

Retiring from Elite Sports in Greece and Spain

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Abstract. The main objective of the present study was to compare the athletic retirement of elite Greek and Spanish athletes in terms of (a) pre-conditions of retirement, (b) transitional period, and (c) consequences of the transition. For this purpose, elite athletes from Greece ($n = 76$) and Spain ($n = 57$) described in retrospect their experience leaving competitive sports through the Retirement from Sports Survey (Alfermann, Stambulova, & Zemaityte, 2004). Separate one-way ANOVAs and chi-square tests revealed differences and similarities between the transitional processes of athletes from the two countries. More similarities than differences were detected in the retirement of Greek and Spanish athletes. Based on these commonalities, we proposed a Southern European perspective on the topic. According to the present results the main characteristics of this pattern could be the lack of retirement planning, high athletic identity after the sports career, and predominance of relocation in the sports world after retirement.

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Retirement from elite sports has a great influence on the athlete's life, thus has become an important topic in the sport career development and transitions research (see Lavalley, Wylleman, & Sinclair, 2000 for a review). Between late 60's and late 80's, numerous sport psychology studies focused on the negative experiences the athletes undergo at the time of their retirement (e.g., Allison & Meyer, 1988; Hill & Lowe, 1974; Mihovilovic, 1968; Ogilvie & Howe, 1986; Svoboda & Vanek, 1982; Werthner & Orlick, 1986). Later studies revealed an alternative aspect according to which the athlete feels relieved from the heavy burden of the commitment to an athletic career (e.g., Alfermann & Gross, 1997; Coakley, 1983; Greendorfer & Blinde, 1985; Wylleman, De Knop, Menkehorst, Theeboom, & Annarel, 1993). This "crisis or social rebirth" research dilemma was answered by McPherson (1984) who claimed that the approach of athletic retirement as a single event, that is automatically traumatic or relieving, should be replaced by considering it as the beginning of a transitional procedure. According to Schlossberg's transition theory (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995), a transition is "an event or non-event which results in a change in assumptions about oneself and the world and thus requires a

corresponding change in one's behavior and relationships" (Schlossberg, 1981, p.5). In order to understand the individual's effort to respond to this change, the transition's type (anticipated, unanticipated, non-event), context (one's relationship to the transition, e.g., the coping strategies), and impact (i.e., the extent to which one's daily life is changed) should be studied. Additionally, four major sets of factors identified as situation, self, support, and strategies influence a transitional procedure in an adult's life.

The academic world embraced this view, an idea that is clearly expressed in the definition provided by the European Federation of Sport Psychology: "athletic retirement is a transition that requires former athletes' adjustment in occupational, financial, psychological and social spheres of life" (FEPSAC, 1999). In order to comprehend the transition, research has been conducted studying the retirement reasons and revealing a plentitude of factors that influence the transitional process (e.g., Alfermann et al., 2004; Baillie, 1993; Cecic-Erpic, Wylleman, & Zupancic, 2004; Crook & Robertson, 1991; Fernandez, Stephan, & Fouquereau, 2006; Koukouris, 1991; Lavalley, Grove, & Gordon, 1997). As summarized in the International Society of Sport Psychology position stand (Stambulova, Alfermann, Statler, & Côté, 2009), research showed that retirement planning (Alfermann et al., 2004; Coakley, 1983;), voluntary termination (Alfermann et al., 2004; Cecic-Erpic et al., 2004; Stambulova, Stephan, & Jäphag, 2007; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001), multiple personal identities (Alfermann et al., 2004; Brewer, Van Raalte, & Linder, 1993; Cecic-Erpic et al., 2004; Grove, Lavalley, & Gordon, 1997; Lally, 2007), availability of social support (Mihovilovic,

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1968; Stephan, Bilard, Ninot, & Delignieres, 2003; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), and active coping strategies (Alfermann et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Stambulova et al., 2007; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001) facilitate athletes' adaptation to post career. Athletic retirement has been also viewed as a decision process including the interaction and balance between push (i.e., negative considerations about the athlete's present life which induce to retirement), pull (i.e., the positive aspects of the post career life that attract towards retirement), anti-push (i.e., the attachment to the sports career), and anti-pull factors (i.e., the uncertainty of the post-sports life; Fernandez et al., 2006). What is more, literature indicated the influence of non-athletic factors upon the career transition out of sports, factors such as non-athletic transitions (e.g., transitions in the academic and occupational career; Wylleman & Lavallee, 2004), ageing and its implications (e.g., Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994; Werthner & Orlick, 1986), current status and occupation (e.g., Cecic-Erpic et al., 2004; Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003), and the cultural context of the transition (Alfermann et al., 2004; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009; Stambulova et al., 2007).

Most of the aforementioned studies were conducted in North America, Australia, and Central and Northern Europe where sport career transition programs were also developed (Anderson & Morris, 2000). Recognizing the need for culturally sensitive practice and research, Stambulova and Alfermann (2009) emphasized that researchers should avoid simply transferring "universal" theoretical frameworks from the existing studies to any socio-cultural context. It is not only the cultural context of the athlete that can influence the transition, it is the cultural context of the researchers themselves as well that may intervene when conducting research, through the preference of theoretical models, the use of certain instrument, the choice of data collection, the results interpretation, and also the researchers' race and gender (Ryba, 2009; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). In Europe, the attempt to study retirement within its socio-cultural context was accomplished through the European Perspectives on Athletic Retirement Project (EPAR; Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). The focus of the project was placed on investigating the retirement process of elite athletes proceeding from different European cultures: Germany, Lithuania, and Russia (Alfermann et al., 2004), France and Sweden (Stambulova et al., 2007).

We deemed appropriate to place the present study within the same theoretical framework as the studies of the EPAR. This career transition framework is a combination of existing transition models deriving from different socio-cultural contexts; from North American (Schlossberg, 1981; Schlossberg, Waters, & Goodman, 1995; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001), Central

European (Alfermann, 2000), and Eastern European cultures (Stambulova, 1994). Through this synthesis, athletic retirement was viewed as a transitional process involving the (a) preconditions, that is athletic identity during sports career, satisfaction with the athletic career, reasons for termination, retirement planning, voluntary/involuntary retirement, timeliness of retirement; (b) transitional period, that is coping strategies, emotional reactions to retirement, perceived difficulties during the transition –including the difficulty to change identity–, perceived financial and psychological support, duration of the transition; and (c) consequences, that is current satisfaction, perceived professional success, and relation to sports nowadays.

The Ecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) was combined along with the transition models in order to culturally situate the study. According to Bronfenbrenner, human development is influenced by micro-social (e.g., family, peers), meso-social (e.g., school), and macro-social factors (e.g., cultural values, traditions). Following the adaptation of this model in elite sports climate, athletes' development occurs in a context that can be described by micro-level (e.g., coaches, family, the athlete's biopsychosocial situation, training techniques), meso-level (e.g., federations, clubs, media attention, sport policies, counseling programs for athletes), and macro-level factors (e.g., geography, political and economical stability, cultural characteristics; Wylleman, & Lavallee, 2004; De Bosscher, De Knop, Van Bottenburg, & Shibli, 2006).

In order to increase the cultural sensitivity of this research, the transitional process should be understood within a given socio-cultural context. At macro-social level, Greece and Spain are countries geographically situated in Southern Europe and share many characteristics. As nations, they manifest parallel patterns of political behavior; for example, they form consolidated democracies since mid-1970s with a common past of inability to sustain stable democratic regimes. As cultures, viewed through the construct of cultural syndromes (Triandis, 1995), both cultures were traditionally considered primarily collectivistic (Hofstede, 1984), but also showed the tendency to evolve into more individualistic (e.g., Doumanis, 1983; Gouveia, Clemente, & Espinosa, 2003). Concerning the socio-labor environment, employees in Greece and Spain experience difficulties in combining family duties with work. This poor work-family balance could be attributed to a highly family-oriented policy model promoted in both countries and according to which social support is both received by and directed to the family, hence individuals do not receive institutional support to reconcile the demands of the family and work (e.g., Cantera, Cubells, Martínez, & Blanch, 2009; Kotowska et al.,

2010). Many similarities could also be observed in the meso-social level, regarding their sport culture. Greek and Spanish elite athletes, when successful, received public recognition and media attention but only a few of them could rely financially on their investment in sport. The course of the athletes' sport careers depended largely on the decisions made by sport authorities. However, after retirement former athletes had to decide on their own and find a job. The lack of organizational support during and after the sports career was evident. Recently in Spain, sport career assistance programs were developed, but their impact on sports culture will only become visible on the future generations of athletes (Mateos, Torregrosa, & Cruz, 2010). To the best of the authors' knowledge, sport career development was also neglected on the academic research level. Apart from a few notable and widely cited studies (Chamalidis, 1995; Koukouris, 1991, 2005), Greek literature had little to offer on the subject. In Spain, a growing interest for the study of athletic retirement could be noticed (e.g., González & Bedoya, 2008; Torregrosa, Boixadós, Valiente, & Cruz, 2004).

The recent cultural turn discourse in sport psychology (Ryba, Schinke, & Tenenbaum, 2010) calls for a more socio-culturally situated career research and assistance to athletes (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). In an attempt to fulfill this need, the aim of the present study was to compare the retirement transitions of Greek and Spanish elite athletes in terms of (a) preconditions, (b) transitional period, and (c) consequences of the transition. Based on the abovementioned cultural commonalities between Greece and Spain, we hypothesized that more similarities than differences would be detected that would suggest a culturally common pattern.

Method

Participants

The total sample of the study consisted of 133 former elite athletes from Greece ($n = 76$) and Spain ($n = 57$). We used two criteria for including participants in the

study: (a) participation in competitions at national and international level; (b) retirement from sports at least one year ago. Greek participants (56 males, 20 females) competed at national (49%) or international (51%) level in football ($n = 18$), athletics ($n = 7$), volleyball ($n = 7$), basketball ($n = 6$), water polo ($n = 6$), swimming ($n = 6$), rowing ($n = 5$), handball ($n = 3$), sailing ($n = 3$), cycling ($n = 3$), canoeing ($n = 2$), gymnastics ($n = 2$), karate ($n = 2$), beach volley ($n = 1$), table tennis ($n = 1$), fencing ($n = 1$), taekwondo ($n = 1$), wrestling ($n = 1$), and Greco-Roman wrestling ($n = 1$). Respectively, Spanish participants (47 males, 10 females) competed at national (42%) or international (58%) level in athletics ($n = 20$), football ($n = 14$), hockey ($n = 6$), cycling ($n = 4$), futsal ($n = 4$), basketball ($n = 2$), table tennis ($n = 2$), fencing ($n = 2$), badminton ($n = 2$), and judo ($n = 1$). Both samples are representative of the athlete population at the Olympic Games in terms of gender distribution.

Regarding the total sample, participants' age ranged between 19 and 55 years old ($M = 34.89$, $SD = 9.11$). They retired on average at the age of 27.50 ($SD = 6.97$) while their sport careers had a total duration of 3 to 31 years ($M = 16.05$, $SD = 7.39$) and the average time elapsed since their retirement was 7.39 ($SD = 6.00$) years. Further details for the athletic careers of the Greek and Spanish participants appear in Table 1.

Instrument

The participants answered the Retirement from Sports Survey (RfSS; Alfermann et al., 2004). This instrument was developed for cross-cultural comparisons of retiring/retired athletes and it was used in the EPAR. The authors received the English version directly from the instrument's authors. The first and the fourth author translated the basic survey into Greek and Spanish respectively, the translations were triangulated with language experts, and pilot studies were conducted to ensure that participants understood the questions and instructions.

First we asked the participants to provide general and sport demographic data. Then we presented them

Table 1. Means (and standard deviations) for participants' characteristics

Variables	Greek ($n = 76$)	Spanish ($n = 57$)
Age of career start	11.00 (3.34)	12.05 (4.05)
Age of best performance***	18.83 (4.38)	23.87 (4.36)
Age of retirement***	25.54 (7.51)	30.11 (5.18)
Age of the study***	30.74 (8.47)	40.42 (6.73)
Time between biggest success and retirement	6.71 (5.34)	6.13 (3.60)
Time between retirement and the study***	5.20 (3.69)	10.32 (7.29)
Sport career duration**	14.54 (7.65)	18.05 (6.69)

** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$.

with a set of questions. The information obtained can be divided in three sections: (a) preconditions, (b) transitional period, and (c) consequences.

Preconditions. Athletic identity during sports career was measured through a shortened 5-item version of the scale of Brewer et al. (1993). Answers were given on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*very much*), with higher values corresponding to higher athletic identity ($\alpha = .77$). Satisfaction with the athletic career was evaluated by a multiple choice question with five answers from “completely satisfied” to “completely dissatisfied” that worked as a 5-point scale with higher values corresponding to higher satisfaction. In the original version of the survey, reasons for the athletic career termination were explored via a ranking procedure according to which participants were asked to rate six potential groups of reasons (i.e., job-, sport-, relationships-, health-, family-related reasons, and financial reasons) from 1 (*the least important group of reasons*) to 6 (*the most important group of reasons*). This evaluation method was maintained in the Spanish version but was changed in the Greek version. After suggestion that arose through cognitive interviews, Greek participants were asked to rate each group of reasons from 1 (*not important reason*) to 6 (*very important reason*) rather than rank them. Moreover, in order to investigate whether retirement was planned and voluntary participants were asked two yes/no questions. Additionally, they expressed their satisfaction for the time the retirement occurred on a 5-point scale from 1 (*too early*) via 3 (*quite opportune*) to 5 (*too late*).

Transitional period. To measure emotional reactions upon retirement the athletes rated, on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*), a list of five typical negative emotions ($\alpha = .82$), that is anxiety, emptiness, sadness, uncertainty, and aggression, and five typical positive emotions ($\alpha = .74$), that is freedom, happiness, joy, relief, and relaxation. Areas of perceived difficulties during the transition included professional career, studies, family, communication and leisure activities. Each item was assessed by a 5-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). The difficulty to change identity was explored through one yes/no question. Participants also rated the degree of perceived financial and psychological support (e.g., from parents, spouse, friends, etc.) on 5-points Likert scales from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Coping reactions, that is denial, active coping, planning, alcohol–drug disengagement, behavioral disengagement, venting of feelings (i.e., saying things to escape unpleasant feelings and expressing negative feelings), seeking social support for emotional reasons, positive reinterpretation, mental disengagement (i.e., doing something to think about it less and making jokes), and acceptance, were measured through a 12-item scale list deriving

from a coping questionnaire developed by Carver, Scheier, and Weintraub (1989). Item content was adapted to athletic retirement context (e.g., “I have been refusing to believe that my sports career is really finished”) and each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale with a higher value corresponding to higher approval of the coping strategy. Intercorrelations between the items were moderate; most coefficients were in a range between -0.1 and $+0.2$ and the highest was 0.60 . This was expected because the 12 items represented different coping strategies. Athletes were also asked about how much time (in months) they needed to adapt to the post-career life.

Consequences. Athletic identity nowadays (still feeling like an athlete) was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Four items on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) formed the scale for general life satisfaction ($\alpha = .78$). To explore satisfaction with professional choice and perceived success in the professional career two yes/no questions were asked. Finally, the retired athletes assessed their current relation with sports by answering eight yes/no statements like “I do exercise for my self”.

Procedure

We considered snowball sampling and collection of data via personal contact as more culturally relevant and suitable for the nature of the population, which are retired athletes who are hard to locate. Questionnaires were self-administered at the athletes’ preferred location. We previously informed all participants about the nature and purpose of the study, as well as about terms of anonymity and confidentiality through a signed informed consent.

Results

We calculated the mean differences between the Greek and the Spanish samples by conducting separated one-way ANOVAs for scale answers or Chi-Square comparisons for yes/no answers. To avoid type I error, the Bonferroni correction was applied ($.05 / \text{number of variables}$) and α levels were set at $.004$ for coping strategies, at $.01$ for difficulties, at $.01$ for financial support, at $.007$ for psychological support, and at $.006$ for current relation to sport. We presented our results from the Greek and the Spanish samples in three tables that correspond to the three phases of the transition; that is preconditions, transitional period, and consequences of the retirement.

Preconditions

The mean differences between the Greek and the Spanish samples regarding the preconditions of the transition out of sport were calculated (Table 2).

The only significant difference between the two samples was the Greek retired athletes' higher satisfaction with their athletic careers, $F(1, 131) = 94.86, p < .001, \eta^2 = .41$. Considering the rest of the variables, they manifested a considerably common pattern. No significant difference was observed concerning the degree to which athletes from both countries felt identified with the athletic role during their career. There was no significant difference for retirement planning or for voluntary retirement. No difference was found on the satisfaction with the time of career termination. What is more, it should be highlighted that both samples reported quite high scores on the athletic identity during sports career, quite high percentages of voluntary retirement but rather low percentages of planned retirement. As far as the reasons for retirement are concerned, means were calculated for the Greek sample and frequencies for the Spanish, because different measure methods had been applied. Analysis showed that Greek elite athletes retired mainly due to job-, sport-, and health-related reasons. The ranking for the retirement causes of Spanish elite athlete brought job-related reasons in the first place, while health-related reasons were in the second place and sport-related in the third.

Transitional period

Table 3 reports mean differences between the Greek and the Spanish samples. Facing the transitional period, accounting for Bonferroni correction, Spanish retiring athletes engaged more on active coping than their Greek colleagues, $F(1, 128) = 12.96, p < .001, \eta^2 = .09$. There were no significant differences for the rest of the coping strategies. The strategy that received the higher score for both samples was acceptance and the strategies with the lowest scores were alcohol-drug disengagement along with behavioural disengagement (i.e., giving up). Comparison of the emotional reactions, both negative and positive, revealed no differences. With reference to the difficulties the transition raises, the means for the various difficulties' categories were low and their differences were not significant. However, significantly more Greek than Spanish elite athletes

stated the difficulty in changing identity after their retirement, 41% versus 11%, $\chi^2(1, N = 133) = 14.86, p < .001$. Regarding the perceived support, retired Greek athletes evaluated higher than the Spanish the financial support from their parents; because the assumption of homogeneity of variance was violated, the Welch F -ratio is reported, $F(1, 126.26) = 25.22, p < .001, \eta^2 = .15$. No further differences were detected for the financial or the perceived psychological support. The means of the Table 3 show that athletes from both countries rated high the perceived support, both financial and psychological, from the family (i.e., parents, other relatives, and spouse) and friends, whereas they gave very low scores to the support from sport agents (i.e., sport organizations and officials). Finally, there was no difference in the amount of time that Greek and Spanish retired athletes reported that they needed to adjust to the life after sports.

Consequences

Mean differences were also calculated for the third and final phase of the transition out of sports (Table 4). No significant differences were detected for any of the variables of the consequences of athletic retirement in Greek and Spanish former elite athletes. Eighty-six percent of the retired athletes from both countries stated their satisfaction with their current professional choice and 80% perceived their current careers as successful. There was no significant difference for general life satisfaction and athletes appeared to feel quite at ease. Regarding athletic identity nowadays, Greek and Spanish retired athletes did not differ significantly and the total sample reported a quite high score. Additionally, both reported high percentages of still exercising and being sport fans. Finally, most Greek and Spanish former athletes maintained a professional relationship with the sports world, that is working professionally or having an additional job related to sport.

Discussion

The results of the present study supported the hypothesis that Greek and Spanish former elite athletes

Table 2. Means (standard deviations) or frequencies, and F or χ^2 value for the pre-conditions of the transition in retired Greek and Spanish athletes

Variables	Greek ($n = 76$)	Spanish ($n = 57$)	F or χ^2 value
Athletic identity during athletic career	5.19 (1.20)	5.21 (1.30)	0.10
Satisfaction with the athletic career	3.86 (1.11)	2.14 (0.89)	94.86***
Planned retirement	39.5%	29.8%	1.33
Voluntary retirement	69.7%	73.7%	0.25
Timeliness of retirement	2.33 (.82)	2.35 (.85)	0.02

*** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Means (standard deviations) or frequencies, and F or χ^2 value for the transitional period of retirement in retired Greek and Spanish athletes

Variables	Greek (n = 76)	Spanish (n = 57)	F or χ^2 value
Coping strategies			
Refusing to believe in retirement	2.38 (1.45)	2.39 (1.42)	0.51
Taking action to improve the situation	2.39 (1.37)	3.28 (1.39)	12.61***
Coming up with a strategy or plan	2.68 (1.60)	2.93 (1.27)	0.45
Using alcohol/drugs	1.38 (0.93)	1.20 (0.77)	1.30
Giving up	1.48 (0.94)	1.35 (0.71)	0.76
Saying things to escape unpleasant feelings	2.09 (1.21)	1.96 (1.21)	0.22
Spending time or talking to other people	2.18 (1.25)	1.71 (1.04)	5.05
Expressing negative feelings	1.93 (1.23)	2.02 (1.20)	0.15
Trying to see the situation more positively	2.67 (1.48)	2.66 (1.45)	0.00
Doing something to think about it less	2.50 (1.46)	2.04 (1.09)	3.78
Accepting the reality of retirement	3.39 (1.54)	3.87 (1.58)	2.95
Making jokes	2.42 (1.43)	2.02 (1.31)	2.63
Emotional reactions upon retirement			
Negative emotions	2.69 (0.79)	2.69 (1.07)	0.00
Positive emotions	2.48 (0.92)	2.56 (1.05)	0.20
Perceived difficulties in the transition			
Professional career	1.70 (1.13)	1.72 (1.25)	0.01
Studies	1.51 (1.27)	1.46 (0.88)	0.06
Family	1.53 (1.53)	1.78 (1.34)	1.71
Communication	1.80 (1.14)	2.07 (1.39)	1.51
Leisure activities	1.97 (1.22)	2.02 (1.24)	0.04
Changing identity	40.8%	10.5%	14.86***
Perceived financial support			
From parents	3.37 (1.74)	2.02 (1.30)	25.22***
From other relatives	1.86 (1.23)	2.59 (1.73)	6.81
From friends	1.70 (1.16)	1.92 (1.44)	0.81
From sport organizations	1.16 (0.40)	1.53 (1.06)	5.52
From various funds	1.22 (0.65)	1.24 (0.74)	0.02
Perceived psychological support			
From parents	3.59 (1.55)	2.87 (1.52)	6.92
From spouse	3.22 (1.71)	3.39 (1.71)	0.27
From other relatives	2.22 (1.44)	2.37 (1.50)	0.29
From friends	3.00 (1.52)	2.98 (1.32)	0.00
From coach	2.03 (1.40)	1.92 (1.39)	0.16
From sport officials	1.36 (0.72)	1.36 (0.76)	0.00
From a psychologist	1.28 (0.79)	1.40 (1.12)	0.51
Other related factors			
Perceived duration of the transition (in months)	6.22 (8.22)	6.14 (9.50)	0.00

*** $p < .001$.

would bear more similarities than differences regarding their transition out of sports. We culturally situated the retirement experiences of Greek and Spanish elite athletes by describing, in our introduction, the common macro- and meso-social factors in their contexts, and at micro-level we compared their reactions to athletic retirement. Placing the present research within the EPAR Project we will begin the discussion of our results by highlighting the findings that are common throughout the studies of the same project with samples from France and Sweden (Stambulova et al., 2007), Germany,

Lithuania and Russia (Alfermann et al., 2004). Then, we will focus on the similarities that arose from the comparison between Greek and Spanish retired athletes proposing a common pattern for Southern European cultures, even though further research with more Southern European cultures would be required in order to support such pattern. Finally, we will comment on the nationally specific differences between the two samples of the study.

Considering this work in relation to the findings of the other studies in the EPAR Project (Alfermann et al., 2004;

Table 4. Means (standard deviations) or frequencies, and *F* or χ^2 value for the consequences of the transition in retired Greek and Spanish athletes

Variables	Greek (<i>n</i> = 76)	Spanish (<i>n</i> = 57)	<i>F</i> or χ^2 value
Satisfaction/Perceived success			
Satisfaction with professional choice	88%	82.5%	0.80
Perceived success in professional career	76%	87.5%	2.75
General life satisfaction	3.63 (0.84)	3.61 (0.81)	0.00
Current relation to sport			
Athletic identity nowadays	3.57 (1.25)	3.61 (1.35)	0.08
Exercising for one self	84.2%	94.6%	3.84
Taking part in competitions for veterans	40.8%	37.5%	0.15
Keeping relations with former coaches	52.6%	55.4%	0.10
Keeping relations with sport friends	89.5%	96.4%	2.23
Working professionally in sport	57.9%	48.2%	1.21
Having an additional job related to sport	43.4%	50%	0.56
Visiting competitions as a spectator	89.5%	73.2%	5.92
Advising informally young athletes	69.7%	60.7%	1.17

Stambulova et al., 2007), we can conclude that athletes from several European cultures share some characteristics regarding preconditions, transitional period, and consequences of the athletic retirement. More specifically, retired athletes from France, Greece, Spain, and Sweden usually had a high athletic identity during their sports careers. The majority of them perceived their retirement as voluntary and occurring at an opportune time or a bit earlier. Coping strategies also seemed to follow a common pattern. Athletes from the abovementioned countries as well as from Germany, Lithuania, and Russia managed to handle the transition mainly by accepting the reality of retirement. What is more, French, Greek, Spanish, and Swedish athletes also turned to positive reinterpretation and coming up with a strategy or plan as means to cope with retirement, while the least used strategies were giving up and the use of substances such as drugs and alcohol. Close family, that is, parents and spouse, and friends appeared to be the main source of financial and psychological support, whereas the lack of perceived support from sport officials, sport organizations, former coaches and psychologists was largely reported. After their retirement, the vast majority of the athletes from these countries kept a relation to sport by multiple ways, such as exercising themselves, visiting competitions as fans, advising informally young athletes, keeping relations with former coaches and sport friends, and having a job (main or additional) in sports. Overall, the results of this study provided information that may strengthen the common pattern in the process of retirement, which had been proposed in the studies of the EPAR so far (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Voluntary retirement, facing the transition with acceptance, support from close family (parents and spouse) and friends, lack of support from sport organizations,

and keeping a strong relation to sports (mainly by exercising themselves) were the cross-culturally common characteristics of the transition of retired athletes from European cultures. These characteristics were shared among cultures that could be described as more individualistic (France, Germany, and Sweden) as well as more collectivistic (Greece, Lithuania, Russia, and Spain) according to Hofstede's (1984) typology.

The comparison between the Greek and Spanish athletes revealed many similarities in their athletic retirement. Athletes from Greece and Spain started their careers at 11–12 years old and felt quite identified with their athletic role. Most athletes retired voluntary but few athletes planned their retirement. They perceived their retirement as occurring at the right time or a bit earlier. They retired mainly due to professional reasons (e.g., finding a better job or graduating from university) similarly to the German elite athletes (Alfermann et al., 2004). This similarity between the three cultures may derive from the fact that elite athletes in these countries could not rely financially on their athletic career, thus a professional opportunity might have led to an athletic retirement decision. Nevertheless, job-related reasons, when considered as a factor pulling to retirement following the retirement reasons' typology of Fernandez et al. (2006), can be associated to the positive aspects of the post athletic career life. Regarding the transitional period, Greek and Spanish elite athletes used the same coping strategies and mainly acceptance. Considering their emotional reactions in relation with the corresponding scores reported in the other EPAR studies, Greek and Spanish elite athletes appeared to have experienced more negative emotions upon retirement, but still the negative emotions could be described as moderate. Retirement did not cause difficulties in fields such as professional career, studies, family,

communication, and leisure activities. Family, mostly parents, and friends seemed to be the most important, if not the only, source of psychological and financial support to the retiring athletes. After retirement, most Greek and Spanish athletes still held a tight relation to sports by exercising themselves, visiting competitions as fans, and still feeling like an athlete. Nearly half of the athletes worked professionally or had an additional work related to sports. Similar percentages were reported by the French sample (Stambulova et al., 2007), whereas the corresponding rate was approximately 24% for Swedish athletes (Stambulova et al., 2007) and approximately 28% for German athletes (Conzelmann & Nagel, 2003). This finding reinforced the concept of relocation in sports that arose from studies with Spanish samples and according to which most of the retired elite athletes do not exactly retire but they rather relocate themselves into the athletic world by following a professional career in sports (Torregrosa et al., 2004; Torregrosa & Mimbrero, 2000). To sum up, on the one hand, some of these similarities are in line with the aforementioned cross-cultural common pattern of many European cultures. On the other hand, some commonalities deviate from this pattern formulating a culturally common pattern between Greek and Spanish elite athletes. Based on these similarities we propose a common pattern of athletic retirement from athletes proceeding from Southern European cultures that consists of lack of retirement planning, high athletic identity after sports career, and predominance of relocation in sports.

Besides the many characteristics they shared, the athletic retirement transitions of Greek and Spanish athletes also presented some differences that represent and detail further the developing Southern European perspective on athletes' career and retirement. To begin with, they differed regarding their athletic careers; most Spanish athletes reached their best performance later, retired older, and had longer sport careers than their Greek colleagues. Moreover, Spanish athletes usually appeared less satisfied with their athletic careers. During the transitional period, Spanish athletes seemed to engage more in active coping which is considered as a factor that facilitates the adaptation to life after sports (Alfermann et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Stambulova et al., 2007; Taylor & Ogilvie, 1994, 2001). Additionally, more Greek than Spanish athletes (approximately 41% vs. 11% respectively) appeared to find it difficult to change their athletic identities after retirement. Upon retirement, athletes are faced with the challenge to change their identification to the athletic role and a strong athletic identity may provoke stress and anxiety (Grove et al., 1997). Both Greek and Spanish athletes reported high athletic identity during sports career, but possibly it was easier for many Spanish

athletes to decrease this identification because they used more active coping, a problem-focused coping strategy that includes efforts in altering the source of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). However, these are only hypotheses based on the existing literature as well as the description and comparison between the two samples. Finally, the present results indicate that Greek retiring athletes relied more than the Spanish on the financial support from their parents. Although it was not statistically tested, this finding might be better understood when combined with the result that Greek athletes retired at a younger age, which could mean that they might still be financially dependent from their families. In summary, the national-specific patterns of the athletic retirement suggest differences mainly in the preconditions and the transitional period.

Taking into consideration the limitations of the present study can help to improve future research attempts. To begin with, the sample of the study is rather small and very mixed, including various sport modalities. Additionally, the present work includes only two Southern European cultures. In order to ascertain whether a Southern European perspective really exists, further research should include samples from other Southern European countries, such as Italy, Malta, and Portugal, and at the same time researchers should develop "cultural mindsets" for career research, that is, to integrate into their studies approaches from cultural and cross-cultural psychology (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). What is more, by placing the study within the EPAR Project we decided to maintain the same theoretical framework, design, and methodology in order to make our results comparable to those of the other EPAR studies. This might have narrowed our scope on a topic such complex and multifaceted as the athletic retirement. More precisely, the retrospective design might have caused a recall bias, especially when considering the amount of time passed between retirement and the study. Furthermore, the quantitative methodology may fail to capture the entire complexity of the retirement process. A possible way to face these limitations could be by using a qualitative approach with a combination of both prospective and retrospective designs, for example interviews with athletes before and after they retire. We also realized that by treating nationality as an independent variable, we ran the risk of objectifying culture, that is treat Southern European culture as a fixed reality (Ryba, 2009), a criticism already made by the same researchers of the EPAR Project (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009). Being aware that a quantitative method can not escape this risk we intended to compensate for this shortcoming by describing the cultural context of the research. What is more, we should emphasize the fact that the further aspiration of this study is to raise cultural awareness

amongst researchers and practitioners in the field and not to provide fix guidelines on how to treat athletes from different cultures.

The detection of cultural patterns in athletic retirement may provide several ideas for practical implementations. With regard to the cross-cultural pattern, proposed by previous studies of the EPAR Project (Stambulova & Alfermann, 2009) and strengthened by our findings, we emphasize the perceived lack of support from organizations that most athletes reported in all the studied countries. At meso-level, this means that policy makers should care about the athletes not only during their careers but during their retirement as well. Considering the Southern European pattern we proposed, more sport career assistance programs should be developed, particularly in Greece where, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no such programs exist. Because lack of retirement planning appears to describe this pattern and at the same time retirement planning was described as a facilitating factor of the transition (Alfermann et al., 2004; Coakley, 1983; Torregrosa et al., 2004), sport career assistance programs in Southern European cultures should specially focus on planning the transition out of sports apart from supporting the athletes in the various sport career transitions. At micro-level, applied psychologists that work with retiring/retired athletes from Greece and Spain, should take into account that after retirement the athletes may still feel quite identified with the athletic role. Moreover and according to the national-specific pattern of the Greek athletes, many elite athletes from Greece encountered difficulties in abandoning their identification with the athletic role upon retirement. Literature has suggested that athletic identity can work as a barrier at the retirement process (Baillie, 1993; Cecic-Erpic et al., 2004; Grove et al., 1997; Lally, 2007; Mateos et al., 2010), therefore interventions and counselling should cover this issue. In conclusion, taking into consideration the importance of the culture, where athletes come from or retire, and detecting cultural patterns can help in forming a culturally sensitive practice in sports career assistance.

On the whole, we compared the retirement transitions of Greek and Spanish elite athletes and proposed a Southern European view adding on the European perspectives of athletic retirement. Besides contributing an additional cultural perspective to the EPAR Project, the present study intended to be contextually informed by recognizing the importance of culture as a context. The practical implications relate to a deeper understanding of the nature of the transition as well as to cultural awareness. Acknowledging and considering cultural patterns seems to be important when conducting research on sport career development issues as the gained knowledge could serve to design or culturally adapt sport career assistance programs.

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