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Exploring migration experiences of foreign footballers to England through the use of autobiographies

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the sport labour migration of elite footballers who have transferred from another European country to the English Premier League (EPL). Sport labour migration happens for a number of reasons, including financial gain and professional development. With this, however, comes various challenges like cultural shock and cultural dislocation. To extend the research on migration, data was gathered from autobiographies, with ten premier league footballers who had transferred from one of five selected European leagues. Results revealed a number of insights into a player migratory experience, including the importance of settling in, dealing with the characteristics of a new league, a need for positive support from the club and the negative impact of the media. Findings inform how to improve the migration experiences in both sport and other job sectors that require acculturation.

Introduction

People, including elite athletes, are now moving globally to seek employment. The global movement of athletes has accelerated since the late twentieth century, and the migration of administrators, coaches, athletes, and ancillary staff is a prominent feature of global sport.[1] In the highly competitive world of sport, driven increasingly by the demand for immediate success, athletes are now able to sell their services to the highest bidder, wherever this team may be located.[2] Furthermore, countries at the core of capitalist sport (such as the UK) are able to use their economic superiority to recruit cheaper talent from peripheral countries in order to minimize their labour costs.[3] At the same time, athletes recognize that their bodies 'are invested with cultural capital that they can translate into economic capital', which others are willing to pay large sums to acquire.[4] In light of such migration occurring in elite level sport, it is important to understand more fully the migration experiences of athletes. This study aims to provide such an understanding within the context of elite professional footballers, including challenges faced by such athletes when relocating to another country to compete.

Contextual review

Sports labour migration is a dynamic and multifaceted process, and while the reasons for it are varied a number of typologies have been developed.[5] Of relevance to this study, Magee and Sugden also devised an alternative typology of migration for English league football with a combination of

overlapping categories.[6] Their typology comprises the Settler, Ambitionist, Exile, Nomadic Cosmopolitan, Expelled, and Mercenary. Significantly, the motivations of footballers for moving can impact on migratory experiences at a later stage,[7] either mitigating against or enhancing the cultural challenges faced by migrants.[8]

Many athletes see that a successful sporting career can be a source of financial security for their families and the wider community.[9] Sports labour migration can also create tensions in the host nations, with fears surrounding cultural integration reflecting similar local-global tensions arising from increased global interconnectedness.[10] In some countries, these fears have also resulted in the introduction of 'protectionist labor [sic] barriers, including quotas, residency clauses, selection limitations, and eligibility thresholds' that are designed to protect local interests.[11] As a result, it is not uncommon for migrating athletes to have negative experiences, which can force them to return to their homeland.[12] Players can face loneliness and insecurity, due to the impact of giving up families, cultures and part of their personal and social identities in order to pursue their careers abroad.[13] In these situations, when players come into contact with different cultures that requires changes in their original cultural patterns to adapt to their new host culture,[14] they undergo a learning process, referred to as acculturation.[15] In the early stages of acculturation, migrants often experience homesickness, isolation and face language difficulties. In addition, similar issues are also felt by the migrant's families.[16] Such feelings have been termed as culture shock[17] and cultural dislocation.[18] Conversely, nations are often willing to sacrifice a degree of their national identity, and to recruit citizens 'specifically for their short-term potential to enhance the nation's international standing'.[19] In these instances, international sporting success (and the assumed associated increase in national pride) is prioritized over 'local interests', and is indicative of the significant place of sport in the national identity of some nations.

There has been an increased rate of football player migration in the 1990s, which was driven by two factors; the withdrawal of quota rules, which freed the restrictions of the number of players clubs were permitted from outside of their National Association, and perhaps even more significantly, the introduction of the Bosman ruling. This change followed a case surrounding Belgium footballer Jean-Marc Bosman, resulting in clubs being prohibited from withholding player registrations following the conclusion of a contract, which gave players more power and freedom with regards to an overseas transfer.[20] These legislative changes have had an effect on all of the major football leagues across Europe, but perhaps none more so than the EPL – the highest domestic men's football league in England. It was formerly known as the Football League First Division, before a decision was made to break away from the Football League, establishing itself as a global brand with games viewed by telecasts around the world.[21] The television rights for the new league created high financial revenue, with satellite subscription company British Sky Broadcasting Limited, (Sky) paying over £190 million for a five-year deal to broadcast matches.[22] The value of the broadcasting rights deals has increased significantly, with a record-breaking split between Sky and British Telecom (BT) set to surpass the £5 billion mark over a three-year deal.[23] These developments have also accelerated the migration of overseas footballers to England. During the first year of the EPL in 1992, there were just eleven foreign players that started the first round of fixtures. By the 2008/2009 season, there had been an increase with 358 registered foreign players having now plied their trade in England's top division.[24] This trend has continued into the latest premier league season (2018/2019) with 377 of the 565 players registered at the beginning of the season not being from England.[25]

The EPL is a global product at the centre of international attention that creates added pressure, has an insular nature in its traditions and is positioned as the dominant domestic sporting competition in the U.K.[26] For these reasons alone, it is vital for an overseas player and their clubs to understand the consequences of such a significant career change. Previous research has provided some evidence of the challenges players face when migrating from one country to another, especially in elite level football. For example, Weedon interviewed youth footballers following their migration into English Premier League (EPL) academies, and Richardson et al. interviewed

five young players who had transferred to EPL clubs.[27,28] Our study aims to expand on this limited research evidence, in order to more fully understand the experiences of overseas players migrating to the EPL, while being aware of the social and cultural implications of living and working abroad as an elite athlete. In the current study, we explore a sample of elite footballers. We adopted an in-depth qualitative approach, using the autobiographies of elite players with the aim of understanding the migration experience of elite foreign players moving to the EPL, including the challenges faced by such athletes.

Methodology

Using autobiographical data

One potential avenue for understanding players' experiences of migrating to the EPL is by gaining direct information from past and current players through interviews.[29] However, interviewing such elite athletes is difficult, with Sparkes and Stewart highlighting time, access, and cost as barriers to conducting interviews.[30] Sparkes and Stewart proposed autobiographies as an alternative analytic resource due to the ease of access to elite performers, the low cost, and how autobiographies can provide a depth of insight. An autobiography can be defined as a person's written story of his or her own life.[31] They can provide a written narration of the prominent aspects that have occurred throughout the athlete's own life, within the context of their living society, allowing them to share both individual and social experiences.[32] Autobiographies also have mainstream appeal,[33] with human's socially constructed experiences that are conveyed through storytelling, dominating contemporary publishing and allowing people to consume and spread information.[34] From a research point of view, autobiographies focussing on the careers of athletes, as they provide detailed information about their lives,[35] have been used as an analytical resource in a number of studies in sport. These have focussed on investigating illness and injury,[36] mental health issues,[37] and difficulties from alcohol.[38] Butryn and Massuci suggest that by investigating an athlete's individual story, researchers are better equipped to understand athletes' experiences.

Sparkes and Stewart (2016) highlight how autobiographies can provide appropriate data concerning elite athletes due to their availability, and the illuminating insights they can provide, and that they can enhance our understanding of such social phenomena as migrations experienced by elite individuals who lived through them (Plummer, 2001). However, Smith and Watson (2010) call researchers to consider the authenticity of autobiographical texts, highlighting that readers of autobiographies should consider while such writing may contain 'facts,' they are not factual history about a particular time, person, or event; rather they offer subjective truth rather than face. Autobiographical accounts are influenced by a range of factors, such as the writer's own motives and biases, and their ability to accurately recall events and experiences (Howells & Fletcher, 2015). Thus, autobiographical texts may be considered as 'commercial commitments' (Thing & Ronglan, 2014, p. 1), and outside influences might influence the style of the narratives (e.g., length and depth of content) as well as the 'inclusion and relevance of psychosocial-related content' (Howells and Fletcher, 2015, p. 46). When using autobiographies, we need to recognize the intersubjective exchange between narrator and reader (Smith and Watson, 2010), and Sparkes and Stewart highlight how the use of autobiographies propose that readers need to adopt a 'critical analytical stance' (p. 126) when reading such texts. Taking these debates in the literature into account, we use autobiographies in the current study as they illuminate our understanding of theexperiences of elite players migrating to play in a new country.[39] In addition, the autobiographies provide the involve players recounting the personal experiences that are important to them (i.e., what is important when moving to another country to play football). As the aim of the current study is to understand the 'lives' and 'experiences' of players migrating to play in the EPL,

autobiographies appear a very suitable resource to understand the subjective experiences of this elite sample.

Sampling procedure, participants and analysis

A detailed search of elite male footballers who had played in the EPL took place. To ensure that the selection of autobiographies was relevant to the topic of interest, purposive sampling was used to identify appropriate participants that fit the particular area of interest.[40] The initial criterion for inclusion was that the autobiographies had to be of an elite footballer. When classifying an 'elite' player, eight broad categories defined in previous research were considered for inclusion/exclusion of an elite player.[41] This included categories such as their international level, experience, professionalism and training frequency. A player also had to have represented their countries first team, and also has to have made at least fifty appearances in the EPL. The second criteria were that players had to have transferred from one of the top four European leagues (Spanish La Liga, French Ligue 1, German Bundesliga & Italian Serie A) or the Eridivisie into the EPL at any point during their career. The top four European leagues were selected through their current UEFA coefficients, which are based upon their current levels of success in European competition. The Eredivisie was also used due to the frequency of transfer activity from that league to the Premier League, with at least two per season over the last eight years and thirty-nine in total over the last seven seasons.[42] The final criteria were that the autobiography had to include information about their transfer to, and subsequent time playing, in the EPL. The final sample consisted of 10 male footballers (no female footballers who had written an autobiography that have met the above criterion of representing their countries first team, played over fifty matches in the female equivalent Women's Super League and transferred over from one of the five leagues). This sample included two autobiographies from each of the five European leagues; Holland, Spain, France, Germany and Italy (the details of the players sampled are summarized in Table 1).

After sourcing the autobiographies, the first author read through each book, identifying and highlighting specific information relevant to the research question of understanding the experiences and challenges of elite football players migrating to the EPL. This data was transcribed and thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's guidelines.[43] Six key guidelines were followed here, where initially, the first author immersed himself into the data by reading and rereading the autobiographical data. The second stage saw the generation of initial codes to identify and provide a label for potentially relevant information. A shift then took place from the initial codes by putting them into themes. The initial codes were reviewed to identify areas of similarity and overlap that could be used to generate a theme, which would have captured something important about the data in relation to the research question. All themes were then reviewed in relation to the initial codes and all of the data gathered to ensure that all the themes were relevant. The themes were then defined and named in order to differentiate their unique value to the research question, before finally being presented in the actual report. Throughout this process, the second and third authors acted as critical friends.[44] They were not involved with the initial data collection and analysis; instead, their role was to challenge the first author on his interpretation of the data, and the organization of the thematic structure. This process resulted in four general themes; *issues of settling in a new living environment*, the *need for positive support from their clubs, appreciating the characteristics of English football*, and *increased media scrutiny*.

Table 1. Footballer, club and autobiography information.

Footballer	Transferred from	Transferred to	Title	Year of transfer	Year of publication	Premier League appearances	International appearances
Luis Suarez	Ajax (Netherlands)	Liverpool FC	Crossing the Line – My Story	2010	2014	110	106
Maya Yoshida	VVV-Venlo (Netherlands)	Southampton FC	Unbeatable Mind	2012	2018	135	88
Pepe Reina	Villarreal (Spain)	Liverpool FC	Pepe – My Autobiography	2004	2011	285	36
Fernando Torres	Atlético Madrid (Spain)	Liverpool FC	Torres: El Niño: My Story	2007	2009	212	110
Didier Drogba	Olympique de Marseille (France)	Chelsea FC	Commitment: My Autobiography	2004	2015	254	105
Eric Cantona	Nimes (France)	Leeds United FC	Cantona: My Story	1991	1994	143	45
Uwe Rosler	FC Nürnberg (Germany)	Manchester City FC	Uwe Rosler – My Autobiography: Knocking Down Walls	1994	2013	103	5
Jens Lehmann	Borussia Dortmund (Germany)	Arsenal FC	The Madness is On the Pitch	2003	2017	148	61
Patrick Viera	AC Milan (Italy)	Arsenal FC	Viera: My Autobiography	1996	2005	307	107
Dennis Bergkamp	Inter Milan (Italy)	Arsenal FC	Stillness and Speed: My Story	1995	2014	315	79

Results and discussion

Settling in a new living environment

Throughout the autobiographies, players (indirectly) spoke about the acculturation process, and the importance of settling in their new environments and the many challenges that came along with this. One of the most prominent issues surrounding this transition, was the difficulty in speaking the national language. Didier Drogba, an Ivorian who moved to Chelsea from Olympique de Marseille in France, encountered this issue, saying 'My initial problem was that I didn't speak English, my command of the language extended to the pointless sentences that all French kids learn at school'.[45] This lack of English language proficiency had an effect on Drogba's ability to find somewhere to live, claiming that his 'poor command of English' meant he 'couldn't face the thought of visiting loads of houses'. The anxiety that is present in this comment can be added to the loneliness and insecurity that Maguire and Stead identified as issues faced by migrating players.[46]

Spanish player Fernando Torres also found the language barrier particularly difficult when he transferred from Atlético Madrid. He says, 'one of the biggest problems I faced when I first moved to Liverpool was the language barrier. My English was limited',[47] something he claims to have prevented him giving 'as much as I would like' in terms of expressing himself both on and off the pitch. This barrier can, therefore, impact on the on-field performance of players, and subsequently their careers and livelihoods. The language issue also had an influence on Suarez' career both on and off the field. He claimed that, 'To start with at Liverpool, I had to rely on gestures to communicate'.[48] The location within England should also be considered for Torres and Suarez. Liverpool English can also be referred to as Scouse, an easily distinguishable accent, that some claim to have regionally specific grammar and vocabulary to be considered its own dialect.[49] Due to this regional variation, Torres found particular difficulty when conversing with the medical staff at his new club. When highlighting an early experience of having to explain an injury to the medical staff, he says:

> One place you can't afford to get it wrong is at the doctors. You have to be very careful. If you don't explain your symptoms properly, you can end up being given the wrong treatment. If you can't explain exactly where the pain is, and what kind of pain it is, it can hinder your rehabilitation.

In fact, this language barrier was a common issue amongst most of the players when migrating to England. French player Patrick Viera, for example, felt a particular pressure. He says:

> I remember how difficult those first few weeks were. I didn't speak the language and, in England, more than anywhere, that's a handicap that you have to get over quickly . . . The English think that not speaking their language shows a lack of respect and, in the end, they are quite right.[50]

In a sporting culture that has previously been identified as xenophobic, in terms of the media and supporter attitudes,[51] not speaking the language can result in players being perceived to be more 'foreign' than others.[52] These players are often the first to be blamed following a poor team performance, with their dedication to the team questioned. Moreover, football managers have historically hired 'those who most resemble themselves since they believe they can be trusted to act in the expected manner'.[53] Torres claimed that the manager did 'insist on the importance of learning English' because it would help him 'understand and integrate' into the local culture a lot quicker.

Issues with speaking the new language are a particular challenge for the players coming to England, as is supported by Weedon, who found that academy footballers experienced negative feelings of frustration and despondency when interacting with native players. In other employment situations, however, language may be less important for several reasons.[54] According to culture learning theory there are considerable learning outcomes across individuals and groups, including personal factors, such as motivation and expectations, and situational factors, like

previous experience and intercultural contact.[55] In football, for example, there is perhaps more practical reasons that enhance the expectation of them learning the language. There is more cultural diversity in European football teams compared to other work sectors such as labour work.[56] All of the players here were motivated to learn the language, either independently, or with the help of others.

Language issues were not confined to the player, but also extended to their families (as both Evans and Piggott, and van Tonder and Soontines highlighted. A concern over their family was a common theme to emerge within autobiographies.[57] Jens Lehmann highlighted the difficulties that his family faced when he migrated to England from Germany. He says 'Besides my salary, two things were important to me: a house for the family and a good school for my kids'.[58] In terms of his children's schooling, Lehmann's child initially had a negative experience. He explains, 'to move to a neighbourhood and a school where, initially, he did not understand a single word. He began to suffer from stress induced hiccups that would not stop during the first few days', something that Lehmann stresses was 'too much for him (Mats, his son). He felt a total outsider, an alien, whom no one understood'. Because of his own circumstances, Lehmann says 'I myself could not be of much help to my kids as I had to go to work, in other words, training'.

Several players also struggled to adapt to the environmental differences that they would be experiencing in England. Pepe Reina points out:

> when you move to a new country [in this case from Spain], you have to pick up the new language, adapt your culture, get used to a new way of driving and adjust to a different climate – and you do all this without the support network you had at home.[59]

He says that he and his wife could 'not prepare [themselves] for when you leave a hot climate and go to one where it feels like it rains all the time'. Torres also speaks about adapting to the climate and lifestyle differences, saying 'you have to get used to a new country, a new currency, and new climate, so you have to feel comfortable in your new home'. Drogba however, saw the negative side of not adapting to a new environment, he says:

> The move to England had been harder than I'd expected. I had a lot to adapt to both in terms of the language and the team's way of playing, and my family had a difficult time adapting as well.

He adds that his challenge was exasperated because his wife and children were, at the time, living in a hotel suite, something Drogba argued was unsustainable in the long term. This perceived challenge of settling in has also been found previously. Richardson et al. examined the migration of elite young football players moving to the EPL finding that leaving their home and family to try and establish a career in professional football, in an unknown environment, was particularly difficult.[60]

Maguire identifies the 'settler' category of athletes that stay in a host country for a considerable period of time. However, the time taken to settle in to living and playing in England for these players should not be underestimated. In Magee & Sugden's study, a former Manchester City forward said it took him 'about 4 years to get to grips with it all' before eventually staying in England for 11 years. All of our analysed footballer autobiographies revealed difficulties with the acculturation process that followed their transfer.

Appreciating the characteristics of English football

Difficulties with settling are not confined to off-field problems. Several players spoke of the unique differences and challenges that come with playing in the English Premier League. Dutch player Dennis Bergkamp (who moved from Italy), for example, was told that 'when he first came he needed to toughen up a bit. At the time, he wasn't as physical as he became later, but the English Premier League was very physical'.[61] Maya Yoshida is another player that quickly learnt about the physical nature of the league. After making his debut he says, 'once in the Premier

League, I quickly realised that physicality is a must for a centre-back'.[62] He goes on to claim: 'In England, being strong physically and mentally is a minimum requirement', so much so, that he created a plan to do extra strength training in the gym. Drogba is another player that struggled with the initial physical nature of English football. He says 'In England, when you get fouled, you have to stand up and shake the guy's hand! At the time, it was a big culture shock and let's just say that I took a long time to get used to it'. Torres also found out about the characteristic, and was quickly told, 'you've got to get to the gym. You're too thin to play in England'. Although not related to the topic in question, other research has provided evidence for the importance of both a physical and physiological profile for elite soccer players, something which should be considered during sport labour migration.[63]

A number of players identified further physical challenges that the EPL posed to them, namely the speed and intensity of the play. Lehmann admits, 'right from the start I realised that I would have to speed everything up . . . the football there is strong, hard, quick . . . I had to adapt to the English way of playing, and that meant getting used to a game that was harder'. Viera also speaks about the intensity, something that he enjoyed. He says 'English players are perhaps less technical . . . but they make up for these shortcomings by playing with real intensity. I have to say I love the English game'. In contrast however, Drogba took time to adapt to this new-found intensity, admitting that 'I had been shocked, by the relentlessness of the premier league and the pace at which games were being played'. The increased physical requirements of the EPL was exasperated by the lack of a mid-season break in the playing season over the winter months, as is common in many European countries. Yoshida points out:

> There is no winter break in the Premier League, unlike domestic leagues in other European countries such as Spain, Italy, Germany, France and the Netherlands. For a player, it is also a time to recharge your batteries both mentally and physically after the first half of the season. However, in England, where I understand that football is part of people's everyday life and has always been the biggest source of entertainment, the league schedule gets busier instead of coming to a break during the festive period! . . . In that winter, I found it seriously tough to play on New Year's Day with only a two-day interval.

For the football migrant, needing to adapt to different working conditions and playing styles is a key factor. In other employment sectors, (such as factories or office work) migrants typically find a very similar working style, yet our findings indicate that players were confronted with a new, physically demanding style that they found to be particularly challenging, in line with both Richardson et al's and Weedon's findings.[64] However, in both of these examples, the footballers studied were younger, maturing players that are more likely to be given time to develop. Elite players, conversely, are likely to be put into the first team very quickly and expected to perform, which would heighten this challenge.

Need for positive support from their club

All the players considered it a necessity to have a strong supporting network from within the club. An example of this is the perceived support they received from the manager. Viera talks up the importance of his manager:

> The reason Arsenal won the day over these other two clubs was of course Arsene Wenger [the then manager]. I was convinced by what he told me, because he had first been interested in me as a person before he had thought of getting in touch with me the player . . . Arsene really wanted me to join and he did everything he could for the negotiations to be finalised as quickly as possible.

Eric Cantona also speaks about the importance of the manager; he says 'the manager of Leeds was ready to put his confidence in me'[65] after a difficult period during his playing career in France. Cantona was very appreciative of this support, where he later says 'I would like Howard Wilkinson [Leeds United manager] to know, and the public of Elland Road [the home ground of Leeds] with

him, that Leeds gave me my life back … I came back to football thanks to him and that incomparable welcome which was given to me'.

Players also spoke about the club staff members that helped them to settle in, with mixed experiences occurring for different individuals. On one hand, Torres found that he received strong support from the club. He says 'I'm accompanied by staff from Liverpool, especially David Bygroves and Owen Brown (Club advisors). They have been great in helping me to adapt to life in Liverpool, especially at the start'. He also praises those who helped him with learning the language, claiming 'Two people were vital during my first few days in the city: Rob and Alan, the English teachers Liverpool laid on for me'. Reina shared this view, praising the staff for their help in the early days. He says 'The staff … They made me feel at home. I'll always be grateful to them for the confidence they had in me'.

In contrast, Yoshida felt that he didn't receive sufficient support from within his club. When speaking about his struggles to find housing, he claims 'I imagined that various essentials for life in a foreign country – such as a house – would be arranged by the club. But I was wrong'. Because of this 'it was a challenge not to feel frustrated or irritated by the time it took to sort out some basic stuff involved in living in a foreign country'. Drogba shared this frustration, claiming that:

> … when it came to helping me to settle in and find somewhere to live, Chelsea were not the impressive organisation they are now … I either relied on other players to advise me, or did it myself … This was not easy.

Another important support network from within the club was the teammates of the player migrating. Reina for example, was particularly grateful of the teammates who helped him when he moved to Liverpool. He says:

> There was a community of Spanish players there. Xabi, Luis Garcia, Fernando Morientes and Josemi were all at the club – and this undoubtedly made it easier for me to settle in. They were telling me everything that I had to do, all the rules I needed to follow and showing me where I needed to go … Thanks to them, the adaptation process was much easier than it might otherwise have been … Thanks to them, the adaptation process was much easier than it might otherwise have been … I had an instant sense of belonging and that was thanks to my teammates".

Rosler shared this positive experience, suggesting he:

> was lucky in that I was coming into a team that had a lot of experienced players such as Steve McMahon, Tony Coton, Keith Curle and Niall Quinn. Mcmahon was great in those early months by taking me to one side and explaining things to me when needed … It helped me settle in a lot quicker. I really appreciated him taking the time do that".[66]

Rees highlights the importance of social support in elite populations, and how support networks are crucial to health, well-being, and learning and transfer of skills.[67] For example, Cranmer and Sollitto[68] found that players receiving informational and emotional support, predicted higher levels of athlete satisfaction with their sporting experiences, and Fletcher and Sarkar,[69] highlighted how social support can improve player resilience. In their study examining migration experiences of young European players, Richardson et al. (2012) found the players' own parents to be a key source of support, highlighted how the migration transition would have been difficult without them.[70] Furthermore, Pummell, Harwood, and Lavallee illustrated how such social support from significant people in athletes' lives is crucial when making within-career transitions.[71] Similarly, this study highlights the importance for different support sources such as their manager and teammates. The findings also point to frustrations and difficulties when this support is not forthcoming. Even more worryingly, low levels of social support amongst both current and former footballers is also associated with mental health issues.[72]

Despite the increasing frequency that footballers are bought and sold, this research should also act as a reminder that footballers (and other athletes) are not just a commodity. Admittedly, they are now earning millions of pounds/euros per year and are more financially secure than a lot of other

job sectors in the UK and Europe.[73] This doesn't neglect the point however, that they still require sources of support from elsewhere to avoid a negative consequence. In other job sectors, evidence suggests that emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction can impair employee well-being,[74] but this should also be the case for footballers. Social support, such as from the family,[75] the coaches,[76] and the club[77] is key for footballers succeeding in a new country.

Increased media scrutiny and shaping public perception

Several players spoke of the intensity of the media when moving to England, and the negativity of their reports. Cantona for example, indicates that 'In England, the media publicity and pressure is much more intense than in France, and the newspapers and television can create a tension'. He says the media were 'scrutinising every little thing I did'. Cantona continues to speak badly of the British media, suggesting "there will always be little shits who are attempting to dig up dirt, even where it doesn't exist.

Lehmann was also wary of the British media, whom he claims can turn on a player pretty quickly. He says 'There is a game that the English media, though not exclusively, likes to play: praising the player lavishly, only to run them into the ground ruthlessly at the slightest mistake'. Lehmann also speaks about the importance of ignoring the media, saying that, 'my advice in terms of working with press, advice that has always worked well for me, is simple. Focus on your skills and do not pander to the press'. Drogba certainly had a difficult relationship with the media during his early days at Chelsea. He boldly claimed that, "The British media were different. I learned my lesson the hard way ... My answer was headline news in every possible media – TV, radio, newspapers, internet. Drogba went on to say that 'the media had decided on an image of me, it seemed, and that made it harder for me to win people over with my football'.

Yoshida also points out how the media can influence how they are perceived as footballers, indicating how the 'people in the media might have given him a lower (performance) grade' something with Yoshida himself was able to deal with, but admits others may struggle with that sort of label. He says, 'I know some players and managers do care, but I have never seen that sort of attitude guiding them somewhere positive or good'. Viera also agrees with this, claiming that 'the media loved to pigeon-hole people'. Rosler also highlights how manipulative the media can be, arguing that after a particular incident, the 'media turned it around and suggested there was something other than a goodwill in my gesture ... it was a reminder of how even the simplest gesture could be turned on its head when things were going badly'.

For the majority of the players here, the media was perceived as a negative influence. Similarly, Kristiansen, Roberts and Sisjord[78] found that players had to learn to cope with perceived negative content in the media, whilst Kristiansen & Roberts,[79] found that a higher performance climate increased a player's perception of negative media exposure. This link between level of performance and media exposure may explain why those in the high-performance climate of the EPL, had a negative perception of the media, whereas migrant youth players in Premier League academies, mentioned very little about the negative impact of the media in Weedon's study.[80]

More significantly, the media has, traditionally, shaped the views of fans and others in the football world (in addition to the wider public). Once established, it is very difficult for players to shake off the reputation that has been formed in the media, particularly if their language skills are lower. This was the case with Drogba and Yoshida who initially struggled physically in the English Premier League, and many of the players who struggled with the language. The players believed that the media used these struggles to portray them in a negative way, suggesting that they were motivated by short-term, financial gains and not interested in acculturating into the English culture. In this manner, the players were typecast and may be considered to fit within the 'Mercenary' category that Maguire identifies. Maguire does point out, however, that 'it would be foolish to see their categories as either mutually exclusive or set in stone'.[81] Nevertheless, once pigeonholed by the media, it can take time and considerable effort for players to move between 'categories'.

Conclusions

Migrating to another country to play football has proved to be a complex experience. This article identifies some unique challenges that occur for elite level footballers when they have to acculturate to England. Other research which has looked at the acculturation experiences amongst youth footballers, has found contrasting findings to the ones in this paper. Challenges like family settlement and media scrutiny were not so prevalent in other papers. This indicates that is may be easier for players to migrate at a younger age to prevent such stressors occurring. One key difference between the sample of elite footballers and others using academy/youth players, is that those in the elite category are expected to perform straight away and to a high standard. This could also explain the scrutiny behind them struggling with the language.

By using a variety of leagues, it is hoped that the consistent findings here can be transferred to a wider audience in similar circumstances. This allows for comparisons between several populations, that can be applied to a variety of settings and groups. It should also be noted that elite level clubs have put things in place to support foreign players, with a lot of clubs now recruiting education/welfare officers, language teachers and liaison officers. This extended form of support was evident for several players, and perhaps shows a willingness from clubs that players do indeed need patience and time to adapt to a new league and environment. In contrast, other findings pointed to frustrations and difficulties when support from clubs is not forthcoming. If athletes perceive low levels of support, they are more likely to appraise difficult situations as stressful. Our research suggests that there are negative outcomes if social support is not received, and highlights the need for football clubs to carefully consider the support they give to players migrating to EPL, as such migration experiences can be particularly stressful.

Using autobiographies allowed us access to the transition experiences of elite footballers. Alternatively, interviews would have been an appropriate approach to enter into conversations with elite players about their transition experiences,[82] and a limitation of the study, compared to interviewing, was not being able to explore further the challenges identified in the transition process. Interviews allow researchers to focus questions, and an interview-based study might have provided richer data. Nevertheless, using published autobiographies afforded us access to such an elite sample, who it would be difficult to access directly for interviews in person.[83] Autobiographies have also been criticized as an analytic tool due to the role of 'ghost writers' in the majority of celebrity autobiographies. Yet, the depth of personal detail provided in those in the current study demonstrate that the players have 'played a full role' in the 'telling' of the story. We conclude that autobiographies provided a suitable source to address the specific research aims of the current study. A further potential limitation is that autobiographical writing does not provide factual history but offers subjective truth from the perspective of the writer,[84] allowing events to be reframed in order to improve their public image.[85] Nevertheless, autobiographies focus on the personal experiences of players, which can provide a deeper kind of 'truth' than athletes might reveal directly in an interview.[86] In summary, the insights provided in autobiographies appear to be an appropriate resource to study migration experiences, as the elite players are recounting their subjective, personal accounts of transitions that are important enough to include in their 'life story'.

Finally, having to appreciate the characteristics of English football proved how unique the English Premier League is in comparison to other top European leagues, especially when considering the physicality and intensity required in such a rest deprived league. This is something that players should immerse themselves in when coming to the country, but is also perhaps something both coaches and fans should be mindful of when assessing their new players.

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86. Palinkas et al., 'Purposeful sampling for qualitative data collection and analysis in mixed method implementation research'.

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