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**Migration and adaptation experiences of American basketball athletes in  
Greece: A phenomenological study based on the cultural transition model**

by

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*“It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent;  
it is the one most adaptable to change.”*

- Charles Darwin

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### **Abstract**

Many athletes take the leap in the course of their athletic journey and pursue opportunities abroad to improve and develop their career profile. These migrant athletes are faced with acculturation to the psychological, sociocultural, and physical demands of the foreign cultural contexts (Ryba et al., 2016). Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore the phenomenological experiences and adaptation processes of American basketball players in Greece in relation to the social and sport culture basketball environment, and analyze how those factors interacted with their subjective athletic performance. Five male professional basketball players from the USA who played in Greece for at least one professional season participated in semi-structured interviews. The ages were between 22-35 with professional experience overseas ranging from 1-13 years. The top-down analysis was conducted using the the cultural transition model (pre-transition, acute cultural adaption, and sociocultural adaptation) as reference (Ryba et al., 2016). The findings suggest that the athlete's relationships inside and outside the basketball court foster the adaptation in the Greek sociocultural context. Topics on professionalism and adaptation within the Greek basketball organization are discussed. The results of this research provide insight on the adaption to the Greek sociocultural and professional environments to support athletes, enhance adaptabilities, and facilitate performance.

***Keywords:*** *american basketball players, adaptation, acculturation, greek basketball, cultural transition model*

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	6
<b>Literature Review</b>	8
Levels in Migration	8
Migration and Cultural-Contexts	9
<b>Framework Proposed: The Cultural Transition Model</b>	12
Pre-Transition Phase	13
Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase	14
Sociocultural Adaptation Phase	20
<b>Methods</b>	23
Participants	24
Data Collection and Analysis	26
Trustworthiness	27
<b>Results</b>	28
Pre-Transition Phase	29
Table 1. Pre-Transition Phase	30
Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase	33
Table 2. Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase	34
Sociocultural Adaptation Phase	41
Table 3. Sociocultural Adaptation Phase	42
<b>Discussion</b>	45
<b>Limitations</b>	51
<b>Conclusion and Future Implications</b>	51
<b>References</b>	53
<b>Appendix A: Interview Guide</b>	59

## Introduction

The progression of sport has liberated the global athletic trade market where athletes are moving freely from jurisdiction to jurisdiction and from country to country, contributing to borderless and numerous career opportunities for sporting professionals seeking opportunities (Scholte, 2000). Over the years, sports such as basketball, football, tennis, golf, cricket, and skiing have all partaken in international imports and exports of professionals in the sporting industry (Maguire & Stead, 1996). This phenomenon has been researched in the sport sciences field, particularly looking at the migrational trends and interdependencies of transnational athletes because international sport has become more and more of a commodity producing an attractive and competitive labor market.

These individuals take their passion and sport careers to foreign grounds to progress personally and professionally. They fill gaps within clubs, teams, and leagues outside their Nation to advance their careers in ways that would not be possible if they stayed behind. For example, over the years the popularity of Canadian hockey attracted talented players from abroad to play and even naturalize into Canadian grounds to strengthen Canadian National hockey teams (Maguire, 1996). Additionally, due to high competition in the American basketball industry, players spend years in their teenage and young adulthood playing overseas before becoming draft edible in their home country; it is not always guaranteed that they will make the final cuts (Lee & McFarlin, 2015). Thus, it is evident that sport has become more and more of a commodity producing an attractive and competitive labor market that may have risks and uncertainties.

To some extent, life as a professional athlete overseas may be glorified through the eyes of spectators, but their reality commonly includes a high demanding lifestyle with environmental changes inducing discomforts. Researchers have investigated the diverse life experiences of athletes overseas as seen in cricket, handball, football, and basketball (Agergaard, 2008; Bale & Maguire, 1994; Butler & Dzikus, 2015; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Stead & Maguire, 2000). Common findings include challenges in social, psychological, and cultural adaptation, adjustments, identity negotiations, expectations, and professional instabilities (Butler & Dzikus, 2015; Maguire & Stead, 1996). In addition, both short and long-term relocated athletes commonly experience rigorous competition and training schedules, travel, foreign routine and lifestyle shifts (Ryba et al., 2016). Seeing that the progression in the twentieth century has made almost essential for athletes to take their careers overseas therefore it is important that these populations of professionals are given the proper attention so that they adapt and adjust positively to foster healthy career development (Ryba et al., 2016).

Knowing that this line of research exists, there are many dimensions that are yet to be discovered within migrant athletes involved in numerous sport contexts worldwide. In particular, Ryba and colleagues (2012) have been advocating the significance of further research on transnational athletes, putting the focus on getting insight on the personal experiences of these athletes. This is explained in the following quote:

*“refocusing the study of adaptation on processes rather than outcomes is a starting point for developing more nuanced understanding of cultural adaptation and will*

*require an array of qualitative methodologies to further this area of study". (Ryba et al., 2012, p.94).*

This study is an extension from the aforementioned suggestions and uncover the experiences of a subpopulation in the demanding world of sport. The rationale of this study is to explore the experiences of American professional basketball players who have migrated into Greece to play basketball, further examining the adaptation processes to the locations, basketball environment, and how these factors play a role on their subjective athletic performance. The method applied in this research is qualitative phenomenological approach using semi-structured interviews. The conversations and interpretations of the cases may provide insight to future basketball players and administrative bodies interested in learning about the population of migrant athletes in Greece, while facilitating performance.

## **Literature Review**

### **Levels in Migration**

Over the years, researchers have tried to make sense of the different characteristics and trends with athletic migration overseas stated below. Pioneers in the field of sport and migration have specified three levels of migration that occur (Maguire & Stead, 1996). First, migration within a nation-state like intra-continental exchange of Eastern Europeans to Western European volleyball, football, hockey, and basketball (Duke, 1994; Maguire & Stead, 1998). The second is between nation-states that are situated in different continents like Dominican Republic baseball players playing in America or transcontinental movements between Europe and North-American with American football, hockey, and basketball (Bale

& Maguire, 1994; Klein, 1991). Finally, there is between nation-states situated within the same continent like in the USA where student-athletes receive scholarships and opportunities to play their sport and study throughout different states across the country (Lee & McFarlin, 2015).

Moreover, research distinguished three dimensions that vary in migration trends existing in pluralistic societies: permanency, mobility, and voluntariness (Berry, 1997). For example, some individuals voluntarily seek out immigration into new grounds for personal purposes, while other populations such as refugees are displaced from their home from war or poverty and are relocated into new cultures. The permanent settlers may be already accustomed to, what was a foreign environment because of prolonged settlement. In other cases there are individuals who are temporarily relocated by travels, international academia, sojourners, and sporting careers (Berry, 1997).

Recent cultural sport psychologists have negotiated the terminology for athletes who crossover borders. Athletes' mobility is referred to those who experience short-term relocation, and migrant athletes long-term relocation status over or within nations (Ryba et al., 2017). However, the term *transnational* is also a descriptor for these individuals because athletes are constantly changing the geographical location where they are contracted on short/long-term, temporary, and sometimes permanent terms (Ryba et al., 2017).

### **Migration and Cultural-Contexts**

Talented individuals have been drawn from their Nations and/or transferred to and from foreign teams to compete at a higher caliber to fulfil contracts, and develop their careers

and personal lives (Falcous & Maguire, 2005). Some studies have explored the migrational trends, motivations, and experiences of professional athletes including athletes motivations, lifestyle, performance, adaptation and adjustments in cricket (Maguire & Stead, 1996), basketball (Butler & Dzikus, 2015; Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire & Bale, 1994), rugby (Evans & Stead, 2012), football (Molnar & Maguire, 2008; Stead & Maguire, 2000), and hockey (Maguire, 1996). For instance, Botelho and Ageergaard (2011) researched the motives of women who play football that are imported to Scandinavian countries for professional contracts by using a qualitative approach with questionnaires. The research indicated that the main reasons for migration was a combination of economic gains, cultural stimulus, settlement opportunities, and simply having passion for the game of football. Although opportunity abroad seems appealing, many limitations are often overlooked due to the perception of global flow, instantaneous mobility, borderless social interaction, and boundless opportunity (Evans, 2014). There are variables that play essential roles in the experiences of the athlete on and off the playing field. For this reason it may be challenging to capture the entire spectrum of complexities within labor migration. These include issues surrounding the adaptation to the new cultural, social, and professional contexts (Ryba et al. 2016). In reality, the migrant individuals in the sports communities are faced with different intensities of lived experiences and interactions due to the dynamic changes in behaviours and mentalities that occur in foreign grounds.

Researchers studying cross-cultural psychology have spent time investigating the connections amongst the behavioural development of immigrants in new cultural contexts (Berry, 1997). During the previous 20 years migration scholars have been focusing more and

more on the experiences of migrational/transnational individuals who cross-borders and migrate into foreign cultures and environments. It has been only in the recent decade where researchers in sport psychology have explored the psychological, behavioural, and social exchanges, and changes that arise from the shift from one nations ground to another (Ryba et al., 2012; Ryba et al., 2017; Schinke et al., 2012);.

Adaptation is the psychological and behavioural adjustment individuals undergo in response to environmental demands and change (Berry, 1997). Acculturation is the social and psychological changes one endures in attempt to balance ones previous culture into a new one (Berry, 1997). It is said that for athletes to sustain performance demands, they must have positive adapt-abilities to foster social ties and environmental changes (Ryba et al., 2016). This can be separated into two psychosocial-cultural understanding by the following quote:

*“Psychological adaptation largely involves one’s psychological and physical well-being, whereas socio-cultural adaptation refers to how well an acculturating individual is able to manage daily life in the new cultural context.”. (Berry, 2005, p. 709)*

The growing literature on sport migration and transnationalism within the sport science field can be located in cultural sport psychology (CSP; Ryba, 2017; Schinke et al., 2011). Researchers attempt to enrich the understanding of the adaptation and assimilation of individuals in a new cultural while considering their cultural foundation (Schinke et al., 2005). Terms that are used in this field encompassing the experiences of these athletes in new cultural contexts are: adaptation, acculturation, sociocultural adaptation, psychological adaptation, and adjustment which will be looked at more in the proposed framework.

### **Framework Proposed: The Cultural Transition Model**

Ryba and colleagues (2016) assembled a temporal Cultural Transition Model to demonstrate a three phase construction and progression of transnational athletes as they adjust and adapt to various sociocultural contexts. To date, the Cultural Transition Model is the most recent proposed model in CPS field (Ryba et al., 2016). From the researcher's knowledge, there are no other studies that have used this model which makes this particular study stand out.

The three phases explained below are: 1) pre-transition, 2) acute cultural adaptation, 3) sociocultural adaptation. The moderating psychological processes within these phases are social repositioning, negotiation of cultural norms and practices, and reconstructing the meaning of self. Since this is a rapidly changing field, the researcher integrated evidence from other sources contributing to the proposed model (Berry, 1997; Ryba et al., 2016). It is worth noting that the three phases in the model are not a linear but can happen interchangeably and at different rates as time progresses based on the underlying psychological, social, and cultural exchanges. These mechanisms are adaptive and therefore are dependent on individual within their context, self-regulation, and skill sets that ultimately shapes successful task resolution and repositioning of the self in cultural placements. Ryba and colleagues use the term *adapt-abilities* because of the individuals learned "abilities to adapt" (2016).

The model is empirical and was created from interviews of 15 professional and semi-professional athletes (male and female) varying from cultures worldwide in sports from hockey, soccer, basketball, alpine skiing, handball and dance. The diversity of the sports and

origins gave a rich sample to study the psychosocial components of transnational athletes to study the adaptive responses, the underlying behaviours and psychology behind the processes of cultural transition. The researchers analyzed the discourse using abductive reasoning to interpret and construct the model without the basis of any prior assumption or knowledge. Finally, the model was produced reflecting the athlete's motions during career and cultural transition facilitating adaptability.

### **Pre-Transition Phase**

Transnational athletes migrating to new countries are faced with unique and unpredictable demands from the foreign cultural contexts. It is in the athletes' best interest to prepare and research ways for personal acclimatization to the foreign culture so that they do not risk psychological and/or physiological setbacks (Fiske, 2004). Life scripts and career narratives are likely to change due to the cultural transition. This phase consists of the preparation may include but is not exclusive to, contacting transnational networks to gather information on the culture, team, club culture, living expectations, and diet. It is important to prepare oneself to be open-minded during this phase so that they can be more accepting to the unexpected.

The routines of these individuals are expected to change from home to host culture and the preparation for the move requires negotiations and repositioning of old to new habits and relationship dynamics. During this phase, the athlete is expected to prepare for social repositioning, cultural negotiations, and be prepared to sacrifice the set of customs, norms, and self-system that they have been accustomed to. Whether the athlete is single or moving

with a family, the geographical mobility can put a strain on athletes' relationships causing potential resentment, and social withdrawal (Ryba et al., 2016). Relationship consideration and maintenance can be challenging and it is something that should be discussed with the network surrounding the athlete so that they can be supported towards their journey overseas (Stead & Maguire, 2000).

All components surrounding the physical and interpersonal expectations are to be reconstructed, and it is appropriate to research and gather the adequate and truthful information to fulfil each athletes' inner and professional needs. Athletes must be wary in this stage of preparation so that they gather accurate information while keeping modest expectations by the host environment. Failing in these judgements and having incorrect expectations may cause unforeseen emotional and behavioural setbacks leading to conflicted cultural and professional adaptation as presented in the next phase.

### **Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase**

Previous research investigating cultural adaptation have classified this experience as *acculturation*. Redfield, Linton, and Herskovits (1936; as cited in Berry, 1997, p.149) were the research pioneers of acculturation which they defined it as the phenomenon of the consequences from change in cultural patterns from the group or individual who comes into first-hand contact with a different culture. It is the adaptation process from change across cultures and this presented on a group and individual level (Berry 2005; 1997).

The changes in a group level focuses on the negotiations of communities, nations, and social structures with the goal to avoid conflict and to unite. In sport, one may identify a large

sporting organization as the dominant group, and the new team members as the non-dominant group. Sometimes the dominant group can enforce forms of acculturation that result in segregation and separation of the non-dominant group; in this case it is maladaptive to the migrants (Berry, 1997). In other cases, the ideologies and beliefs of the *outsiders* may overwhelm the dominant group. For example, Falcous and Maguire (2005) gathered data from British basketball fans and found that they preferred to support their indigenous players versus bringing in American migrant athletes. The issues surrounding the concerns stem from the fear of Americanization of the local identities. However, some fans appreciated and valued the American players because they felt that they contributed to the fortune of English basketball and held positive perspectives on the players' commitment and work-ethic. The acculturation process can be shared within the host team and newcomer by fostering the interest of intercultural exchange by hosting activities and shared interests regarding one and others culture (Ryba et al., 2017).

Focusing on the individual level, one is concerned with the psychological and behavioural changes of a member in the society who endures cultural change (Berry, 2005). Graves (1967) recognized the presence of the psychological factors in acculturation and referred to it as *psychological acculturation* (as cited in Berry, 2005). This process focuses on the psychological wellbeing manifested by the dynamic interrelationships of intra-personal and societal variables (Zhou et al., 2008).

In relation to the cultural transition model, the *acute cultural adaptation phase* is made up of characteristics of psychological adaptation to acculturation linked to physical and psychological well-being of the individual (Ryba et al., 2016; Berry, 2005). This phase

consists of the adjustments as an outcome of the social practices of the given culture (Ryba et al., 2016). One can find the psychological acculturation as a means of shedding or unlearning some aspects of one's previously learned and accustomed cultural repertoire (Berry, 1997). The psychological term was added to provide the opportunity to separate the experience of the individual from the masses during the cultural and environmental shift. In other words, the degree of psychological and behavioural outcomes from the individuals experiencing migrational change can be dissected using their subjective perspective a part from the larger societal patterns associated to acculturation (Berry, 1997). The athlete within this phase is faced with acculturation within sport and non-sport cultural contexts as described below.

**Sport as Culture.** When athletes move across borders for athletic careers, it can be broadly viewed as a within-culture transition but really there are many cultures inside the sporting world that require athletic adjustment (Ryba et al., 2016). Sport cultures are likely to be viewed to share the same language worldwide due to the globalization of sport. However, culture affects the differences in styles of play, training, and coaching across nations; these are within sporting culture adjustments athletes must adapt to (Ryba et al., 2016). Other adjustments include the process of integration within the new team, language, professionalism, and management (Ryba et al., 2016). It is important to support this part of the athletes' adjustment because the overall harmony of values and goals within the sport culture influences the athletes' motivation and performance (Ryba et al. 2016).

During this phase, the migrant athlete can be initially stunned by the abrupt psychological, social, and environmental changes that occur from being placed into new environmental contexts. Individuals must reconstruct their self-meaning and social ties in

amongst professional sporting demands and foreign cultural conditions to foster positive adaptation (Ryba et al., 2016).

A large part of being a professional athlete is based on the emotional and physical pressures within organizational and competitive stress (Hanton & Fletcher, 2005; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Schinke et al., 2012). Athletes endure organizational stress directly related to their placement and development within the sport organization including the adjustments to new roles and athletic demands (Schinke et al., 2012). For instance, the presence of better players, less playing time, and general adjustments to coaching styles and systems can cause athletes to experience “little fish in a big sea” syndrome from a study by Schinke and colleagues (2011). The opposite may happen where the athlete becomes accepted and famous within the new cultural context and nation due to excelled performance.

Moreover, cultural norms are featured in migrant athletes from individualistic cultures (North America and parts of Europe) had to adapt to a collective style of training in the Caribbean, which was contrary to their personal and cultural norms (going for group runs instead of independent ones) (Schinke et al., 2011). In addition to these findings, readjusting to schedule and strict timelines was a modification for these athletes as they are used to playing by their own rules. Additional findings from Maguire and Stead found that athletes’ felt that they lacked down-time after training and competitions and one can imagine that leading to psychological and physical consequences (1996).

Competitive stressors can be experienced within the athlete state of appraisal of opponents and demands within competitive environments (Schinke et al., 2012). For example, the performance of athletes during the Stanley Cup playoffs in NHL players

contributing to the potential career advancements and endorsements for the future (Battochio et al., 2009). Chronic stressors can contribute to feelings of vulnerability and job insecurity during the competitive state of players having their job on the line due to the pressures from their organization to perform at a certain caliber as lived by professional cricket athletes (Maguire & Stead, 1996).

**Culture Outside of Sport.** On one hand it can be very exciting for the athlete to experience a foreign environment, lifestyle change, and sport context, but on the other becoming accustomed to those dynamic changes can be entirely exhausting. Scheduling, hours of societal operation, modes of transportation, living standards, logistic, and diet are necessities that should be considered. A study conducted by Butler and Dzikus (2015) found that intra-personal constraints made it difficult for a sample of migrant American basketball players to explore cultural cuisine and language during their profession abroad. This contributed to feelings of seclusion and a poorer quality of life.

When considering the feeling of “loneliness” it has been documented that those feelings are more prominent after the 6-8 week marker post-relocation after the initial excitement and freshness of the relocation sets in (Schinke et al, 2011). The change in relationships and support systems can be impeding to the athlete and typically after separation, they may experience feelings of loneliness and loss as experienced by boxers, baseball players, and hockey players playing professionally abroad (Schinke et al., 2011). Moreover, Ryba and colleagues found that it was common for athletes to struggle with loneliness, seclusion, language barriers, and general adjustments to foreign demands, especially with rookies who lack professional experiences abroad (2016). However, veterans

can fill the void by helping the rookies adjustment due to their experiences abroad (Blodgett et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, constructing new relationships and connecting to old ones can contribute to alerting the maladaptive responses from acute cultural changes. Relationships strengthen the athletes' positive experiences abroad (Berry, 1997; Butler & Dzikus, 2015; Ryba et al., 2016). Schinke and colleagues suggested that methods to successfully cope with those feelings are to invest time in intimate relationships, family ties, seeking out communities to foster networking and build relationships, and even peer-mentoring (2011). Peer-mentoring and seeking out mentorship from experienced teammates can be a great way to help the newcomer integrate and learn how to manage acute responsibilities such as organizing logistical essentials. Furthermore, modern technology, Facebook, Skype, and social media can provide a cushion for these athletes while being abroad (Butler & Dzikus, 2015). Notwithstanding the usefulness of these coping techniques, it is deemed important that athletes do not limit their friendships to like-cultured individuals or by detaching themselves from the society impeding integration into the new culture (Schinke et al., 2011).

To conclude, the adaptation strategies are improved with the transformation of the psychological mechanisms of social repositioning, cultural negotiations, and self-meanings of one's previous cultural system. It is typical to endure psychological and physical setbacks especially soon after the relocation period, but it is expected to decrease over time as the self-system becomes more adaptive and adjusted to the cultural environmental demands (Berry, 2005). In amongst the dynamic cultural changes and exchanges, integration strategies are exercised by the athlete activating their self-system to make future transnational

experiences more familiar. This is dependent on the individual's mindset, coping skills, and ability to accept the current environmental situation; the quality and quantity of the adjustment period ultimately effects on the next phase (Ryba et al., 2016)

### **Sociocultural Adaptation Phase**

Societies are shaped and diversified by socialization, communication, and social norms worldwide and athletes are expected to navigate within these elements to discover a balanced self-system within these demands. Sociocultural adaptation is having the knowledge, contact, and positive mentality of the people encompassing the given society and culture. The ability to navigate effectively within the host culture expressions, gestures, clothing norms, language, race, gender, ethnicity, and geography ultimately is dependent on the skills strengthened from the previous cultural adaptation phase (Ryba et al., 2016; Schinke et al., 2005). Moreover, athletes achieve positive sociocultural adaptation when there is harmony within the sport and non-sport contexts by the expression of shared values, meanings, and lifestyle needs (Ryba et al., 2016). When the acculturated individual feels that they have integrated into the society and cultural, they have achieved the strategies encompassing sociocultural adaptation (Ryba et al., 2017).

Previous research refers the term “sociocultural adaptation” to how successful an acculturating athlete can manage their daily life and “fit in” a host cultural context (Berry, 1997). Berry (1997) describes the term as the degree that an individual can manage daily demands in sport, work, school, and family by using interpersonal skills in a new culture. This phase is a linear process, therefore the more time the individual spends in contact with

the host culture, the more accustomed they become to it (Berry, 2005). For instance, becoming more accustomed within the daily demands of the culture can influence the comfort and satisfaction experienced by the athlete, which can lead to the athlete to consider repetitive and even long-term opportunities within the given society (Ryba et al., 2016).

Maladaptive psychological and behavioural outcomes can be attributed to poor sociocultural adaptation. For example, those who lack experience in exercising their language skills in various scenarios can be struck by the difficulties managing language barriers. For example, a South American athlete felt less intelligent and self-conscious when they struggled to speak English in front of others; this led to fear of expression (Schinke et al., 2011). Additionally, athletes' lack of social awareness can influence their sense of belonging in social contexts. For example, shift in social norms such as proximal distance and non-verbal gestures during communication can cause discomfort between the domestic and foreign individuals (Schinke et al., 2011). Furthermore, alcohol consumption and partying can have a potential effect on the professional reputation and performance of the athlete depending on how they choose to spend their time within the host context (Schinke et al., 2011).

In some cases, maladaptive responses to challenges and cultural exposure may hinder the career outcomes of professional players. This is represented in the work overload experienced by cyclists barely balancing athleticism and full-time employment, and in Brazilian footballers who returned home before completing their first season abroad due to loneliness, and inability to cope with new lifestyle (Brandao & Vieira, 2013; Tenenbaum et al., 2003).

Coping skills and strategies can be exercised to manage the athletes' psychological and physical states. It is suggested that athletes can increase this within a new culture by exercising cultural understanding, belonging, trust, assertiveness, and self enhancement (Schinke et al., 2012). Tactics accumulated from previous experiences from the athletes home and transnational experiences can influence emotional regulation, problem solving, and some cases avoidance coping strategies when there are threats detected (Berry, 1997; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Ryba et al., 2016). For instance, when elite Finnish swimmers felt cultural discomfort in Australia, they maintained their psychological well-being by exchanging cultural customs and fostering relatedness, one of the main dimensions of the self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryba, 2012).

The goal of this phase is to gain mastery of the sociocultural adaptability of various cultural states and to bridge the gap between the routine and the unexplored. Individuals learn the mechanisms to adapt to future transitions easier if they have an open-mind while activating their self-management skills within different contexts. Discovering oneself within new environments is a process of trial and error, therefore when the individual is exposed to more transnational situations, they can improve the ability to integrate their previous self-concept within any new given contexts. In this phase athletes should feel they are living their authentic self by acting with fluidity and automation to fulfil their daily needs (Ryba et al., 2016).

In conclusion, seeing that sport is a growing worldwide industry, the appeal to crossover borders to gain professional and personal experience is large. In particular, basketball is a high demand sport within the USA and therefore, it is interesting to explore

the viewpoints of playing and adapting to a culture outside of their home-base. The aforementioned literature review supports that there are psychological, social, and cultural factors to be examined during the acculturation of the athletes. In addition, the demands of the sport and non-sport contexts may contribute to this process and it will be interesting to gather data to explore how these athletes interact within the demands. The components of the three-phased cultural transition model used to explore and offer information on the experiences and adaptation processes to the location, basketball environment, and examine how these factors play a role on their subjective athletic performance. The information will contribute to cultural sport psychology field to provide insight which can be of particular interest to the support and network around these athletes. Moreover, the risks, negotiations, and sacrifices that are made within the adaptation experience is of value to the basketball administration, coaches, sport psychology consultants, players, and those wanting to gain insight on this phenomenon. Since there are no other qualitative studies that look into the adaptation experiences of American basketball players coming into Greece to play professionally. This phenomenon has yet to be investigated, therefore a hypothesis is not necessary for the exploratory nature of the study.

### **Methods**

Qualitative research was chosen as the most appropriate methodology for this realm of inquiry because it provides the researcher with a deeper understanding of individual beliefs, attitudes, psychology, and experiences (Patton, 1980). The researcher was interested to gather information based the athletes diverse backgrounds in inter-continental mobility

leading to Greece and/or their reflections on their first experiences in Greece. The phenomenological approach was used to support the exploration of individual experience during their season(s) in Greece (Kvale, 1996). Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) proposed three types of interviews: unstructured, structured, and semi-structured. In this study semi-structured interviews were used to foster a natural flow and progression of the conversations. The goal of the semi-structured interviews to serve only as a skeleton for the themes to be covered and allow for natural conversation to occur, as it was said that knowledge exists in the reality of the person and their world surrounding the experiences (Kvale, 1996). This approach will ultimately interpret and provide a description of the common themes derived from the experiences endured by the participants.

### **Participants**

The participants in this study are 5 male of colour originated from the USA. They played professional basketball in Greece for an undefined period of time. They were interviewed during (N=1) or after season 2017-2018 in Greece. The ages of the men were between 22 to 35. Each participant was given a number to assure anonymity. Moreover, the locations and teams are not stated due to participants requests .

Player 1 was interviewed mid-season as the pilot interview. It was his first time playing professionally outside of the USA. He played collegiate basketball in the USA and tried out for the NBA prior moving to Greece. He was 22 years old when he migrated to Greece and was contracted to play for a full-season on a "Alpha 2" level team.

Player 2 was 35 years old and had ten years of playing experience overseas, mostly in Europe. During that period he played in Greece twice for two different teams. The first time he arrived at the end of a season on an "Alpha 1" team. In the second time he arrived just after pre-season on a "Alpha 2" team. In between the approximate five year gap, he played in various countries. This player supports his family back in the USA with 2 children.

Player 3 was 29 years old and had played overseas for seven years professionally, mostly throughout Europe. He played in Greece in two separate seasons, the first time he arrived during pre-season playing for an "Alpha 2" team. He had approximately a one year gap between both seasons in Greece where he played in another European team. The second time he arrived after pre-season on a "Alpha 1" team. This individual has a wife and followed him during the last half of his professional seasons overseas, including Greece.

Player 4 was 35 years old and has been playing 13 years overseas and played in Greece twice for two different clubs during two separate seasons. During the first season he played on a Greek basket league as a single man. Approximately ten years later, he had his wife and children accompany him during his second season in Greece playing in the "Alpha 2 league".

Player 5 was 28 years old, played overseas for six years in Europe. This player was displaced in three different countries, played for three different teams, all in the same season. He ended that season in Greece on a "Alpha 1" team . He was single and did not have any children.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The participants were recruited through personal network and the online database <https://www.eurobasket.com>. Ten responded, two declined and three dropped out. Therefore a total of five participants were in the final data collection. The researcher collected the interviews following consent from the participants regarding the general conduction of the study, confidentiality, recording, and transcribing of the interviews.

A pilot study was conducted face-to-face as a testing and training tool. It helped the researcher gain confidence in the interview technique and this is suggested as a highly useful opportunity for novice researcher. The results of the pilot test was included in the final results because the researcher felt that the data was valuable. Additionally, the researcher did not want to risk losing the participants interest by conducting the same interview post-pilot test. This is known as "semantic satiation" (Ismail et al., 2018). The remaining interviews for each athlete took place over the phone (n=3) and video call (n=1). Each interview had pre-planned open-ended questions, with follow-up questions and probes depending on the flow of the conversation.

Top-down content analysis was performed to analyze and interpret the data into themes and patterns adapted from Taylor-Powell and Renner (2003). Before the analysis, the researcher transcribed the data right after each interview took place and sent a copy back to the participants to ensure accuracy.

In the first step of content analysis, the researcher became intimate with the data by listening to the audio recordings and reading the transcriptions of interviews over numerous times to ensure correctness. After creating and using the duplication of interviews, the

researcher coded each interviewee with initials to protect confidentiality. The researcher focused on the ideas, concepts, phrases, and terminology as units of analysis and created codes in relation to the three phases of the cultural transition model for them on the margin of the document. Then, a new document was created with three columns associated to each phase of the model and the relevant topics were inserted to each phase using different colours to differentiate the phases. Once this was completed, topics with similar meanings within each phase were categorized into subtopics.

A new table was constructed with rows listing the topics from The Cultural Transition Model (Ryba et al., 2016). These were labelled “primary themes” in one column followed by the “sub-themes” in the second column consisting of the highlighted codings retrieved from the previous document. The initialed meaningful segments from the data documents associated to the primary themes and sub-themes were compiled together in a separate document to be collectively analyzed by the content, attributions, similarities, and differences.

### **Trustworthiness**

Although the guideline to ensure trustworthiness in qualitative research can be ambiguous, the following strategies were adopted to increase trustworthiness (Patton, 2002).

1. Pilot interview: To increase interview reliability as a test and training tool.
2. Replication: The procedures of this study can be systematically replicated following the recruitment, interviewing style, transcription, and analysis of data (Patton, 2002).

3. Purposeful sampling: The data was sampled having in mind the locations and time period of migration in Greece to increase the diversity of viewpoints (Williams & Morrow, 2009)
4. Member checks: After data was transcribed it was returned back to each participant to ensure the data was correct and establish credibility.
5. Integrity: Following cross-analysis of data, the evidence is presented as a whole with corresponding categories, while highlighting relevant direct quotes of the participants to represent examples of the categories (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

## **Results**

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of American basketball players who have migrated to Greece for a professional contract while examining the adaptation processes within the cultural contexts of the location, basketball environment, and how it affected their athletic performance. The model used for analysis was the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016).

A total of 267 statements were extracted from the transcripts and arranged according to the three phased model (Ryba et al., 2016). Within each phase, sub-themes emerged during the analysis of each data document. Results are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3 with supporting quotes. The pre-transition phase is depicted in Table 1. Table 2 is the acute cultural adaptation results. Table 3 is the final phase supporting the socio-cultural adaptation phase.

### **Pre-Transition Phase**

The pre-transition phase was described as the athletes' preparation and research towards the mobility overseas (Ryba et al., 2016). In this sample, some athletes prepared for their mobility overseas from the USA, while others transitioned from other teams located in Europe. Therefore this phase provides the experiences of the athletes coming into Greece. This includes the try outs, collection of information and reaching out to the network of contacts at home and abroad, and finally physically reaching the destination (Ryba et al., 2017). The central psychological mechanisms that are activated during this and all phases are social repositioning, negotiations of cultural practices, and meaning reconstruction of the self (Ryba et al., 2016). With the consideration of all elements of this phase, emerged four sub-themes from the transcripts: preparation and research, consideration of relationships, expectations, and future pre-transition.

Table 1. Pre-Transition Phase

Theme	Sub-theme	Indicative Quotes
Pre-Transition	Preparation and research	“if you play good in Greece, you know, then a lot of doors open up for you so that was one of my big decisions on going back there”
	Relationship considerations	"my parents are older, ummm you know what i am saying so it's hard to leave them..."
	Expectations	“ a lot of the times coaches lie to talk to the players and get a clear understanding of what's expected and what's wanted and you know all of those things but until..but for example, I've had that happen and be completely the opposite of what we talked about you know what I'm saying and so umm a lot of times, you just never really know what you're getting into until you get off the plane and get in the gym and start living it for the few weeks so..”
	Future pre-transition	"you know making sure, I said I'm asking the right questions next time if i had to do it again in greece"

**Preparation and research.** This was one of the most common sub-themes described as the athletes preparation, playing repertoire and reasoning leading to the migration to Greece. Athlete 1 had no prior experience overseas, and athletes had played in Greece twice over their careers. Athlete 1 and 4 were rookies when they began their journey overseas as 1 stated, *“Greece was the best situation because of the league and also me being a rookie, it was the best situation for my time when I was coming out”*. Athlete 5 prepared for his transition to Greece at the end of the season after having two unfortunate professional experiences in two separate teams over the course of one season. Athletes had knowledge

about Greece prior to arrival, the beauty, the climate, and even one mentioned his motives behind playing in Greece was from the great reputation of the Greek basketball leagues.

**Relationship considerations.** This sub-theme encompassed the consideration of relationships and the negotiations made for the athletes' mobility. One athlete mentioned that although he does not have any romantic ties, though it is a scary thought leaving his parents behind for the fear of health complications. Two of the athletes had their wives accompany and support them during their professional seasons overseas and in Greece. In addition, one family had to organize specific arrangements to support and nurture their family which was executed by the basketball organization.

**Expectations.** This was also a frequently mentioned sub-theme which considered the cultural and professional contract expectations prior to the athletes relocation. One athlete expressed his preparation for his second season coming into Greece, he knew what he was getting himself into with the organization and fanbase and this eased his entry back into the culture. However, other athletes brought up more statements in regards to the professional expectations. For instance, athlete 2 and 4 were aware of the financial risks coming into Greece due to previous difficulties receiving prompt payments, and not receiving their bonus money at the end of the season. Moreover, one athlete expressed that, *“some guys started off the season went months without getting paid..and umm you know that’s just unfortunately kinda been the staple there...(split) you know its kinda just one of those things..there’s certain countries that you know..stuff to expect like that from and sadly...Greece is one of them.”*

Moreover, although some athletes living expectations were met, others landed in Greece with other circumstances awaiting them, *“I didn't expect to be in a hotel for a year \*laughs\*...I expected to be in a apartment or maybe a house with shared teammates.”*

**Future pre-transition.** During the analysis of the pre-transition phase this sub-theme was created after collecting statements attributed to the reflections of future pre-transition and preparation for athletes' mobility, and advice likely given to other athletes'.

It was common for experienced athletes' to receive contact from other athletes' wanting to gain insight on agents, clubs, teams, locations, and lifestyles. Advice includes the importance of looking into the coach, taking risks, be optimistic, open-minded, and to be surrounded in a positive environment with like-minded values. For instance, Athlete 2 had ten years of professional experience overseas and mentioned the significance of taking chances when considering opportunities abroad because there is always something to gain; taking the best risk with the highest chance of being successful. Meanwhile athlete 3 mentioned, *“I'll like warn them like it's going to be tough regardless, you know what I mean whether you are making, you are getting all of your money on time this or that or you are in the best city or whatever, it's like you gotta stay focused on that basketball.”*

Overall, the four sub-themes that emerged from this phase summarized the athletes' preparation, relationship negotiations, expectations, and advice for future pre-transition considerations. Athletes used their network of athletes and agents to gather research and advice in Greece. Additionally, contracts were set with expectations and requirements for those who migrated with their families.

### **Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase**

The second phase of the cultural transition model is the acute cultural adaptation experienced by athletes the moment they enter the host country, in this case Greece. Due to the athletes' diverse backgrounds, this phase considers the reflections of athletes' first and second times in Greece. This phase is dedicated to the repositioning of the self within the cultural and social practices, daily living, and the team and professional environment (Ryba et al., 2016). Psychological acculturation is mainly based on the psychological well-being of the athlete within the sociocultural contexts (Searle & Ward 1990). From the findings, this phase was the most illustrated phase from the athletes' interviews. This is not surprising to the researcher because the main question of the thesis was based on the adaptation process of the athlete within both cultural contexts of the host environments in Greece and the basketball organization. The sub-themes that surfaced from the data analysis are: acculturation and modifications, role of relationships, basketball professionalism, adaptation to performance environment, and flow of adaptation.

Table 2. Acute Cultural Adaptation Phase

Theme	Sub-Theme	Indicative Quotes
Acute Cultural Adaptation	Acculturation and modifications	"just to do a simple task that should take 20 minutes, it takes a whole day to a week"
	Relationships	"met a lot of amazing people, uhhh a lot of good people and.. I dunno that I really like, and I will probably keep some relationships with, you know for as long as I can while I am so far away"
	Professionalism	"the management, this year..well i guess both years were you know, were pretty good, this year was excellent they basically uhh catered to our needs..well catered to my needs, and most of the team's needs, when we needed something done, they got it done pretty quickly"
	Performance environment	" we had actually 3 coaches this year, umm the first coach was really not communicating his direction of what he wanted and we as a team just got tired of it, we stopped playing, we kinda shut down our motor, we lost a lot of games that we should have won"
	Adaptation flow	"Honestly there's really not too much else to it other than time..you know you just kinda need some time to get used to your surroundings"

**Acculturation and modifications.** This sub-theme looks at athletes merging and repositioning of previous culture, lifestyle, and needs within the new context. The rookie athlete was placed in a hotel with poor wifi connection and no access to a kitchen; the team was given food vouchers at restaurants located throughout the city. He brought up his daily tasks being difficult to manage due to the slower change of pace and a clash with the store hours of operation with his new training routine, *"It's like I gotta go before my stuff, I gotta*

*go in the morning or I gotta go late at night! or if its on a Tuesday or Thursday, I gotta go heck early in the morning because everything is going to close at 2 for the rest of the day!”.*

This athlete stated irritability during the first couple of weeks because of the lack of things to do on his own time while continuously trying to arrange and adjust to the daily demands of his new life situation.

The topic on the poor financial status of the Greek economy was not ignored by most athletes, especially for one who had previously played in Greece years back who had to get used to the new strict adjustments at the banks.

Language barriers were not as strong for athletes playing in larger cities where English was broadly known, however two athletes mentioned that simple tasks took more time or was unachievable due to the inability to read Greek. The sunny climate in Greece, along with the cultural cuisine, people, and enjoyment of the general society were popular elements during their repositioning into the society. One athlete mentioned the view of the sea in his place in Greece bringing familiarities back to his home in the states. Moreover, the relaxed way of life in the Greek culture remained a highlight within the acculturation process, *“I like how everything is like relaxed, like you go eat and you like sit there for 3 hours to eat you know, it really chill, instead of everything being in a rush and everything always be like “here you go, here’s the bill”, pay and then get out, and everybody in a rush”.*

**Relationships.** This sub-theme focused on the statements surrounding the contributions of relationships during the acute adaptation phase. As mentioned before, two of the athletes transitioned to Greece with their spouse, while others were single. The athlete who had his spouse with him expressed the adjustment process being easier having her with

him to support him with the tough times and to have someone to talk with, *“she was with me the whole time, so you know it was..pretty you know, easy for me to uhh, adjust having her there with me, to have someone to talk to, be with you, be there for you when you go through those tough times”*.

Additionally, one of the single athletes mentioned the significance of having relationships when they have free time. He shared the experience of a teammate who had his girlfriend with him, *“...they basically have their family in the room you know?[....]coming back decompress from the day while other people may find a girlfriend for like a week or...two weeks and then have like that time to like decompress and get back to the grind of everyday...”*. Later, this athlete found a host-family mid-season *“it’s been a very big highlight because, especially being at the hotel, being well in front of men all the time, nobody cooks...nobody is from this city so they don’t have family here themselves so it’s like you miss a whole aspect out of holidays, out of dinners, out of being truly relaxed in a good place of conversation”*.

The athletes’ agents served as notable relationships to foster communication with the basketball managers and presidents when they needed *“...to get things done but nothing ever got done”*.

Teammates such as the domestic players and veteran transnational players helped the adjustment process for rookies and some of the players who arrived later in the season. Moreover, the rookie athlete was a self-acclaimed *“guinea pig”* for his American teammates because he took leadership to navigate and make mistakes through the unknown Greek cultural context which evidently helped his teammates achieve their tasks faster.

**Professionalism.** This sub-theme covers the themes surrounding the players experiences, expectations, and negotiations within the topic of professionalism in the Greek basketball culture. The basketball organizations were analyzed based on the statements athletes' made that challenged expectations and experiences with the professionalism. From this sample of athletes, 4 out of the 5 expressed the lack of professionalism of the management during adaptation to the societal and basketball settings that accumulated from their arrival, *"you know and somebody who coming brand new, it was a lot that needed to be done...not on a day to day basis, slowly it kept building because they were taking their time after one task after another task, they weren't following through with the one task, the first one...so it accumulated a lot and it built up almost towards the end where it was getting frustrating a lot"*.

The one athlete who did not experience troubles mentioned timely payments and great management that catered to the team's needs. However, the rest of the athletes experienced common administration issues and prolonging of the individual and team needs. This included the absence of team jerseys for games, late car arrivals for the athletes personal use, and salary issues. The build-up of these frustrations are expressed in the following statements, *"it was really...umm, irritating to see that still going on and they expect me to be a professional at the same time.."* and another stated *"the organization and the people managing it there, it was umm, they have a lot to do..you know they are just as big as the, a part of the team as the star player or the you know, but that is...all the people see on the outside of it...is "okay he is scoring points, ok he is not", but you know the president, the*

*managers, the you know coaches, they all play a big deal on what, you know, what happens with the team”.*

Moreover, the group acculturation of the professional basketball season was demonstrated when athlete 5 stated the differences from NBA and the Greek league. Teams in the NBA compete within the NBA league, whereas the Greek leagues compete outside of Greece in the Euroleague, Eurocup, and Champions League leading to special accommodations for the alpha leagues schedules leading the smaller teams extending their season up to a few weeks than expected.

Overall, the experiences of these athletes differed in organizational aspects but when it came to the payments there was commonalities. For some athletes, the financial expectations and agreements were unmet. It was common to receive slow and partial salaries or nothing at all; another was threatened against his salary if his team did not meet performance expectations towards playoffs.

**Performance environment.** Ryba and colleagues (2016) discussed aspects of fitting into the club and team culture, therefore this sub-theme aims to extend upon this topic by assessing the contribution and threats to the psychology and performance of athletes and teams during their training and performance. Many topics surrounding the psychology of the athlete and team during the interviews regarding frustration, focus, team cohesion and communication. For instance, the frustrations outside of the performance environment seemed to affect the performance of some of the players leading to stress, irritability, lack of focus, and bad energy on the court. For the rookie the build-up of daily tasks is stated, “...affected my performance cuz I am not 100% focused on the game and 100% focused on

*practice, I am trying to figure out how to make my life outside of practice and outside of the game better cuz it was terrible*". Player 2 added to this point due to his experience, by expressing that young players lack experience and are easily affected by external factors that lead to problems for the team such as mental blocks and communication failures that generally do not get better if the backbone of the team is flawed.

One athlete expressed that teammates sharing the same role can experience within-team friction due to the desires of more playing time. In addition, another athlete mentioned the presence of fanatics in the audience as another intruding factor on the court. Whether his team was home or away, the fanatics of the home team would use extreme measures to mark their territory such as the use of flare guns, batteries and cigarette lighters thrown on the court, and shouting at the referees to make plays for their yelling at the referees to make plays for their teams side, *"it was a huge battle trying to win every single game whether you were at home or away."*

Moving forward, the coach and team play a large role in the psychology of the athlete and team which was expressed by most players. Two players experienced problems with their coaches. Player 4's team experienced change of 3 coaches within one season due to the lack of communication and direction which lead them to shut-down until they eventually found a coach that fit the teams needs by providing strength, interest, and confidence. The other athlete struggled with the character of his coach and the controlling coaching style. This prevented the natural and instinctual role of the player and this was expressed as difficult to adjust to. These aspects were shared by the whole team and this created tension and even verbal arguments during the games between teammates and coach.

On the contrary, one athlete mentioned that the combination of the team signing him and a couple of others while having a coach that believes in the players elevated the team's success from losing all games prior to his arrival, to finishing top 6 in the league. Finally, expectations from the team and coach led one player showing vocal leadership to the younger players and this was desired by the player due to his status as a veteran.

**Adaptation flow.** The flow of adaptation is the sub-theme that encompasses the trials, adjustment time, coping skills, and mindset of the athlete while adapting within the cultural context. The rookie went through trials and errors searching for the best places to eat, shop, and get haircuts. He shared the difficulty achieving his tasks with the Greek language barrier, in amongst his attempts to find time outside of basketball to get things done. This athlete expressed it took nearly two months for him to develop a flow and have everything that he needed along with knowing where to go.

Meanwhile the experienced athlete 2 was able to cope and not stress about his lower living standards (poor wifi and subpar food) to support his team and win. He brought up the importance of keeping an open-mind, treating others professionally, and staying cool and headstrong even when the situation is negative because he is there to fulfil a job.

Athlete 3 and 4 brought up their first times playing in Greece as close minded, naive, and immature in terms of cultural adaptation. It took athlete 4 almost half the season to adjust and step outside of his comfort zone and get used to his surroundings. However, the return to Greece seasons later proved to be different. For example, athlete 3 mentioned a 2-3 week period of adjusting to the practices, teammates strengths and weaknesses, and coach expectations. Moreover, he keeps motivated by spending his down time in the gym working

on getting better and adjusting to his team's needs, *"just continue to stay confident in myself and my teammates stay confident in me, it was a good thing, and I just try to play through it and you know get the most out of what the team needed me to do that night, maybe one game I am not making my shots so i try to get, you know rebound and play defence, do something to help the team win and you know, be a positive influence on the court"*.

Furthermore, athlete 5 transitioned into Greece at the end of the season after 2 failed experiences in other teams that same season. He expressed that his adaptation did not take long possibly due to his exposure to dozens of teammates and repetitive playing experience abroad.

### **Sociocultural Adaptation Phase**

The third and final phase of the cultural transition model is the sociocultural adaptation phase (Ryba et al., 2016). Sociocultural adaptation is the balance, fitting-in, and reparations produced within sociocultural contexts facilitating positive psychological self-systems. The athletes' harmony and integration within the sport and non-sport contexts is expressed in this phase. After carefully analyzing the data documents, four sub themes emerged: outcomes and experience, optimal functioning, balanced self-system, and final takeaways.

Table 3. Sociocultural Adaptation Phase

Theme	Sub-Theme	Indicative Quotes
Sociocultural Adaptation	Outcomes and experience	"...in that realm of basketball, the referees uhh, really respect guys that they know a long time and appreciate, like the veterans"
	Optimal functioning	"they gave me a car and an apartment, so that was good, it was pretty good living conditions, good internet, so...that's the main thing that you look forward to is an apartment, the internet..."
	Balanced self-system	"you know staying motivated is definitely a personal thing you know it's just you know there are a lot of things I want to accomplish when I play and a lot of goals and a lot of places that i want to go and things that I want to experience so and i know that you know, playing well in that moment and in that season will, you know help get me there"
	Overall takeaways	"that is the one thing that uhh, is still in the mix right now, being the fact that the season is over uhh we still have some scuffle in just trying to get all the money that umm, I signed for right now"

**Outcomes and experience.** This sub-theme reflects players' previous cultural opportunities and experiences abroad, and familiarity supporting sociocultural adaptation. Four out of the five players had experienced diversity within various cultural contexts around Europe and abroad over several years. One athlete said it was a blessing to play abroad due to being able to see things from the travels that he would not have been possible if he stayed in the States. Three of the players had previously played in Greece and communicated the excitement to return to Greece. Players expressed that the country's beauty and weather contributed to the enjoyment and performance in Greece. Player 4 stated that is basketball reputation made his second experience coming into Greece a favourable one, especially

because the referees, “*really respect guys that they know a long time...and appreciate, like the veterans*”.

Participants who had experience in several years of a variety of transient contexts were able to adjust in a short-period. One athlete mentioned that he goes into “*auto-pilot*” once he is settled in after a 2-3 week period post-relocation.

**Optimal functioning.** This sub-theme is the contributing factors that are attributed to the athlete fitting into the sociocultural context while promoting their optimal functioning. Athletes expressed that basic necessities when abroad are receiving their payments, having good accommodations, wifi and internet connections, diet, and knowledge about what stores to go to. The rookie athlete had difficulties completing day-to-day tasks while balancing trainings due to his inexperience within culture settings, language barriers, and lack of guidance. The rookie athlete was placed in a smaller city and perhaps this is why the language barrier was more prominent as opposed to athlete 3 and 5 who were located in larger cities where people were more familiar with foreigners and the English language. Athlete 3 expressed that both of his experiences in Greece were very professional; the team was taken care of by the management, he received all of his money and this contributed to the comfort and positive environment “*to perform in the highest level*”. In contrast, personal and professional factors such as the struggles and exhausting season endured by athlete 5 was expressed. Moreover, he mentioned that the frustration and situational factors with his coach made it difficult for him to maintain motivation or reach the goals that he had set for himself. Families were mentioned as support to the athletes, as one athlete stated that it was easier to arrive to Greece and play basketball because the organization knew that he had a wife and

kids which made him more family orientated versus his first year in Greece as a single man. Since it is common for players to bring their spouses abroad, one player mentioned that the wives get together with each other to maintain excitement in their routines.

**Balanced self-system.** The balanced self-system is the sub-theme reflecting athletes' awareness, negotiations, and sacrifices within their basketball career abroad. This sub-theme shapes the elements surrounding the athlete being proactive within the management of their careers. Participants stated that everyone in the team is in the same position trying to improve, to be able to feed and take care of their families.

The rookie expressed achieving balance after frequently spending time with a host-family who shared their home and family customs with him. He was able to improve and relax within both basketball and day-to-day contexts.

Most of these athletes had experienced several different cultural contexts throughout their careers abroad. Athlete 2 expressed his ability to be patient and humble while dealing with unprofessional setbacks during his second experience in Greece which contrasted with his first time playing in Greece. He took the initiative and spent his salary on healthier food rather than eating fast food (which was provided by the organization for free). He started receiving slow and partial payments that led him leaving Greece and *“not burn any bridges”* in the meantime. He expressed that, *“my main focus is to do my job but when it becomes too much and... you know, you are valuing your job and the people the people that you are working for don't value you, you gotta make changes”*.

Athlete 3 carried his narrative in relation to professional athleticism and team needs. He brought up that athletes have to deal with stresses behind the competitive environment to

succeed as a professional player. In addition, the athlete expressed his ability to reposition himself smoothly in a new team by simply fitting-in, playing adhering to his assigned roles, and not showing off which helps the overall team morale.

**Overall takeaways.** This sub-theme is the final thoughts and reflections of the athletes' experiences in Greece. The goal of this sub-theme is to show the reflections from the societal, cultural, and professional outcomes. The sport and non-sport contexts are interdependent from each other however, they are interlinked with adaptability of careers (Ryba et al., 2013). Findings from this sample statements from both sport and non-sport. For instance, player 2 did not lose a piece of himself due to a failed business agreement, he took it as a learning experience for the future. Moreover, his thoughts for the future were to retire but he added that if he was given an opportunity to play in Greece again, he would only sign with certain teams. Player 4 expressed "that is the one thing that uhh, is still in the mix right now, being the fact that the season is over uhh we still have some scuffle in just trying to get all the money that umm, i signed for right now".

Athletes stated that the overall experience within the Greek society and professional contexts helped them mature and grow as players but also personally. One player learned who to trust and became better at scoping out professional situations, while another mentioned that he is aware of the type of questions that he would ask prior to signing again.

### **Discussion**

The goal of this master's thesis was to explore the experiences and adaptation processes of American basketball players in Greece in relation to the social and sport culture basketball environment, and explore how those factors interacted with their subjective

athletic performance. The cultural transition model was used as a framework to analyze and relate the transcripts with three phases: pre-transition, acute cultural adaptation, and the sociocultural adaptation (Ryba et al., 2017). The phases are not linear in progression but they are constructed in relation to dynamic adjustments within various cultural context, suggesting that a multiplicity of experiences abroad shape more of an adaptable athlete (Ryba et al., 2017).

For the pre-transition analysis the findings varied in sub-themes including, preparation and research, consideration of relationships, and expectations. The future-pre-transition sub-theme is described near the end of the discussion to provide athletes with insight and suggestions for the future migrations abroad and in Greece.

The preparation and research varied by the players previous playing experiences and reasoning behind their move to Greece within the 2017-2018 season. It seems that Greece has a high reputation within Europe and this is appealing to players coming in from abroad, however it comes with some sacrifices. The intercultural communication from other athletes helped the participants gather information on the expectations to playing in Greece and from this, athletes stated that they were aware of the possible financial risks involved. This is a part of the underlying psychological mechanisms involved in the preparation for mobility and adaptation because the athletes managed to re-construct meanings and behind their move to Greece by sacrificing financial factors to progress professionally (Ryba et al., 2017). Moreover, keeping an minded attitude helps the athletes prepare and reposition themselves using a flexible mindset fostering the adjustments of their sport careers.

Consideration of the relationships surrounding the athlete is said to be an important deciding factor for the athletes' mobility (Stead & Maguire, 2000). Two of the athletes were supported by their spouses and children who travelled with them overseas, while one supported his children back at home; this was also a recurrence throughout their profession abroad. Thus, from the findings, one can suggest that family ties are important factors behind the negotiations involved with the athletes mobility leading them to their career in Greece. It seems that the players narrative involving their families provided a positive attitude for career adaptability because the athletes were able to continue their careers abroad knowing that they were supported by their families. However, the lifecycle is also considered within the career adaptability overseas from the athlete who mentioned the difficulties leaving his aging parents behind.

Ryba and colleagues (2016) stated that poor expectations of the cultural differences was linked to maladaptive behaviours such as resentment, emotional disconnection, and social withdrawal in the acute cultural adaptation phase. Although the athletes did not state cultural expectations, they held other expectations from their playing contract varying from salary and accommodation arrangements that ended up disappointing them upon arrival and during the course of their season. This contributed to the psychological state of the athletes because they were challenged by external factors eventually affecting their performance in basketball settings.

In specific, the rookie was unable to focus during practice due to the external demands. This may suggest that the athlete lacked cultural and professional experiences abroad that hindered his social repositioning and normative belonging, preventing a smooth

adaptation. However, his day-to-day tasks seemed to be unusual for professional players due to the statement from a veteran player, *“it’s not a normal thing, normally all teams take care of your living conditions, try to get you transportation, set up your transportation for you and just do the little things so you can just focus on basketball and..winning and enjoying your life”*. Moreover, the cultural hours of operation clashed with his daily tasks leaving the athlete at risk for poor sociocultural adaptation (Schinke et al., 2011).

Berry (1996) proposes that the accomplishment of day-to-day tasks and needs are essential in the construction of sociocultural adaptation. The build up of daily tasks can interfere with the adaptation to both social and performance settings. Newcomers and rookies require extra help from their clubs during the acute adaptation phase to achieve daily tasks, familiarity, and personal needs within the Greek society, especially amongst the presence of language barriers, and clash in societal and training hours. Alternative suggestions to foster athletes in need is through utilizing the domestic players and veterans on the teams to reinforce these needs by guiding the new teammates with their daily tasks and athletic needs (Blodgett et al., 2017).

Within basketball acculturation, athletes stated that they require time and patience when adjusting to their new team, however, the statements suggested that team professionalism and administration play a large role in the athletes adaptation and performance. Unfulfilled salary expectations were deciding factors behind athletes leaving Greece or stating their plans on not returning for another professional season. Additionally, poor communication between the administration, coaches, and athletes contributed to the athletes frustrations, lack of focus and enjoyment during basketball, and tainted professional

experiences in Greece. One can conclude that the majority of these players could have benefitted from support during their challenges. Sport psychologists may be able to fill the void by supporting both athletes and staff to come to a better understanding between each other (Ryba et al., 2017). The team staff can potentially resolve misunderstandings, miscommunications, and potential cultural differences shared by both parties through the education of positive intercultural sport environments and coach-athlete relationships.

After a certain point, it seems that there comes a time where professional athletes to prioritize their needs based on professional expectations. Athletes who are proactive in the management of their careers are linked experiencing better commitment to the team and organization (Ryba et al., 2016). This is positively displayed by athlete 3 when he asked the Greek basketball team to organize certain aspects to fulfil his family requirements in Greece. In contrast, the athletes who lacked control in their situational factors like payments, accommodation and administrative issues were motivated to improve and reposition themselves in favourable situations. For instance, the frequent changes of teams in search for the best-fit for athlete 5 led him to Greece at the end of the season. Additionally, athlete 2 left Greece early and happily without burning any bridges to move forward onto a better suited professional situation. This may indicate that even though the athletes were not well-adapted to their professional contexts, their experiences in various cultural and basketball settings allowed them switch in and out of various cross-cultural settings supporting overall adapt-ability.

The problems associated with acculturation are not derived solely from the culture itself, but is drawn out of the acculturation process (Berry, 1997). The athletes decisions

leaving Greece was not due to cultural factors but unmet professional standards within the basketball organizations. The financial aspect of the Greek basketball organizations was not ignored during the analysis. As previously mentioned, the athletes struggled with the slow payments, unfulfilled salaries, and even not getting paid at all. This led them to leaving Greece early or leaving Greece with unfilled payments.

One can suggest that athletes should feel a congruence of personal and professional goals and values within the athletic culture to support the overall well-being within their careers overseas (Ryba et al., 2016). Athlete 3 represents this by his positive narrative reinforcing overall positive sociocultural adaptation. He was well-adjusted in both seasons in Greece due to his statements supporting the positive professional management, support from his wife, good coaching, and a comfortable environment to be able to perform at the highest level. Additionally, the appearance of a Greek host-family helped the rookie re-construct himself within the social and performance context which fostered performance. The familiarity of having a comfortable home, diet, and regular communication helped fill the void of loneliness and daily exhaustion from repetitive routines. The overall information suggests that relationships, professional environments inside and outside of basketball, and the repetitive experiences abroad nurture the underlying psychological mechanisms in the model to support positive cultural and professional adaptation (Ryba et al., 2017). The psychological well-being of the athlete is supported when they are able to dedicate their focus on basketball rather than external factors.

The overall takeaway from this research is described in the following quote by the rookie, *“When mental aspects get better, the personal life gets easier, more fluid”*. This

statement stands out as a representation of the significance of the athletes' psychological well-being no matter what experience they have overseas or on the court. Whether they are playing abroad or at home, the athlete needs, goals, and values must be met to support their performance and mental-state. When the athlete experiences professional and environmental setbacks, their focus and mood is affected on the court and it is up to the athlete to reposition themselves in a better situation that suits them. Furthermore, since basketball is a team sport, the team can act together and support one and other when establishing themselves within the society and basketball culture. Additionally, it is beneficial to gather perspectives of the coach and domestic players in these contexts to provide and enrich the understanding of the full picture in this topic. The accumulation of knowledge from cultural transitions can serve as knowledge for future situations, feeding back into the pre-transition phase for all athletes preparing for their quest abroad.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study includes the researchers' lack of experience in conducting qualitative research, and therefore the interviews lacked depth. Additionally, the researcher felt that the cultural transition model was a challenging model to work with and therefore, bottom-up analysis may have been more suitable for this study.

### **Conclusions and Future Implications**

This study was conducted to explore the adaptation experiences of American professional basketball players in Greece in relation to the social and sport context, and analyst how the factor interacted with their subjective athletic performance. Overall, negative

factor of professional environments had a more profound effect than positive cultural factors of Greece, leading to lack of focus and unsatisfied seasons. Managers play a great role in the satisfaction of the players on and off the court, therefore it is essential for the athletes to have their day-to-day and performance needs met. This can be fostered through open and positive communication between the managers and players. Moreover, the team is a unit and each player can support one and other. Veterans and domestic players can lead the inexperienced and new players when entering a new season so they can have a smoother adjustment into the team and social culture. Finally, athletes can use each other to gain insight on the Greek culture and professional environments by asking the right questions in relation to their personal and professional goals.

Future implications may include interviewing the coach and domestic athletes on the teams to explore the various perspectives on this topic. Moreover, it would be interesting to gather data on more players in the different levels in the Greek league. This study can be applied to future research and the possible creation of a resource to support migrant athletes. Even though this study was limited to basketball, the potential to grow this line of research into other sports and cultural backgrounds in Greece is substantial.

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### **Appendix A: Interview Guide**

#### 1. Reasons to Migrate

- How long have you been playing basketball professionally?
- How long overseas?
- How many times have you played in Greece?
- What were the reasons for moving to Greece?
- Knowledge of basketball working conditions / Agent
- Did you have any previous playing experience outside of USA?
- Please explain any sacrifices before moving to Greece?
- At what point did you arrive in Greece?

#### 2. Adaptation Process of environment/living conditions

- Finally when you got to the new environment, how was your experience adapting to it?
- Elaborate on your living conditions: home, car, city, language, food culture, schedule/times
- How long did it take you to adapt to the new environment?
- Can you explain in as much detail the positives factors that helped you settle in?
- Can you explain if there was any challenges during these times? If so what were they?
- Any psychological challenges settling in?
- Is there anything that was missing to assist you with your adaptation to the new environment? If so, explain.

- Was there any resources available to assist you with your daily needs? If yes please describe.
  - If no, how would an assistant be of use to you?
3. Adaptation Process to Basketball environment
- Elaborate on the adaptation process of basketball
  - What was your experience with Greece basketball culture versus USA basketball? (skill, professionalism)
  - Can you tell me about your experience adapting to the team?
    - What helped you adapt more?
    - Did you know anyone on the team?
  - Elaborate on the communication dynamic within the team?
  - Did you face any difficulties during your season in Greece?
4. Finally, how was your performance affected by the adaptation to the new environment
- From your experience, how did the adaptation process affect your basketball performance?
  - Can you describe how you experienced adapting to the season?
  - Did adapting to the new environment have anything to do with it?
  - Did adjusting to the new environment affect on how you played? If so how?
  - How do you feel about your overall performance during your time in Greece?
  - What could have helped you improve?
  - How did you stay motivated during those times?

5. Impact of migration period in Greece and life experience

- What did you gain from your time abroad?
- Did you learn anything about yourself during this period?
- How did it affect your basketball career?
- Would you do it again?
- Advice to others...Anything else you would like to add?