Exploring Structure and Culture in the Lived Acculturation Experiences of Newcomer Varsity Athletes in Manitoba

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ABSTRACT

With the growth of immigration in the Canadian context, newcomer athlete acculturation has grown in importance, with implications for everyone involved in the host culture sporting context. The purpose of this project was to increase our collective understanding of newcomer athlete acculturation in Canada by exploring the transition and settlement experiences of seven newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba. The guiding question for this study was: What are the acculturation experiences of newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba? An interpretive thematic analysis of the data resulted in themes highlighting particular social elements of Manitoban culture (e.g., tight-knit pre-existing social groups), mental health and resilience, and interactions with host culture systems as key elements in how the newcomer varsity athletes experienced acculturation. Such articulations support perspectives calling for further examination of the roles of structure, mental health and general wellness, and the influence of host and home context culture in understanding newcomer athlete acculturation.

KEYWORDS: acculturation, culture, mental health, newcomer varsity athletes, structure.

According to Sport for Life (2018), immigration will be the primary source of net growth in the Canadian population by 2030. Approximately 23% of Canada's population is comprised of immigrants (a landed immigrant or permanent resident) and non-permanent residents (persons born outside Canada who hold a work or study permit or who are refugee claimants) (Statistics Canada, 2016). For the purpose of this study, both categories will be considered under the term newcomer. More recently, 68% of the total Canadian second quarter population growth was attributed to international immigration, the highest for that period since 1971 (Statistics Canada, 2018). During this period in Manitoba, a province in Western Canada in a region known as the prairies, international immigration not only accounted for much of the growth in the population, but also compensated for population loss as a result of interprovincial migration (Statistics Canada, 2018).

Athlete acculturation is growing in importance, especially for sports psychologists (Schinke et al., 2016a), with implications for everyone involved in the newcomer athlete's sporting context. The purpose of this project was to increase our understanding of newcomer athlete acculturation in Canada by examining the experiences of newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba. The guiding question for this project was: What are the acculturation experiences of newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba?

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Literature Review

Definitions of acculturation has changed over time but it can be viewed as the process of learning a second culture (Rudmin, 2009) when migrants from one culture come into significant first-hand contact with members of the host culture to which they have relocated. There is a distinct change that occurs in the behavioral, attitudinal, and psychological process of the individual based on this interaction and it can be likened to culture shock (noted by Schinke et al., 2013) or a rupturing of the individual's psyche and concept of self (Ryba et al., 2016). It is differentiated from enculturation in that enculturation is likened unto socialization, where an individual learns the necessary skills to survive within their own culture through observation, which is not always deliberate (Sam, 2006). While cultural learning takes place, acculturation is specific to the process of learning another culture in a different cultural context. Moving to a new cultural context is not always voluntary (e.g., refugees who are forced from their home country), but the challenge to the newcomer's cultural identity and behavior occurs nonetheless. In other words, it is a very complex phenomenon which can occur each time the migrant encounters something or someone new in their host cultural context.

Over the last decade, acculturation has been positioned in research as fluid as opposed to a linear process, experienced as newcomer athletes navigate their host cultural context (Schinke et al., 2013). This contact with the social world around newcomers influences how they experience and understand acculturation. This point of view is informed by the social constructionist perspective. As noted by Ryba et al. (2018), Schinke's work is significant in relating newcomer acculturation as adaptive or maladaptive based on whether it is shared (where newcomer athletes navigate their acculturation experiences with the help of others in the host cultural context) or shouldered (where newcomer athletes navigate acculturation experiences in the host context on their own), becoming a benchmark for newcomer athlete acculturation research in the Canadian context. The approach or level of reciprocity of the acculturation context is shown as significant in determining to what degree acculturation is experienced positively or negatively. Schinke and McGannon (2014) posited that newcomer athlete acculturation be examined in three ways: as the athlete's responsibility (similar to shouldered acculturation where the athlete is expected to assimilate or be marginalized), with limited reciprocity (where the athlete is still expected to assimilate but with limited help from the host context), and with immersed reciprocity (similar to two-way, shared acculturation).

The host sport context becomes a significant source of cultural learning for newcomer athletes but the athlete is sometimes met with the expectation to assimilate and with a lack of reciprocity, which results in shouldered acculturation, increased acculturative stress, and increased negative perception towards the host culture (Schinke & McGannon, 2014; Schinke et al., 2013). While cohesively strong sport contexts which are not task-oriented can assist with newcomer athlete integration, Schinke et al. (2017) found that athletes' mindsets can change from optimism to disappointment with the various hardships (e.g., making deep social connections and navigating unfamiliar cultural practices) faced in the host context. This change causes a comparison with the positive, familiar home cultural context, and therefore a turning away from the host cultural context.

The work of Ryba et al. (2016) has also taken perspectives on athletic cultural transition in new directions, noting that in many cases, newcomer athletes' movement across borders is intentional and can also be impacted by a myriad of factors in their new cultural context. While noting newcomer athlete acculturation concerns related to finances, language proficiency, and threat of de-selection, among others, Ryba and colleagues note that the well-being and acculturation struggles of family members impact how the athlete experiences acculturation. Their daily social interactions with others in the host culture leads to a questioning of self and identity that must be navigated and balanced, with athletic performance likely to be impacted if this balance is not established (Ryba et al., 2018). Ryba and colleagues point to the need for

organizations and those working with newcomer athletes to be made aware of the depth of how this process impacts newcomer athletes. The importance of understanding the impact of the athlete's culture and context in relation to their interpretation and response to host culture experiences has been highlighted by Kontos and Breland-Noble (2002). The authors have also noted the need for host sport contexts and sport psychologists to increase cultural sensitivity and awareness when working with athletes from a different culture.

Multiple factors affect acculturation, but some researchers have been accused of ignoring the impact of culture during this process (Chirkov, 2009). Shifting to a focus on culture highlights the possibility that a newcomer athlete's country of origin influences how they experience acculturation and it should be considered in acculturation research, a position echoed by Garrido et al. (2012). The role of the host cultural context also comes into focus as the greater the disparity in the cultures, the more acculturative stress experienced by newcomer athletes (Garrido et al., 2012). Newcomers in the educational context, for example, acculturate at a higher rate than those outside the educational context, as noted by Garrido et al. (2012).

Many aspects of acculturation research have been challenged throughout the literature. Chirkov (2009) pointed to the prevalence of positivistic approaches to acculturation research of the time, the lack of focus on the impact of culture on acculturation, and the lack of working models of culture to guide acculturation research. He also highlighted the degree to which acculturation research ignored the role and function of language in acculturation and lacked practical application for the findings of research. As a result, the author recommended that acculturation researchers pay more attention to the newcomer athlete's home culture, take into account the host cultural context, and consider their transition experiences and the meanings they may assign to them. Critical theorists have argued that previous perceptions of acculturation have been too simple and linear in their conceptions, failed to thoroughly represent the experiences of newcomers, and position acculturation as an outcome. They choose instead to view acculturation as a social, fluid, and continuous process (e.g., Schinke et al., 2013). A lack of focus on the role of the social context (Schinke & McGannon, 2014) and cultural diversity (Blodgett et al., 2014) in acculturation research in sport psychology has also been noted in the literature. Further, Ryba (2017) noted that the role of structure and sources of power in the acculturation of newcomers has largely been ignored in acculturation research.

Methods

For interpretivists/constructivists, "individuals make multiple meanings of the social world based on their experiences: an understanding of reality is relative to an individual's context and experiences" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 37). This project follows the understanding of a relativist ontology (multiple realities based on the meanings attached to it by the individual) and subjective epistemology (how you can know or understand that reality), which are foundational standpoints of the interpretive/constructivist qualitative research paradigm. More recent explorations of newcomer athlete acculturation in Canada have been informed by social constructionism (see Schinke et al., 2016a; Schinke et al., 2016b; Schinke et al., 2017). The methods employed for this study took an interpretive approach in understanding experiences and meanings of participants instead of critiquing the structures of power related to newcomer athletes, sport, and the varsity context in Manitoba.

Participants

After receiving approval from the Education and Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) at the University of Manitoba, seven newcomer varsity athletes (five males and two females) from colleges and universities in Manitoba were recruited using homogenous and snowball sampling (Markula & Silk, 2011). Five participants relocated to Manitoba with their

families, and two participants moved to Manitoba to pursue tertiary education. Four participants participated in individual sport, and three participated in team sport. None identified as refugees or as having moved to Canada to escape any trauma in their home countries. To be included in this study, participants were required to have moved to Canada from 2013 to 2018 (a five-year varsity sport eligibility period), be a current member of their 2018/2019 varsity sport team, and also not have been born and raised in Canada or the United States of America (U.S.A) because of the similarities in cultures. Their specific sports teams have been omitted from this document because of the possible social/reputational risks associated with including this information. Similarly, their country of origin or cultural heritage was not identified, with the country classification terms in the United Nations (2019) World Economic Situation and Prospects report used instead as the country identifier for the participants. These categorizations are developed economies, economies in transition, and developing economies.

Study Design

Athletes were asked to write a letter to their younger selves (see The Player's Tribune, n.d.) detailing their experiences moving to and settling into the host cultural context. The contents from these letters were used to inform open-ended questions used in the semi-structured interviews (lasting 30 to 80 minutes) with the athletes. This is similar to the use of participants' Mandala drawings by Blodgett et al. (2014) as a means of facilitating interviews with Indigenous athletes. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), some secondary sources (e.g., online forums where people write about their experiences or perspectives or, in this case, the letters to their younger selves) may be useful to answer experience, understandings and perceptions, accounts of practice, and influencing factors-type research questions. Such secondary sources are valuable because we can access people's experiences and perspectives without shaping their responses through our data collection questions and methods. Field notes were kept by the researchers in order to note observations during and after interviews, as recommended by Sparkes and Smith (2014), and to note identified codes and themes during data analysis, as recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Data Analysis

An interpretive thematic analysis using the six step guidelines by Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted in order to analyze the data collected from the participants. The themes were chosen by the primary investigator and agreed upon by both members of the research team after familiarization with the data, initial coding, placement of codes into emerging themes and sub-themes, the creation of a thematic map, definition and naming of the themes, and the production of a report using part of the extracts necessary for answering the research question. The aim of this process was to produce research that "represents the 'real' experiences of the participants" (Markula & Silk, 2011, p. 38). The primary investigator identifies as a newcomer to Canada and the co-investigator identifies as a second-generation newcomer to Canada.

Results

Discussions with the newcomer varsity athletes revealed patterns that were later put into themes surrounding the social challenges they faced in the host cultural context, issues related to mental health, and the role of host context structure in their acculturation experiences. These themes and supporting sub-themes are discussed below. The pseudonyms used for the athletes are Anthony, Chris, David, Jordan, Marcus, Margo, and Michelle.

Socially Challenged

When speaking with the newcomer varsity athletes about the aspects of the host cultural context that made it difficult to settle in or adjust, social interactions with members of the host cultural context were identified as a significant factor. The supporting sub-themes are: 1) Making sense of cultural differences, 2) Making Canadian friends is hard, 3) Adjusting to language and communication differences, and 4) Facing discrimination and prejudice.

Making Sense of Cultural Differences

As the newcomer varsity athletes settled into their host cultural context, the more they interacted with the host culture, and the more the differences with their home cultures became apparent. While articulating their struggles rationalizing those cultural differences, it was common for athletes to draw comparisons between their home and host cultural practices. Of his early experiences with the culture in Manitoba, "Jordan", when speaking about how he acted around people in his home country versus his host country, noted, "I was just so used to that lifestyle that when I moved here, I had to like, restructure how I did things… 'cause people act differently in a first world country as to a third world country." He also shared about a measure of finding balance between his home and host culture identities by stating, "I'm able to be my full self now… but still like, there's certain things that I can't do around people… because they don't like that." "Michelle" also shared that, "It's been very tough for me because of the culture… I came from a culture… where people used to hug each other, to say hello every time… it's been… a huge cultural shock." This culture shock even extended to the sport context as, when contemplating the differences between how her sport is played in her home country versus her host country, she noted, "Another thing that is different like the way they play and the way we used to play back home."

Making Canadian Friends is Hard

Making social connections proved challenging for the athletes as they struggled to make friends with persons from the host cultural context. This area seemed to be of significance as participants attempted to adjust to life in another culture. "Margo" noted that, "Making Canadian friends is pr…, like really hard…, first of all they're super different from (home country) friends… like they… don't hug… they don't like contact as much." This drew comparisons with what friendship meant, as well as the depth associated with it in her home country as she shared, "Here like, it takes a long time like to actually be… close friends… you don't feel it." "Chris" noted that it was a "culture shock" when he found that, "… it was not that easy to make friends because it was just more of a culture thing where they're all friendly, but that doesn't mean that it's so easy to become friends." "Anthony" found it "hard to make friends" and attributed it to not being talkative and not relating to aspects of Canadian culture such as hockey and the music.

Discussions with the athletes gave a hint as to why it was hard to develop "strong" friendships with some members of the host cultural context; the closeness of previously established friend groups and finding it difficult to break into them. Chris stated, "Most of them know each other from high school… the relationship that they have with each other is closer… it's a bit harder for me to come in and fit into that dynamic." "David" noted that, "When you come here people are already in like ah, small cliques", but gaining more acceptance and developing friendships increased for him later in the varsity sport context. For Jordan, being a newcomer in high school before coming to university/college was beneficial to his university/college experience. He said, "Coming like, in high school actually helped out a lot because now I know like, some of the people who… go here."

Adjusting to Language and Communication Differences

Language and communication differences between the newcomer varsity athletes and members of the host cultural context emerged as another social factor that impacted how well the athletes settled into the host cultural context. Marcus shared that for him the, "… language barrier, was huge. I barely knew English and I knew how to write English… that was huge… it's hard to … express your feelings in some language that… you barely even know." Margo indicated that initially she "… still struggled little bit with English" but it mainly affected her when she had to write assignments and make contact with other social groups. She stated that, "I was not as, as involved as I should because I was fear of like, making mistakes with English." One thing that was helpful for Marcus was his teammates reaching out to help him with his English. He mentions, "It was so hard for me to learn English, but talking everyday with my training partners... like that guidance that I got as a student-athlete [was] through my coaches, seniors, even juniors". Athletes who knew sufficient English still shared about their struggles with communication in the host cultural context. David shared his struggle with the supposition that newcomers who speak English well were already aware of the details related to anything they needed. He stated, "They just assume you know things… but like in reality… just feeling your way through the darkness. I mean, once, once they hear you have good English, they just kind of assume that you've been here a while."

Facing Discrimination and Prejudice

The next social consideration shared by the newcomer varsity athletes in relation to their experiences in the host cultural context was related to facing discrimination and prejudice. When encountered, it had an impact on the athletes as they negotiated their new cultural context. Marcus shared, "There were some people who met me once and they were like, 'Why do you guys even move here? Like, we don't need you guys here.'" He maintained a positive perspective, and this gives insight into how he coped with facing any prejudice or discrimination. He said, "You can go negative off about that or do something positive that can change their mind." He also kept a practical view of it in sharing, "I will be blunt, there will be a racism side of different people… like not such and such a country, that's every country." For David, discrimination and prejudice were highlighted in how he felt while others from the host culture varsity context viewed him. He shared, "If it's a (sport team) retreat, make sure it's… school organized… 'cause if it's student organized, they just invite who they see."

Issues of Mental Health and Resilience

Some of the participants spoke about mental health issues they experienced while navigating the host cultural context. These expressions were related to 1) Dealing with isolation, loneliness, and depression, and 2) Showing determination and resilience.

Dealing with Isolation, Loneliness, and Depression

Many participants expressed feelings of loneliness or being on their own. These feelings prompted instances of athletes isolating themselves further from the host culture and/or feeling depressed. Michelle shared, "Sometimes here in Canada, the fact of being alone, like ah, once you're a newcomer you don't know anybody in this country… most of the time I'm by myself." Margo noted, "My mentality was the main, main issue because… I was in a completely dark place… when you're in dark place like, you just attract more dark things and then you start think…, seeing things like really bad." While these instances of feeling alone have helped her to "… become independent… not depending so much on people", she shared that "…

sometimes you don't want that, you feel, I feel pretty lonely sometimes here." Chris also spoke about his feelings of loneliness in saying, "That was another challenge for me you know, I didn't have anyone that I could really go through most of what I'm going through with."

The newcomer varsity athletes also spoke about facing loneliness and isolation in their varsity sport context. David started to question himself when examining the approach of those in the varsity sport context to him. He stated, "I could have quit. Like, there's so many times I've thought of quitting 'cause it was taking a toll, mental health and everything, it's like going through the like 'Do they not like me? What is this?'" As a result of wrestling with these issues, participants also spoke about the need for ensuring that mental health supports are put in place to help newcomer athletes. David shared, "They need to make sure… sport psych… is mandatory… they need more attention than ah, than other athletes who are already here… it should be explained to them why, and… that it's to their benefit."

Showing Determination and Resilience

The newcomer varsity athletes spoke about how showing determination and resilience, sometimes through having a positive mindset, became a useful tool for navigating challenges associated with settling into the host cultural context. Jordan remembers telling himself that, "Times will get hard because… this isn't your home… just be patient and… try to persevere through all the hard comes and… all the struggles." Michelle spoke about her motivation for persevering in stating, "I have in, on my shoulders my family's responsibility." For Marcus, whenever he felt like giving up, he remembered, "… those tears I saw in my mom's eye" when he was leaving his home country. He felt an obligation to continue because of the sacrifice his parents made so that he could have a greater opportunity in Canada.

The athletes also expressed how crucial it was for them, or for other newcomer varsity athletes, to reach out for help whenever they faced any mental health challenges while adjusting to their host cultural context. Marcus recommended that other newcomer varsity athletes "… don't hesitate to talk to someone." Of his own experience he shared, "It's the best thing that I did as a social person, I got out. Otherwise, I would have probably killed myself inside, like not talking to someone."

Examining Structure

This theme represents the various challenges the newcomer varsity athletes faced in relation to anything that could be related to a system or structure in the host context. In this case, systems or structures represent anything in the host context that could be categorized as institutional, physical, and/or environmental. The supporting sub-themes are: 1) Everything is flowers… or not and 2) Systems and struggles.

Everything is Flowers… or Not

Athletes spoke about having a positive initial experience after moving to their host cultural context. Marcus, speaking about what it was like to come to Canada and move into residence, noted, "It was, I will at least say it was like going to a hotel." Margo also mentioned that, "I talk to all my like international friends and like the first month is just, everything's so beautiful… new place… like a beautiful place, a better place. So, everything is flowers." The time of year a newcomer athlete arrives seems to play a part in shaping that initial experience. This initial affinity wore off as the newcomer athletes wrestled with the realization that their new context was not what they thought it would be. Athletes indicated that this could be for a variety of reasons such as their expectations about what their life would be like after moving to Manitoba. As a result, the athletes started to compare their home and host cultural contexts,

leaning towards or preferring the way things were back home. Margo stated, "I thought it was completely different… that was huge because those things started to come, I was like… Canada is not what I thought." David learned French in order to prepare for life in Canada based on his research showing that the country is bi-lingual. After coming to Manitoba and recognizing that knowing English was sufficient for day-to-day communication, David came to the conclusion that, "… the French I learned was basically useless, 'cause Manitoba doesn't really speak French… basically I was misinformed." From a more positive standpoint, when speaking about the greater level of recognition athletes receive in Canada as compared to her home country, Michelle stated, "As a student-athlete I have a lot of benefits of school and also, in terms of financial benefits and recognition. That was something that I was looking for back home as well and I probably never get it."

Systems and Struggles

The athletes also spoke about the struggles they faced adjusting to aspects of the systems within the host cultural context. These frustrations with systems became evident as the athletes struggled to adjust to the Canadian structure in general, most notably, the educational and healthcare systems. Margo indicated that her initial interactions with the structure in Manitoba were favorable as she noted, "You come here and you see things actually work here... I mean like, [sniffles while crying] traffic works, like the people are more polite and there is no like crime." David, when comparing the amount of tax paid on earnings in Manitoba, shared, "It's not a very friendly taxing system… even on international students. That is one of the main reasons why they (newcomers) even wanna leave." Marcus shared some of his general frustrations as he settled into life in Manitoba. He stated, "I didn't even know where to get a winter jacket… didn't even know there's a winter boots… where to go… how to use this bus."

The education system presented the newcomer varsity athletes with its own set of challenges. In some instances, the athletes found the system to be more favorable than what they were used to in their home countries. Anthony shared that, "… the education system… it's like way better here sometimes… like back home when they would throw all those like subjects at us… I found that really hard and like here's a little bit more laid back." The athletes' struggles with the education system here in Manitoba seemed to focus on navigating the administrative aspects. David shared, "When you go to an advisor or career planning… in Canada there's always this assumption that you know… looking at all these classes, nobody knows that we don't know some of the courses." David's frustration extended to the varsity sport context where he bemoaned the lack of funding support for athletes by sharing, "I (represent) for university/college but I still gotta apply for external scholarships… I gave (sport) priority here, and ahm, it really took a toll on my school 'cause like, I'm giving something priority that is not paying back."

The athletes also spoke about the frustrations they faced with various aspects of the healthcare system here in Manitoba. In speaking about her experience after getting injured, Margo stated, "The health system, like if I was back home, I would probably have my surgery like say, week of my injury. Here, I waited like, I don't know, four months, so like that killed me." She clearly distinguishes that it is, "… the system right, not the people. It's the system here is completely different… that's not Canada, that's what I learned, Manitoba's like that." These experiences shared by the athletes capture how much of an adjustment it was for them as they encountered the various systems or structures here in the host cultural context.

Discussion

Social Elements of the Host and Home Cultures

Culture is at the forefront of understanding acculturation. Defining it, however, has proved challenging (Sam, 2006). This is why it becomes imperative to understand what those cultural definitions and differences are in an attempt to understand the process of acculturation. In any examination of acculturation, it should prove beneficial to gain a further understanding of the idiosyncrasies of both the home and host culture in order to better understand the acculturation process (Chirkov, 2009). This helps in conceptualizing why newcomers have an easy or a difficult time adjusting to their host cultural context.

Socially Constructed Definitions of Friendship

For the participants in this study, making friends or developing close relationships with members from the host cultural context proved difficult, with a variety of reasons identified as explanations for this phenomenon. The difficulty making friends or establishing close relationships also made it harder for the newcomer varsity athletes to achieve a deeper attachment to the host cultural context. The variance between socially constructed concepts of friendship in the host and home cultures seemed to be a significant source of difficulty for the newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba. Participants contrasted the 'warmth', depth of attachment, and expectation related to social support characterizing friendship in home cultural contexts with the friendship experienced with members from the host culture. The conflict in definition and expectation of friendship seemed to contribute to culture shock and cause the newcomer athletes to withdraw from the host culture or establish their own social construction of friendship as a coping mechanism or explanation for host culture attitudes and behaviors. The level of reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014) between the newcomer athletes and those in the host culture helped define the expectations and definition of friendship. Most athletes indicated that they missed the level and type of friendship they enjoyed in their home cultural context.

One significant element that affected the newcomer varsity athletes' ability to make deeper social connections was the perception that the members from the host context, whether in academic or sport settings, kept very strong previously existing social groups. The participants found themselves on the periphery of these relationships and the difficulty faced when trying to establish a deeper connection with anyone in these groups proved either futile or disheartening. With some social groups established from previous levels of schooling, newcomer varsity athletes found it harder to break into such tight-knit associations at the varsity level. This led to the perception of them feeling as if they were the 'other' in such social groupings, also possibly giving rise to further feelings of loneliness and isolation. Interestingly, participants who attended some level of high school in the host cultural context before moving to the university/college context noted how helpful such social groups were for them as they transitioned institutions, making their acculturation experiences in the varsity context more positive. Nonetheless, these athletes still noted difficulties developing further social connections and support within the host varsity context. Interpretation, however, is important as it emerged that based on what was perceived by the host cultural representatives as support, a welcoming atmosphere, and immersed reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014), may be interpreted differently by the newcomer athlete based on their varied social definitions of these elements. This may call for further inquiry into the study of the interpretation of behaviors from both the perspective of the newcomer varsity athlete and the key social elements of the host culture varsity context, such as coaches and teammates (Blodgett et al., 2014; Schinke et al., 2013).

Language and Communication Differences

Language and communication have been shown to have an integral role in how a newcomer experiences acculturation (Masgoret & Ward, 2006; Schinke et al., 2011; Weedon, 2011). Some of the participants of this study struggled communicating with teammates, with classmates, and performing in contexts where they were not as proficient with the host culture language. Even for some who were proficient with English, in order to experience a more positive adjustment in their host cultural context, they opted to adopt the vocal practices and idiosyncrasies of the host culture in order to gain acceptance from members of the host culture. Some athletes reported feelings of being on their own or feeling judged by others when it came to their language skills and abilities. When limited or immersed reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014) was displayed by members of the host cultural context, the newcomer varsity athletes were more willing to make mistakes with language and communication, and engage in cultural exchange and learning. In instances where members of the host cultural context showed no reciprocity, the athletes favored isolation from representatives of the host culture.

Communication of concepts or key information is another related area where some participants felt as if those within the host cultural context only gave what they thought was necessary information. The newcomer athletes were expecting members of the host culture to ensure they had access to all the necessary information. This difference in perception could again be attributed to what the host culture considered normal in relation to the provision of information and support. The resulting implication is that the host culture may feel that they are providing the necessary support to the newcomer athlete, but it is not perceived as such by the newcomer athlete based on their cultural assumptions as to what support is supposed to look like.

A Look at the Impact of Host Context Structure

For the purposes of this project, structure is defined as any system, policy, or organization encountered by the newcomer varsity athletes. When the athletes came into contact with various elements of structure within their host cultural context in Manitoba, the difficulties experienced shaped the lens with which they viewed the host culture and by extension, the host culture's perception of them. For example, while adjusting to the weather was a more significant issue at the start of their journey settling into the host context, the athletes faced more lasting difficulty with the way the educational, and in particular, healthcare systems operated. Whether experienced individually or with varying degrees of intersection, the difficulties faced in these contexts helped to create a narrative of what it meant to be a newcomer varsity athlete in their host cultural context. In the context of access to healthcare, it was disconcerting to athletes to have to face extended periods of injury and recovery, especially without sufficient financial support, while waiting for a longer period for services that would be more easily accessible in their home countries. This resulted in the perception of a host culture that did not care about the newcomer varsity athlete as a person, and the health care system being viewed as cold and frustrating to navigate. Due to this perception, the athletes experienced a range of emotions related to longing for home, comparing home and host cultural contexts, and negative feelings of rejection or marginalization.

The newcomer varsity athletes felt a greater push from these systems to adapt to and adopt what is considered the normative behavior or expectation. Athletes were mostly left to navigate these systems and their idiosyncrasies with varying levels of reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014). This painted a negative picture of the host cultural context, leaving the athlete feeling disconnected from their host cultural context and longing for systems more like those in their home cultural context. As a result, the athletes moved further away from wanting to interact with these elements in the host cultural context, especially because it became a

negative representation of what defined the host context. This struggle between frustrations with structures within the host context and preferred structures in the athletes' home context left athletes conflicted about what was desirable and what was expected of them.

From a critical standpoint, this focus on structure in acculturation allows a deeper look at how host culture systems affect newcomer varsity athletes, as well as what can be done to help them navigate these challenges. Ryba et al. (2016) posit that the organization's role in the successful adaptation of its newcomer athlete bears as much consideration as the individual athlete's difficulties. The level of host culture reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014) communicated by the host cultural context to newcomer varsity athletes can go beyond interpersonal interactions, as the way systems were set up became as representative of host cultural attitudes as overt social interactions. Participants' responses showed that the systems they interacted with also communicated whether or not the newcomer athlete was expected to navigate their host cultural context on their own, with limited reciprocity, or with immersed reciprocity (see Schinke & McGannon, 2014). This experience became the socially constructed perception of what it meant to be a newcomer varsity athlete in the host cultural context, and therefore a representation of what it meant to be a newcomer in that context. While participants acknowledged that the way systems were set up in the host cultural context may have been different as compared to how systems operated in their home cultural context, this rationalization did not eliminate any perceptions they had towards the host culture systems.

Paying Attention to Newcomer Varsity Athlete Mental Health

Peer-reviewed literature exploring the experiences of newcomers in and from varied cultural contexts suggests that newcomers face a range of mental health issues (such as homesickness, isolation, loneliness, and problems adjusting) when experiencing acculturation in their host cultural context (Schinke et al., 2011; Weedon, 2011). Participants in this study shared experiences of homesickness, isolation, loneliness, and depression. This stemmed from the separation they felt from their home culture, whether it was a physical separation from their home country and family, or the culture shock faced while navigating life in their host cultural context. Some expressed that these feelings were experienced while maintaining interactions with persons in the host cultural context, giving rise to the perspective that encouraging social interaction between members of the home and host cultures may not be the only solution for addressing these issues in newcomer varsity athletes. Separation from home or one's home culture, especially if there are significant points of attachment in one's home country (such as family) can have a significant psychological impact on newcomers (Schinke et al., 2011). Participants indicated that the lack of support and information played a part in how well they navigated that process.

In order to address the challenges, they faced, the participants in this study developed a range of coping mechanisms, such as dismissing the differences in culture as something natural in order to make sense of it. Notwithstanding, it was evident that when faced with significant challenges such as rejection from the host cultural context and issues back home (e.g., missing important family milestones), the athletes would struggle to maintain positive mental health. Athletes articulated that there is a greater need for mental health and coping support for newcomer athletes. They also mentioned the need for newcomer varsity athletes to be made aware of how and where to access these services. One such example given was the call by athletes for the provision of sport psychology services for newcomer varsity athletes in Manitoba. The important role of support staff, such as a sport psychologist, in the positive acculturation of newcomer athletes has been highlighted throughout the literature (Kontos & Breland-Noble, 2002; Ryba et al., 2016; Schinke et al., 2016b; Schinke et al., 2017; Schinke & McGannon, 2014; Schinke et al., 2011;). None of the athletes in this study indicated that they sought out the services of a counselor when faced with issues of mental health, consistent with

the perspective shared by Smith and Khawaja (2011) in relation to the underutilization of student counseling services.

One other consideration going forward as it relates to mental health and newcomer varsity athletes is to examine what role theories and initiatives surrounding the concept of resiliency can play in helping newcomer varsity athletes adjust to their host cultural contexts. Pickren (2014) defines resiliency as, "a personality trait that helps in psychological adaptation in risky or adverse life situations" (p. 17). The author indicates that the various elements of the social context (such as the educational context and familial connections) have been shown to play a crucial role in newcomer resilience. Newcomers' cultural practices were highlighted by the author as a source of tension with the host culture or strength for the newcomer. The author also notes the importance of considering the newcomer's concept of self, identity, and cultural maintenance in understanding the newcomer's adjustment to their host culture, as well as the role they play in developing resilience. Examining the host culture and the newcomer from the perspective of building mutual resilience, where both see each other from a position of value with the ability to "enrich the host society" (Pickren, 2014, p. 19), may prove beneficial in developing resilience among newcomers and the host culture as both deal with the effects of the acculturation process. Consideration could also be given for the broader approach to studying resilience suggested by Ungar (2008) which takes into consideration the importance of resources provided by family, the community, and individual's culture in helping them to maintain a healthy well-being and manage adversity. Resilience has been shown to reduce the negative impacts of adversity (Loke & Mohd-Zaharim et al., 2019).

Conclusion

While novel in conception, this study highlights the key role that pre-existing social groups and various idiosyncrasies of the host cultural context played in how the newcomer varsity athletes in this study experienced acculturation in Manitoba. In exploring issues of structure, consideration for how the host culture systems within the varsity academic and sport context either supported or frustrated the newcomer varsity athletes in their attempts to adjust positively was brought into focus. Also, the mental health of newcomer varsity athletes was highlighted as an area where more support systems could be put in place by universities and colleges in order to assist newcomer varsity athletes in adjusting positively to their new context. More research into the acculturation experiences of newcomer varsity athletes across Canada, research incorporating the perspectives of other key social agents in the host cultural context, and that incorporates the idiosyncrasies of the host and home cultures, is recommended in order to expand and further inform our understanding of acculturation in Canada. Further research is also needed from a critical standpoint to examine the extent to which the structures/systems in the varsity sport context help or hinder newcomer varsity athlete acculturation.

Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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