that no more themes arise. Then she translated relevant quotations into English. Finally, the themes and quotes were discussed between the co-authors, and the outcome of the categorical content analysis is shown in Table 1.

Reflexivity and Transparency

In the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) two key criteria are established to check the quality of the analysis: reflexivity and transparency. Reflexivity of both co-authors was an inherent part of the whole research process. The first author is a young researcher with moderate experience in qualitative research, but also with multiyear experience of playing football in Sweden and abroad (non-professional in Europe). The second author has extensive experience in cultural sport psychology and qualitative research, and she provided critical reflections throughout the whole research process. The first author had written notes after each talk to the participants with reflections on her initial impressions about them and thoughts regarding the interview process and the stories told (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Some of these reflections are presented in Findings before each core narrative. Transparency is another rigor criterion within the NOI,

which “means that not only must we be clear to others about what we have done and what we have found, but we must also be clear to ourselves. The critical issue for NOI is to make its procedures transparent” (p. 161). Above we described how we proceed through all the stages in the NOI except for the findings and discussion, which follow. More information for interested readers can be obtained from the first author.

Findings

Kim’s Cultural Transition Narrative

Interviewer’s reflection

I perceived Kim as a calm and organized man, who from the start of our conversation was engaged to participate and willing to share his life and football story. But he was not really talkative and often avoided long reflections saying, “This is just how it is”.

Kim’s narrative: “Preparing for the worst-case scenario and saved by dedication to football”

It was close to the end of the season, in which Kim and his team performed well in the top league of Sweden. Kim was in starting line-up every game and had been an important player to the team for the past five years. Kim’s agent had offers from clubs abroad already at this point, but Kim had other thoughts:

“It was when we were fighting for the gold and he [the agent] wanted me to go abroad... But I felt that, damn, I really liked it here, and was almost ready to sign a new contract with [the Swedish club] and stay, maybe not forever, but for a few more years”.

A few months passed, and Kim, keeping the talk to the agent in mind, began to be curious about playing abroad and explored the opportunities. He signed a contract with an Italian club that was interested in a long-term player and gave Kim four months in Sweden prior to relocation. During this period, he searched for information about Italy, started taking Italian language classes, and spoke to players who he knew had experience of playing professional football abroad. He learned that new teammates might not be friendly, and that people could promise things they would never do. Kim briefly summarized: “I imagined that it would be tough to play abroad, so I was prepared for the worst-case scenario”. One of Kim’s friends was that time playing in Italy and advised to be prepared for long days, lots of traveling, and tactical football. Meanwhile, Kim was still fully focused on performing for his Swedish team. Shortly before leaving, the Italian club confirmed that accommodation, transport and other things were arranged for his arrival.

A few days post-relocation, Kim and his new Italian team travelled to the mountains for pre-season camp. The schedule included long days with hard training along with recovery sessions, and he could start networking with teammates and coaches. Although many of them did not speak English, and Kim’s Italian vocabulary was still limited, the team was friendly and helped him to adjust. Kim felt lucky having support from the coach and two players in the team from which one player was from Sweden and the other player was his roommate. The roommate had played many years in Italian football: “It was nice to talk to him, he had been in Italy since he was 15, ...and he knew how everything was operated”. The Swedish player helped Kim organizing his life in Italy, in- and outside of football.

As Kim was learning about life and sport in Italy, it emerged that football was more than “just football”, and Kim witnessed a serious internal competition within the team:

“Football is almost like a religion in Italy. There was not much smiling, and nothing was “just for fun”. It was bloody serious every practice and every game. It was almost too much, maybe this is what I didn’t like. We were 20 players in the squad and only 11 could start in the games... So, the players did everything in their power to get a spot in the starting line-up. I would say that this was the biggest difference compared to Sweden, where many young players feel satisfied only by being in the squad. This was not the case in Italy where the hunger was high to be in the starting line-up”.

Kim understood he had to work hard, be patient, and stay focused on his long-term plan, “I gave it all in practice, I could never relax or mope around”. He needed to be alert and learn the tactics, strategies, and details on- and off- the field to be ready take the chance when given. During this time, he described living in a *bubble*, solely focused on football. He even did not notice that his girlfriend was struggling to adjust to the new environment until they reflected on this experience years later.

After six months in Italy, Kim felt comfortable to communicate and was able to pick up important information and build stronger relationships with the people around. He had learned that his teammates did not spend much time to socialize outside of football (in contrast to his teammates in Sweden), but he found joy in other life aspects: “Italy is kind of a nice place to live in, nice climate, the warmth, and the food. The days passed by, and my girlfriend and I developed good routines”. On the field, Kim developed strong and trusting relationship to his coach helping him to keep committed and stay focused. By this time, he had begun to accept the team’s culture, but he had to keep being tough to not let anyone “walk over him”. Dealing with daily issues in the host site was facilitated by the company of his girlfriend: “I’m very happy she was there with me, and I think if she wasn’t, it would not have been as good as it was”. Moving abroad made Kim reflect on his relationships back home, some relationships became stronger, whereas others faded. After Kim’s two years in Italy the coach left the team. Consequently, the long-term plan set up for Kim was about to change with the new coach, so he started to search for new opportunities elsewhere.

During two years in Italy Kim learned about the importance of preparing both body and mind for practices and games, balancing physical load and recovery to be ready to perform. Kim’s recommendations to players who might plan to move abroad were: stay focused on the task, be patient, and never give up: “When you’re given the chance to play, take it, if you don’t, you’ll have to work harder and take the chance the next time it’s given to you”.

Eric’s Cultural Transition Narrative

Interviewer’s reflection

Eric was a bright and energetic man, open to talk about his life and football career. Telling his story, he seemed both thankful and optimistic reflecting on his experiences. Although Eric seemed willing to share, he could during the interview excuse himself, needing to say goodbye to his wife or hello to his friend. It made me wonder if he was nervous to talk to me or felt more comfortable having people around him.

Eric’s narrative: “Showing interest for the host culture and carrying responsibility as a foreign player”

Eric had a meeting with the manager of his Swedish club to talk about the future. The manager wanted to keep him for some more years in the club, but Eric felt ready to take the next step in his career and then asked his agent to search for alternatives abroad. During next six months several

clubs had shown interest in having Eric, but he couldn't decide: "When I look back, ... I think I was not in the present. Instead... I was dreaming away and ... had difficulty to evaluate the clubs shown interest in me". The last day of the transfer window, Eric's agent confirmed that a Turkish club was interested. At this point Eric became excited, but his Swedish team did not want to release him. A long day of frustration, as the negotiation went back and forth multiple times, finished with the deal settled. The next day Eric and his agent was on the way to Turkey to meet new club's managers and the team.

The second day in Turkey, Eric joined the team in practice. He was filled with good emotions being on this new adventure. The season had just started, and he was about to be a part of something big: "For the first time in my career I was surrounded by players with amazing careers, ...excellent players that are well-known in football. It was very inspiring and exciting". The new team was about to play in one of the European cups making Eric's big dream coming true. After spending more time with the team, he realized that he had to learn Turkish and Spanish to be able to communicate. He recalled how one day his coach confronted him in the locker-room to test his language skills. Eric was eager to explore Turkish culture and the way of living, and he wanted to show that he was willing to learn:

"When I played in Sweden, there was a mix of players from different countries. The ones who tried to learn about Swedish culture and language were appreciated... Then, when I moved to Turkey, I thought about that, and I wanted to be one of those people, so I wanted to show that I was interested in their culture and language".

When Eric shared his memories about his first games in Turkey, it sounded like he felt being there again:

"Everything around you, every small barrier, things that could have been a problem, I mean, I didn't know the language or any names... it all disappears, and you absorb a football role... There is only one thing in your mind that is to win the game, it's a strange feeling. You can be exhausted and receive many tackles, but you do not feel any of that. It's like going into a war and your thoughts and pain go away".

After some weeks, Eric had earned an important role in the team, his Swedish "team-oriented" playing style was unique in the host team that was mostly based on players' individual qualities. He gained trust and respect among the teammates that helped him to adjust quicker. In Turkey, football culture is tough with the club and fans accepting nothing but good performance: "There were high demands on the players from the club, then players put high demands on each other". Off the field, a staff member assisted Eric to navigate the new city, finding accommodation, bank and phone, but also taught him useful words and phrases. The first few weeks, the team was traveling frequently, and life outside of football was not so important: "I do not remember having any thoughts about non-football life because it was such an incredible focus on football...Many things were prepared and well organized".

Eric started to settle in the city when he got his own apartment allowing him to build relationships both with teammates living close by and other neighbours. As time passed by in Turkey, Eric started to feel more comfortable and autonomous, requiring less help from the club. He began to think about what it meant to be a professional footballer abroad, in terms of increased responsibility towards the club and the fans. He realized that he needed to separate his athletic role from his personal life, to not harm his self-confidence:

"When playing abroad so much is based on football, and the most friends you have are from the team. Your name is recognized only based on football performance, so it is a great focus on how well you perform... In Turkey it was difficult to find something to live with outside of football and not letting football to affect my private life... It is easy when you are doing well in football, but when football goes with ups and downs you can easily fall into that feeling of ups and downs as a person with compromised self-confidence and stuff like that".

After two years in Turkey, the club was not satisfied with the team's result and indicated to make changes in the team leading Eric to think about other options. Experiences with the cultural transition to Turkey gave him confidence when transferring to the next location: "I came to a new club with a lot of experience and embraced the opportunity to show them how I liked to do things, what works for me and show that I have a lot to offer". He always kept in mind the importance of showing interest and willingness to learn about the new culture. He also witnessed how performance could influence the access to social and professional support: "If you're doing well, it's easy to find support. It's worse if you don't perform, then you might get alienated or become a benchwarmer".

Oliver's Cultural Transition Narrative

Oliver's Cultural Transition Narrative

I perceived Oliver as down-to-earth and laidback man, humble towards football and life. He seemed calm and took time to think before answering questions. I also understood that he was deeply connected to his home place with safety and comfort of being in his hometown among friends and family.

Oliver's narrative: "A step for personal development: from homesickness to being hungry for more"

The season in Sweden ended some months ago, and the transfer window was about to open. Oliver had no intentions to leave his Swedish club, since both Oliver and the team performed well the previous season. During the off season, he received a phone call from his agent saying that several clubs abroad were interested to sign him. Oliver's agent always had his eyes and ears open for new opportunities, and this time they decided to visit two of the clubs abroad. While not much interest arose visiting the first club, walking onto the pitch of the second club's stadium, Oliver got a special feeling "this is it". After speaking to this club manager, he felt that this team could match his development curve in football. Oliver had three days to decide, and he talked to his family, friends, and girlfriend about whether signing the contract would be the right thing to do. The thoughts about leaving the place where he felt safe and confident, made him feel nervous and insecure. However, his family supported him, and his girlfriend agreed to move with him:

"She had a job and everything in Sweden and she moved with me instead... she left her life back home to come with me. I reasoned a lot with her about this, and I asked her if she was ready, and she said "yes", and she also said that I could not miss this chance".

Oliver had come to a decision, signed the contract with the club he liked, and a week later he travelled to the new country to join his new team. He arrived in the beginning of pre-season, and the team was about to travel for a training camp. These days were intense and uncomfortable, far away from friends and family, making him doubtful about his choice: "I did feel lonely and I almost panicked about having made the wrong decision with it all, and I got really homesick". On the field, English was a common language, but off the field his teammates tended to speak

their languages, and Oliver had difficulties keeping up in the conversations. Fortunately, he connected with another Swedish player in the team, who assisted in handling new things and reassured him that homesickness was normal. In the new team Oliver found himself in a new situation. He was no longer an obvious player in the starting line-up, he now had to practice even harder and learn about the new team's playing style. His first appearance was in a friendly game, and with his good performance, he earned initial trust and respect from the teammates, which later helped him find his role in the team. Oliver described himself as a calm and friendly mate but mentioned that some players took advantage of that making him to note: "You have to stand on your ground. That's how it is abroad, teammates are not always friends like in Sweden".

The first three weeks, Oliver and his girlfriend lived in a hotel and it was difficult to find routines and a satisfying way of living: "Not having your own stuff or being able to cook your own food, just to be in the hotel took a lot of mental energy". Then an employee at the club helped Oliver to find an apartment and moving in it was a step in the right direction. They started to explore the city and the new culture, which they found similar to Swedish culture in many ways. After three months in the new country, Oliver got called for a camp with the Swedish national team, and he could not wait to go back home. Arriving in Sweden for the first time since the relocation, he felt relieved meeting his family and got a new perspective on his work abroad. When coming back to Switzerland he felt more excited, and many things began to fall in place. In football he had begun to understand the team's playing style and also how to act as a player in the club. With more confidence in his role in the team, he initiated more relationships with people. Oliver developed a stronger friendship with one of the teammates: "They [the other new player and his girlfriend] had recently moved here like us, and we started hanging out with them, exploring places and doing sightseeing". He also repeatedly acknowledged an important role of his accompanying girlfriend: "She helped me a lot, especially with the social part of life".

During his two-and-a-half years stay in Switzerland, Oliver experienced being on a loan for a couple of months in another club, due to lack of playing time. This temporary relocation made him uncertain about making an effort to explore and settle down in the new city. There was no need to get too comfortable: "The move was kind of sudden, I had to make a quick decision... it is always difficult to move, especially when you already have created a comfortable life with friends and all that". Although he had started to feel adjusted and satisfied with life in the host country, he was

not committed to stay longer; as he said, "I would like to try a new league and explore another country". Reflecting more in general about his experiences in Switzerland, Oliver mentioned that these experiences helped him to grow up not only as a player but also as a person (e.g., to be curious to explore new things, more comfortable communicating with people from different cultures). To the players who plan to go abroad he recommended to take a chance and grow through meeting new challenges but also to go abroad only when mature enough (i.e., not being too young).

Players' Shared Cultural Transition Experiences

In Table 1, the reader can find themes supported by some quotes from the players to describe the shared features of their cultural transition experiences. The categorical-content analysis resulted in 12 themes with three of them describing the pre-transition phase, four themes describing the acute cultural adaptation phase, three themes the sociocultural adaptation phase, and two themes the post-transition experiences. According to the players' stories, the pre-transition phase varied between two weeks and six-seven months, the acute cultural adaptation phase lasted approximately from three to six months, and the sociocultural adaptation phase seemed to be on-going until the athlete relocated again after two or two-and-a-half years in the host country.

In the pre-transition phase the players had good self-confidence and were in the process of thinking about future career steps. This is where the agents played a key role, making connections and searching for suitable contracts. As soon as players knew where they would travel, they searched for information to get an idea about the new team, the city and what it would be like becoming a professional player abroad. The themes in regard to the acute cultural adaptation are reflective for their first impressions and priorities. Football was prioritized because they wanted to prove that they were good players, find ways to survive in the new environment and be accepted by teammates. The new meanings of football also started to emerge along with finding significant people supporting their adaptation process. In the sociocultural adaptation phase, new themes emerged as the players started to feel adjusted in football, shifted focus and paid more attention to life outside of sport. The post-transition themes describe the players' perceived ability and efficacy to adjust to new cultural settings, and what lessons could be taken to future transitions.

Table 1

Players' Shared Cultural Transition Experiences

Phases	Themes	Quotations
Pre-transition	Achievement and satisfaction in the Swedish club.	<p>"I really liked it here and I was ready to sign a new contract with [the Swedish club] and stay, maybe not forever, but for a few more years... if I'm going to move it has to be something special." – (Kim)</p> <p>"Not that I wasn't satisfied or couldn't see myself playing in Sweden for the rest of my life, but I was ready for new challenges." – (Eric)</p>
	Agent as a navigator and personal interest for the offer.	<p>"There was a lot of offers, but nothing challenging enough especially in the football aspect... It was also about how much they personally wanted you... so you have to consider many things... When I heard which club it was... and that they saw me as a starting player... It was a big deal and something I really wanted." – (Eric)</p> <p>"I was on vacation, and my agent called me several times and said a couple of clubs were interested in signing me. I had to think about what was most interesting for me." – (Oliver)</p>
Acute cultural adaptation	Gathering information and listening to peers' experience.	<p>"I was new in this situation about moving and I tried to listen to people around me. I had [a teammate] who had been abroad for ten years and then I tried to listen closely to those players from the national team who played in Italy" – (Kim)</p> <p>"I got approval to go visit the club, so me and my agent travelled there. It was important that I got the feeling of comfort in the Swiss club, for the team but also for the city." – (Oliver)</p>
	Adjustment in football as a first priority.	<p>"The first months passed by so quickly and later on my girlfriend told me that she thought these months were very difficult. But I was in my own bubble and didn't think twice about how she was doing." – (Kim)</p> <p>"... in the beginning of the process, I was not acclimatized to daily life outside of football. In the beginning everything was about football and you'd live in a hotel and people are driving you wherever you needed to go. I do not remember having any thoughts about how life outside of football would be because it was such an incredible focus on football." – (Eric)</p> <p>"I was not the first-hand choice anymore. So, I had to start from scratch and practice more and harder." – (Oliver)</p>
Acute cultural adaptation	Connecting with the new team as a careful and respectful guest.	<p>"When I arrived, I tried to be nice to everyone, because like I said, I had imagined that it was going to be a tough jargon and tough arrogance, but everyone was good to me from the start." – (Kim)</p> <p>"... when I moved to Turkey, I wanted to be one of those people that showed that you cared about their culture and their language." – (Eric)</p> <p>"For example, in the locker-room, I'm a pretty calm guy you know, nobody had problems with me and I didn't have problems with anyone either." – (Oliver)</p>
	Football as a way for recognition, money, and personal growth.	<p>"For me and my girlfriend's future, it was a lot of money and for others as well, it meant a lot to us. So, it's hard to ignore it. But also, in a football aspect, was really cool to play for a club in Italy." – (Kim)</p> <p>"Everything is based on football; your name gets known depending on how well you perform." – (Eric)</p> <p>"I have no regrets moving abroad because it has strengthened me as a person." – (Oliver)</p>

	Support from teammate, partner and family.	<p>"Even though I didn't play every game he [the coach] was always good to me and helped me with details... I was lucky we had another Swedish player on the team, he helped me a lot." – (Kim)</p> <p>"Back home, my family was supportive, but most of the support in Turkey was in the team. – (Eric)</p> <p>"It's easier to create a daily living, I'm so thankful that she [girlfriend] moved with me." – (Oliver)</p>
Sociocultural adaptation	Feeling adjusted in football.	<p>"When I was able to join the conversation instead of just being quiet and listening. I would say that was the biggest breaking point, I felt like one in the team. Football was like a religion and to be a part of that team, it was really everything for all of us" – (Kim)</p> <p>"I think it helped me a lot that I got an important role on the team from the beginning. Because in football, it is like a hierarchy, if you perform well you will be appreciated, and it is easier." – (Eric)</p>
	Embracing life outside football.	<p>"The days passed by, and my girlfriend and I developed good routines. After morning practice we went out in the city in the afternoon and it was good weather, we had dinner in the sun..." – (Kim)</p> <p>"I'm so thankful that my girlfriend moved with me. It became so much easier for me, we could do things together, explore the city and places around." – (Oliver)</p>
	Changes in the team and readiness for relocation.	<p>"A new coach came to the team and he wanted to play his players and I was in great need of playing time." – (Kim)</p> <p>"The club had high ambitions and after two years they wanted new players and I didn't want to become a substitute; I wanted to continue my career and play an important role in a team." – (Eric)</p>
Post-transition experience	Perceived ability and efficacy to adjust to new cultural settings.	<p>"I came to a new club [second club abroad] with more experience and I had my perspective on what worked well for me, and I wanted to show that I had much to offer them as a player." – (Eric)</p> <p>"I know that I'm not afraid, because it has strengthened me. It's like you know that you will find your way of life in the next country you migrate to." – (Oliver)</p>
	Knowledge of what to expect for next transition.	<p>"As a football player I knew that I had learned so much in Italy". – (Kim)</p> <p>"It was simple when you were doing well in football, but football will go up and down, then it is easy to fall into that and go up and down as a person and self-confidence and stuff like that." – (Eric)</p>

Discussion

The objectives of this study were: (1) to explore cultural transition pathways of Swedish professional football players relocated to another European country, (2) to identify shared themes in their transition narratives. To explore these objectives, we used the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) to guide us in collecting data from three Swedish professional football players through Skype-based semi-structured interviews, asking for and receiving the participants' reflections on the transcripts, and in data analysis shifting from creating core (cultural transition) narratives based on each interview series to analysing the whole data set to discover shared features in the participants' experiences. Three core narratives entitled *Preparing for the worst-case scenario and saved by dedication to football (Kim)*; *Showing interest for the host culture and carrying responsibility as a foreign player (Eric)*; and *A step for personal development: from homesickness to being hungry for more (Oliver)*, described individual transition pathways, which were successful and unique but also had some shared features. Differences in the players' stories derived mainly from the specific conditions and requirements in their host environments both on- and off- the football field as well as their personalities, quality of the transition preparation, and support available. Shared features of the players' cultural transition experiences derived mainly from the logic of the transition process, and therefore it was convenient to use the cultural transition phases (i.e., pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, sociocultural adaptation, and post-transition) as categories helping to structure the shared features (Ryba et al., 2016; 2020).

In the pre-transition phase, all the players were successful and satisfied being in their home team, and two players initially did not plan to leave Sweden. The players' successful performance made them visible for foreign clubs, and agents played a key role in making connections and finding suitable offers similar to scenarios described by Richardson et al. (2012). When the players had made the decision, they started preparing in various ways, for example, learning local language, visiting the arena and the team, and making Internet search about the city and the club. Already in the pre-transition, they began to imagine what it would be like to live as a professional player in the intended host country. In other words, they started to reposition themselves socially and reconstruct meanings of football and life (Ryba et al., 2016).

Upon arrival to the host environment the players felt differently depending on a quality of their preparatory efforts and immediate support provided by the hosts. Kim had an opportunity to prepare for the relocation during several months by learning about Italy and Italian football, studying the language, and developing preliminary ideas of how he would fit in the new team/club. Eric desired to move abroad, prepared for the move but in a more general way than Kim because up to the last moment he didn't know that he would sign a contract with a Turkish club. Additionally, Eric had experience with foreign players in his Swedish team and learned about behaviours that locals (i.e., Swedish players) appreciated in foreign players. That knowledge helped him to adjust and fit in Turkish team easier. However, Oliver's first impression in Switzerland was described as a cultural shock, doubting his decision, being out of his element and homesick. Oliver also had the shortest preparation time, from the thought about moving abroad to arriving in the host culture took less than two weeks for him. Oliver was also very attached to his family, and their support and the girlfriend's decision to go with

him, were decisive for Oliver to sign the contract in Switzerland.

Moving abroad, the players had to recreate their social networks by building new relations in the team and in the city. In all the participants' stories organizing their social life was an important storyline, and feelings of acceptance in, and belonging to, the new settings were sources of feeling adjusted and satisfied (Campbell & Sonn, 2009; Ryba et al., 2012; 2016). In Kim's and Oliver's stories there were signs of *kindredness*, when upon arrival to the new team a player with similar cultural background took the role of an older brother and look after a newcomer in and outside of football (Campbell & Sonn, 2009). In agreement with previous cultural transition studies, building close relationships, navigating through the new cultural setting, and being disconnected from home were perceived as challenging (Blodgett et al., 2014; Blodgett & Schinke, 2015; Ronkainen et al., 2019).

Similar to other professional footballers coming to a new professional context, the participants in the current study had to deal with higher training standards, greater importance of performance and tougher mentalities compared to their home environments (Ekengren et al., 2020; Light et al., 2019; Richardson et al., 2012). For example, Eric witnessed other players getting alienated as they were not performing well, and Kim shared that some teammates violated fair play norms fighting for the place in the starting line-up.

The players in this study were curious to explore football in a new league and another country as well as advance in their careers (Magee & Sugden, 2002). After having a good season, they had the confidence and readiness to try at a higher level. Still, arriving in the host culture made them realize they had to be fully focused on performing and prove their worth of investment and fitting in (Ely & Ronkainen, 2019; Light et al., 2019). By prioritizing football, they showed a desire to be successful as professional players, and they tried to fully focus on football and neglect other parts of their life. "In a football bubble" is a metaphor for a player being preoccupied with all related to football, while temporally excluding non-football thoughts and feelings.

After some time, the players started to reflect on the meaning of this transition in their career and to see its positive impact on their family's economy, social recognition, and personal development. They began to see that everything was not just about football but also embraced a meaningful daily life, which was considered just as important as performing in football. Similar to the Israeli handball players who relocated to Germany in Samuel et al.'s study (2020), the participants of this study reflected on non-sport parts of their life during their playing and living abroad including their ongoing relationships and events back home.

Knowing that the cultural transition is fluid and that athletes can move back and forth between the phases, it is possible to anticipate that the transition might restart when a player is thinking of a new professional relocation (Ryba, 2017; Ryba et al., 2016; 2020). After about two years of the participants' play abroad, things began to change with new coaches, new teammates, and reduced playing time. Eric's and Kim's chances to play decreased as the structure of their teams changed, and Oliver had already relocated on a loan within the host country as a result of lack of playing time. So, all the three players re-evaluated their situation and decided to look for opportunities elsewhere, and that is they were back in the pre-transition phase. Preparing for a new relocation, the players reflected back on their first and also successful cultural transition to increase their efficacy in coping with the transition to the next cultural setting.

Methodological Reflections and Future Research

We followed the NOI model (Hiles & Čermák, 2008) and found it useful in guiding the study process. Skype-based main interviews complemented by e-mail or phone follow ups and the interviewer's reflective notes helped to get into the players' narratives for further analysis and interpretation. In the data analysis we focused on the communicated content (i.e., what was said) using both holistic and categorical forms of analysis complementing each other. Sending back transcript to the participants for feedback and reflections, as well as constant critical discussions between the co-authors strengthen the rigor. The SvFF organizational support was mentioned to the participants, and they were informed that a summary of findings will be presented to the federation with the purpose to help SvFF prepare the next generation players for potential relocation abroad. This pre-interview information could in some way influence what the participants had chosen to share and how they communicated their narratives.

Future research should examine female players and players with unsuccessful cultural transitions (e.g. moving back home before the contract ended or after being alienated). Football players may undergo several cultural transitions during their professional career, therefore, future research can also explore experiences of players that have had multiple cultural transitions. This perspective might help to understand how the players accumulate the transition experiences and develop meta-acculturation strategies (Ryba et al., 2020; Stambulova et al., 2020).

Practical Implications

The first author prepared a written summary of the study (in Swedish language) and presented it at the SvFF. The findings were found interesting and valid, and the first author was invited to develop and deliver two cultural transition workshops for the two groups of national level football players, such as juniors U18 (15-18 years of age), and juniors U21 (19-21 years of age). The workshop for U18 group was aimed at increasing awareness about their careers and potential relocation abroad, importance of preparation in advance and developing social support network. The workshop for U21 group was more advanced

and included presentation of the CTM and shared cultural transition experiences of the three participants of this study with a focus on preparation for the relocation and major challenges to be ready for upon arrival. Finally, in both workshops the three participants' lessons learned in their cultural transitions and recommendations for the aspirants were shared. Based on the collaboration within this project the SvFF was recommended to encourage players to seek recourses, support, as well as build a kind of buddy-system meaning that experienced players share their experiences of playing in a specific country with young players who desire to go there. It was also decided that materials of the cultural transition workshops will be further used for player and coaching education.

Conclusion

This study contributes to cultural transition research with three narratives of successful cultural transition pathways of Swedish professional football players and shared features of their transition experiences. Pre-transition, the participants were well established players, and agents worked as navigators, making connections and negotiations. Then arriving to the host environment, the players prioritized adjustment in football because proving to be a good player was the start of fitting in. After adjustment in football they allowed themselves to broaden their focus to explore life beyond football. Finding a satisfying daily life outside of sport became just as important as adaptation in sport and the team. Key social figures in the players' transition were their agents, teammates with similar cultural background, relocating partners, families, and new friends supporting them to explore the new cultural settings in and beyond football.

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