



## Mobility and migration experiences of transnational coaches within the Israeli handball context

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### ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** Despite a growing body of literature on athletes' migration, the mobility and migration experiences of coaches have received limited attention. In this study, we explored the mobility and migration experiences of transnational coaches operating within the Israeli handball context.

**Design:** A qualitative study was conducted, underpinned by our relativist ontology and a constructionist epistemological position.

**Methods:** Eight male professionals (e.g., national team coaches, senior team coaches, youth coaches), working (currently, or most recently) in national teams and clubs, who migrated to Israeli handball within the past five years were interviewed. A thematic analysis, integrating inductive and deductive reasoning, was applied in data analysis. Meticulousness was enhanced by focusing on a worthy topic, maintaining credibility, critical friends, producing generalization, and making a significant contribution.

**Results:** The analysis yielded raw-data codes, further organized into lower-order themes and three higher-order themes reflecting transnational coaches' migration and mobility experiences within the Israeli handball context, including (a) cultural transition, (b) cultural adaptation, and (c) coaches' personal insights about mobility and migration. The findings are conceptually analyzed and discussed in relation to the previous research on coaches' career migration.

**Discussion and conclusion:** The findings emphasize the complexity of the migration process, accompanied by varying motivations, demands and barriers, active decision-making; all within the framework of cultural adaptation. The participants endorsed a transnational coaching career, driven by their open-mind mentality and personal-professional growth.

### 1. Introduction

The world of sport at the beginning of the 21st century is characterized by continuing globalization processes (Westerbeek & Hahn, 2013). Within the global world, coaches, among other sport participants, engage in various mobile practices, traveling as well as migrating to different locations to enhance their professional career development (Agergaard & Ryba, 2014; Maguire & Falcous, 2011; Smith, 2016). Coaches engage in short-term mobility, typically involving cyclical acculturation, and long-term migration to develop their careers. Transnational coaches are traveling back and forth from their origin, constructing their careers through across-borders practices (Ryba et al., 2018). Yet, a scarcity of research regarding the experiences of migrating

coaches exists (e.g., Borges et al., 2015; Schinke et al., 2015; Smith, 2016).

By the act of traveling abroad, athletes are required to adjust to the host environment through social repositioning, negotiation of cultural practices, and reconstruction of meaning (Ryba et al., 2016). It is unclear, however, whether coaches go through a similar transitional experience. Among the published studies, Borges et al. (2015) administered a semi-directed interview questionnaire to five male coaches with recent migration experience in 1–4 foreign countries where they coached either the first league or national teams in football or handball. The findings showed that all coaches migrated through an informal mechanism of recruitment that relied on their social networks. Moreover, they fitted three migration types: *ambitionist*, *cosmopolitan*, and

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pioneer. For example, the ambitionist Danish handball coach was motivated to achieve the highest possible level in his professional career. The cosmopolitan Slovenian handball fitness coach was curious about gaining knowledge of cultural and sport differences in foreign countries, including Israel. The pioneer Spanish handball coach wished to develop handball globally, therefore migrated to Brazil.

Likewise, Schinke et al. (2015) conducted non-structured interviews with 10 coaches who had relocated to Canada from various countries, such as China and Russia. Their analysis indicated that immigrant coaches had concurrently lived in two worlds; their home country and the current country. For example, when the coaches felt dissatisfied with the commitment levels of their new athletes as well as lack of respect, they tended to remember how they had used to apply demanding training regimens in their origin countries. Thus, the challenges experienced in their migration were related to (a) training standards, (b) commitment levels, (c) athlete respect, and (d) coach status and credential recognition.

The existing coaches' migration studies suggest that having a preliminary relationship with the host country, through professional or cultural contacts, can facilitate coaches' acculturation (Borges et al., 2015; Smith, 2016). Also, having the partner's support is important for making the transitional decision and for positive adaptation to the host country. As Schinke et al. (2015) suggested, acculturation is a shared experience, involving the athletes, peer coaches, and sports organizations. It is also related to the standards and expectations of the migrating coaches and their fit to the host environment. Therefore, to effectively support a positive migration experience, it is vital to first uncover the coaches' motives for migration, their transition-related decision-making, and their social facilitators.

### 1.1. Conceptual framework of coaches migration

In this study, we integrated Berry's (1997) conceptualization of acculturation with the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016) and the integrated career change and transition framework (ICCT; Samuel et al., 2020) to explore the migration experiences of handball coaches within the Israeli handball context (i.e., the people, sources of influence, processes and events related to the Israeli handball; Schinke & Stambulova, 2017). Migrating coaches might undergo a psychological acculturation process (Berry, 1997). This process typically involves two main issues: *cultural maintenance* (maintaining cultural identity and characteristics) and *contact and participation* (becoming involved in other cultural groups or remain culturally closed). These issues underly four acculturation strategies (integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization). Ideally, coaches would experience *integration*; the desire to maintain cultural heritage while at the same time interacting with the host culture. Yet, they can also experience *separation* along with emotional detachment in case they avoid interacting with the host culture and remain attached to one's cultural background. As part of the acculturation process, coaches might experience a "culture shock" as well as "becoming disconnected" with the new culture (Blodgett & Schinke, 2015).

Ryba et al. (2016) theorized the cultural transition model to provide a comprehensive account of athletes' cultural transitions. This model involves the *pre-transition phase*, the *acute cultural adaptation phase* (ACA), and the *sociocultural adaptation* (i.e., long-term adaptation) phase, with specific psycho-social tasks associated with each phase. Specifically, the pre-transition phase is aimed at producing corporeal mobility and activate psychosocial mobility. The ACA phase pertains to fitting into the sport organization culture and developing normative belonging. The socio-cultural adaptation phase is aimed at establishing equilibrium between the self and the society. It is further suggested that the transition process is relational, meaning that it does not merely unfold, but is rather constructed within a transnational sociocultural field dynamically and subjectively adjusted by individuals to the multiplicity of cultural contacts in various localities.

Recently, Samuel et al. (2020) suggested an integrated career change and transition framework (ICCT) to account for the wide spectrum of transition experiences and adaptation/coping processes. According to this framework, the transition process begins with a change-event that compromises an athlete's current status quo and initiates a pre-transition situation. At this phase, athletes are faced with unique transitional demands pertaining to athletic, psychological, social, financial, academic/vocational, and cultural aspects. Athletes initially appraise the transition demands, the available resources, and the potential barriers. They consider the significance of the transition in their careers, whether positive or negative, and their control over the present newly encountered condition. Subsequently, athletes engage in active decision-making to directly cope with the demands and barriers of the transition. The model offers several transition pathways, depending on the athletes' decision-making and the effectiveness of their coping efforts. While the ICCT was originally developed for athletes, in this study we explored the application of its main tenants with coaches. Research indicated that coaches and athletes share several common experiences and behaviors, such as high motivation and sport identity (e.g., Samuel et al., 2016). We, therefore, considered them as sport performers who wish to develop their careers through transnational mobility. This entails a change process, including motives, decision-making, and the employment of coping strategies. We acknowledge, however, that coaches also have unique characteristics, such as family ties, older age, dual-career, career status, and lower income (in some cases), which tend to influence their mobility decision-making and migration practices.

Integrating the three-change processes might result in a *realist stance* (i.e., the existence of a single, uniform, and objective reality; Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and universalism (Berry, 1997). Still, in this study, we adhered to a *relativist ontology* where social reality is humanly constructed and shaped in multifaceted directions (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Within this paradigmatic tension (see Ronkainen & Wiltshire, 2019), as researchers and practitioners operating within the sports world, we do not confirmedly reject the existence of an external reality and do acknowledge that "interpretations and theories refer to a 'real world' that exists independently of researchers' conceptions of it" (p. 6). Still, we feel that our present approach could be more sensibility positioned closer to relativism.

Specifically, we investigated how each coach constructed meanings, made decisions, and shaped his own narratives in a contextually-driven migration process. The coach's migration process is a unique, individualistic, and contextualized experience. It begins at the pre-transition stage (Ryba et al., 2016) which involves assessment of potential transition demands and barriers as well as active decision-making (Samuel et al., 2020), such as decisions concerning family members' migration (Ryba et al., 2020). The coach's outstanding task is to decide on the means by which European coaches can adapt to the Israeli context (Ryba et al., 2016). His/her deliberate career modification results in migration decisions which further necessitate initiating adaptation in everyday life practice (Ryba et al., 2016). These measures are typically being accomplished by constructing congruency between the coach's values and lifestyles and the local cultural norms (i.e., ACA, Ryba et al., 2016) and through establishing social anchors and contextualizing one's working environment (Samuel et al., 2020). Moreover, these measures are facilitated by coaches' decision-making as well as active coping and support resources. During this phase, the coach begins an acculturation process, as s/he decides on how much effort to invest in the integration process into the host environment (i.e., a decision to change, Samuel et al., 2020). If coaches adopt the assimilation, separation, or marginalization strategies, they might experience a degree of an identity crisis (Berry, 1997), which could result in a crisis situation and a need for intervention (Samuel et al., 2020). Finally, in the sociocultural adaptation phase, coaches begin feeling congruency between their own values and lifestyles and the local cultural norms to develop an equilibrium state between the self and society (Ryba et al., 2016) or alternately remain in crisis. This phase involves further evaluation of the coach's

career context and active decision-making concerning additional development pathways (Ryba et al., 2016; Samuel et al., 2020). In line with the sport career cultural praxis paradigm (Ryba et al., 2018) and the International Society of Sport Psychology's Position Stand on athletes' career development and transitions (Stambulova et al., 2020), as well as our contextually-based conceptual frameworks, we first contextualize the study within the relevant sub-culture.

### 1.2. Israeli handball context

Handball is the fourth most popular ball-game sport in Israel with about 3000 registered competitive players. There are youth leagues, one senior women's league, and three senior men's leagues. The Israel Handball Association is a member of the European Handball Federation since 1992. In 2011, the Olympic Committee of Israel selected men's handball as a "preferred sport" for development, allocating special funding and professional support. An academy was opened for selected youth players. A "Golden Squad" led by a Serbian coach was formed for elite senior players, with a specialized training program. This had later resulted in further migration of Serbian coaches into Israeli handball. In 2016, a unique training abroad program (TAP) for the Israeli U-18 national team was initiated in Germany, led by a Croatian coach and a Slovenian trainer (see Samuel et al., 2020). In the following editions of the TAP, it was led by a Serbian coach and a Serbian trainer, including a phase in Germany and a phase in Serbia. In 2018, a new professional position was formed – a sporting director of the men's national teams. This position was also offered to a foreign professional (Portugal). Therefore, since 2011, several handball professionals migrated into the Israeli handball context. This phenomenon was intensified by the migration of foreign players, mainly from the Balkans, to play in Israeli teams.

### 1.3. Research questions and Study's objectives

In this study, our main objective was to explore transnational coaches' experiences of short-term mobility and long-term migration within the Israeli handball context. Our research questions were: Why and how do handball coaches migrate from European countries to work in Israel? What are the demands and barriers involved in their transitions? How do they cope and culturally adapt to Israel as a Mediterranean country? What insights do coaches have about their mobility and migration experiences? In par with our research questions, we focused on understanding the coaches' motives for transitioning, decision-making involved in transitioning, demands and barriers of the transition, support resources and coping, cultural adaptation, and the role of migration in the coaches' careers. Our examination would potentially allow the Israel Handball Association, clubs, and sport psychologists to offer effective support and facilitate acute cultural adaptation and acculturation of coaches within the Israeli handball context and general sports culture. Moreover, this study might provide general insights concerning the role of transnational mobility in the careers of expert coaches.

## 2. Method

To gain a deeper understanding of transnational coaches' mobility and migration experiences within the Israeli handball context, we drew on an interpretivist paradigm using qualitative methodology. This study was based on a constructivist epistemology and relativist ontology to explore the coaches' subjective meanings attached to their unique experiences (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). We conducted semi-structured interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2014) to identify: (a) how they had experienced their cultural transitions to Israel within the context of their careers and (b) what lessons are to be learned from their experiences. These interviews reflected both cross-sectional and retrospective data, as the participating coaches were contemplating their past career

experiences as well as their current career situations, experiences, and emotional states. We used reflexive thematic analysis (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2019) to analyze the data, as TA can provide analyses of the coaches' experiences in relation to their careers and cultural transitions, as well as the factors and processes that underlie and influence their experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Braun et al., 2016).

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were eight transnational handball professionals who had been operating (still, or up to recent) within the Israeli handball context in the past five years, in different capacities (e.g., national team coaches, club senior team coaches, club youth coaches). Their mean age ranged between 36 and 59 years ( $M_{age} = 44.50$ ,  $SD = 7.96$  years). Their coaching experience ranged between 6 and 32 years ( $M_{age} = 17.87$ ,  $SD = 7.18$  years). Six of them migrated from the Balkans and two from other European countries. On average, they had spent 41.75 ( $SD = 19.00$ ) months within the Israeli handball context.

We deliberately chose those coaches who were still in Israel or had recently left Israel, so their recollections of their transition experience were intact (i.e., criterion-based sampling; Sparkes & Smith, 2014). In addition to their long-term migration to Israel, these professionals also engaged in short-term mobility (e.g., as part of their work in the TAP or the national teams). The first five participants were recruited through the lead researcher's professional contacts, then directing to an additional three participants (i.e., snowball sampling, Sparkes & Smith, 2014). A degree of data saturation was reached as the final interviews elicited data already generated in prior interviews (Sparkes & Smith, 2014).

### 2.2. Data collection

In line with previous studies on cultural transition and migration among athletes (Ryba et al., 2012, 2016) and coaches (Schinke et al., 2015), face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. Interviews were scheduled in quiet locations. The lead investigator performed the interviews in English. This author had experience in qualitative methodology and interviewing. In addition, he has been working as a sport psychologist for the Israel Handball Association for the past four years. He was well acquainted with the Israeli handball context and jargon as well as knew many of the leading players and clubs. This allowed him to accurately communicate with the interviewees concerning their experiences within the Israeli handball context. In addition, as he had maintained well-established relationships with most of the participants, a rapport was established. With those interviewees whom he did not have prior acquaintance, a rapport was established in the pre-interview phone communication and the early stages of the interview.

The interviews varied in duration from 47 to 100 min ( $M_{time} = 71.75$ ,  $SD = 17.35$  min). In line with the interpretivist paradigm, the interviewer wrote detailed analytic memos throughout the interview, elaborating on key issues, and examining meanings. The interviews were audio-recorded, and the data were then transcribed verbatim, mainly by the second author. This resulted in 284 double-spaced pages of transcribed data.

### 2.3. Ethics

Institutional ethical approval was secured from the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya. Participation in this study was on a voluntary basis only. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer explained the nature and purpose of the study and asked the participants to sign a consent form. The participants could withdraw from the study at any point and could ask that any data would not be included in the data analysis or presentation. Data collection ensured data security and the protection of participants' confidentiality, as much as possible.

## 2.4. Interview guide

The interview guide was informed by the conceptual frameworks. This guide was used flexibly, mainly to form structure if needed, yet the coaches could develop their own order in describing their migration experiences. The coaches were asked to provide some preliminary background about their sport careers leading to the present. They followed by describing their experiences during the time they had been contemplating a transnational migration. In the case of several periods of migration, they were asked to describe them but focus and elaborate more on their current experience. Particularly, the interviewees were asked to focus on the potential demands involved in their transition to Israel and their appraisals. They were encouraged to describe their decision-making process, the individuals they confided as part of their decision to migrate, and the factors leading to their decision to migrate. Then, the focus shifted to their ACA and long-term acculturation process, including demands, barriers, crisis, and cultural differences. In the final section of the interview guide, we asked the interviewees to describe and evaluate the cultural transition in the context of the coaches' careers. Also, they were asked to elaborate on their personal insights and lessons learned from their experiences and issue a general message for coaches who undergo similar transitions.

## 2.5. Data analysis

The Atlas TI software was used to organize the generated data (Friese et al., 2018). Thematic analysis, adequate for this subject and dataset, was implemented (Braun et al., 2016). This analysis involved several phases: (1-2) familiarization and coding, (3-5) theme development, refinement and naming, and (6) writing up (Braun et al., 2016). Initially, all interview transcripts and interview notes were read several times. The first author attempted to adopt an indwelling posture by going through the data, immersing in it, and empathetically understanding the coaches' point of view. Data were analyzed both inductively and deductively (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), as the researcher was moving back and forth between the coaches' personal experiences and the conceptual lens. An inductive approach was first assumed, and the researcher attempted to identify meaningful data units (i.e., raw quotes were coded) related to the coaches' migration experiences and categorized them into sub-themes (i.e., code groups). The sub-themes were further aligned deductively with the conceptual lens (e.g. transition demands or barriers, decision-making, acculturation). As noted by Braun and Clarke (2019), we considered the development of themes as an active, reflexive process in which "themes are considered as creative and interpretive stories about the data, produced at the intersection of the researcher's theoretical assumptions, their analytic resources and skill, and the data themselves" (p. 594). For example, considering the study's conceptual lens, the coaches' stories, and his own ideas concerning Israeli general and handball-related contexts, the researcher defined what would constitute an effective adaption process. This would translate into a conscious decision to change and apply all necessary modifications (e.g., be open to Israeli culture, food, and mentality; adapt to Israeli handball culture), culturally adapt and integrate (maintain ties to home culture while being open to host culture). Adaption would be manifested in coaches' behaviors and practices, relationships, attitudes, and interpretations. In line with Smith and McGannon's (2018) recommendations, upon completion of the thematic analysis process, the results section was sent to the participants for *member reflections*. [We acknowledged that reading this text in English was challenging for most participants. Still, we asked them for their feelings and perspectives towards the presented data and interpretation]. While the participants did not add new insights or data, they did express their perspectives that the presented data were rich and accounted for the transitional experience. Noteworthy, this process was also congruent with ethically sound research, as it allowed the participants to protect their wellbeing by identifying any misrepresentations of their data.

## 2.6. Research quality

Evaluating the meticulousness of this study, we have adopted a relativist stance and created our list of criteria (see Smith & McGannon, 2018), including a worthy topic, clear research questions, credibility of data collection, maintaining a critical mindset, critical friends, rich rigor, and generalizability. Similar to Didymus and Backhouse (2020), we view these criteria as flexible characterizing traits that are relevant for our research project (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), and are in congruence with our values and aims as researchers. We must acknowledge, however, that having a relativist approach might also imply that our list of criteria, developed based on our preferences, values, and aims, should not necessarily be accepted as a signifier of rigorous research by others.

First, we believe this is a worthy topic, as not much research efforts were devoted to examining coaches' mobility and migration experiences. Understanding the demands and barriers associated with expert coaches' cultural transitions can allow sport organizations and practitioners to facilitate their effective adaptation. The lead researcher was well positioned within the career transition research as well as the general and sub-cultural contexts, thus facilitating the formation of clear research questions, as well as the credibility of data collection and analysis through his prolonged engagement (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). For example, questions pertaining to cultural differences between European countries and Israel and to differences between European and Israeli sport mentalities. The lead researcher also engaged in self-reflection maintaining a critical mindset throughout the research process, for example, how his own experiences as an athlete and a coach as well as past-migrant (i.e., for educational purposes) might have shaped his data interpretation. The second author, who engaged in all the transcription work, served as a *critical friend* (Smith & McGannon, 2018). Together, they engaged in a process of reflexive dialogue concerning the interpretations of the data. The other two researchers provided further critical insights on the interpretations and presentation of data. Moreover, having a clear conceptual framework to guide the data analysis further increased a rich rigor (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Finally, representational generalization was reached by identifying similarities with and differences from the results of previous research on coaches' migration (Smith, 2018).

## 3. Results and discussion

The analysis facilitated the construction of raw-data codes that represented meaningful interpretations of the coaches' perceptions concerning their migration process experiences. These codes were further organized into lower-order themes and three higher-order themes (see

**Table 1**  
Themes reflecting handball coaches' migration experiences.

Lower-Order Themes	Higher-Order Themes
Motives for a cultural transition Decision-making involved in this transition Objectives of the current transition Planning the transition to Israel Professional barriers Emotional barriers Perceptions of support resources in the current transition Training abroad program Transition outcome	Cultural transition
Culturally adapting to Israel Cultural similarities and differences Long-term acculturation	Cultural adaption
A personal message to other coaches A professional message to other coaches	Coaches' personal insights about mobility and migration

**Table 1):** (a) cultural transition, (b) cultural adaptation, and (c) coaches' personal insights about mobility and migration. Findings are illustrated using data extracts and analytic commentary (Braun et al., 2016). To maintain anonymity, some contextual information was removed from the quotes. Furthermore, we included verbatim quotations from research participants, a practice that has become effectively standard in extensive qualitative social research (Corden & Sainsbury, 2006).

### 3.1. Cultural transition

We identified cultural transition as the largest theme in the volume of codes and related sub-themes, consisting of the following lower-order themes: (a) *motives for a cultural transition*, (b) *decision-making involved in this transition*, (c) *objectives of the current transition*, (d) *planning the transition to Israel*, (e) *professional barriers*, (f) *emotional barriers*, (g) *perceptions of support resources in the current transition*, (h) *training abroad program*, and (i) *transition outcome*.

#### 3.1.1. Motives

First, the participants discussed the motives (i.e., reasons or causes that led the coaches to transition) for making a cultural transition and migration to other countries. Within the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016), this is the pre-transition phase that is typically characterized by creating opportunities through social sport contacts and gathering information about the future situation. This initiates a process of psychological disengagement from the home country attachments while beginning to establish new relationships within the host country context.

Six of the coaches identified financial motives as pertinent. The financial conditions of handball clubs in their home countries were unfavorable, presenting an organizational instability. Also, there was fierce competition for a few coaching positions. Thus, they had searched for opportunities to work steadily and with proper financial and organizational support, expanding their horizons to other countries. Israel, in its attempt to develop the handball sport domain, provided a unique opportunity for these coaches, as could be reflected in the next quote:

In Croatia, you have five clubs that coach is full professional. The rest of the guys must work. In Norway, 95% coaches work. You understand me? In Israel, you don't work [in addition to coaching] ... This is great benefit, because when I bring family here, I stay with my son.

For two of the interviewees, there were other motives to make a cultural transition to Israel. The first participant felt a positive challenge and good timing to create a meaningful impact on Israel handball. The second one transitioned because of his religion and desire to connect to other people:

Another thing was for me, touch me down in my heart, I love to go in the God country.

You know I'm very religious ... For me, it was amazing. To be in the God country, to make what is my sport and to try to teach the people, because you know I don't keep nothing for me.

These findings suggest that coaches might have multiple motives for cultural transition, including a desire to upgrade their financial status, their professional desire for career progress, and sociocultural motives such as religion. These motives are considered as push (i.e., factors which push coaches to transition away from their home countries) and pull (i.e., factors which pull coaches towards engagement in cultural transition to a certain new culture) factors (Orlowski et al., 2016). The reduced financial status and professional opportunities in their home countries acted as push factors (e.g., Carter, 2011) and at the same time, the new financial and professional opportunities in Israeli handball acted as pull factors. Moreover, exploring Israeli culture, for adventure or religious reasons, was also a pull factor. These findings are in line with previous research on coaches' migration. Borges et al. (2015), for

example, identified several types of migrating coaches, such as *pioneers* who wish to promote and develop their sport abroad, *cosmopolitans* who seek foreign multicultural experiences, and *ambitionists* who are motivated to fulfill their dreams of a professional career. The coaches in the present study, however, reflected a mixture of this typology, including also *returnees* who return to their sports culture of origin (i.e., the senior player who returned to coach his previous club), and to an extent even *exiles* who migrate voluntarily but cannot easily return due to sport-related, personal or political reasons in their country of origin (i.e., the Balkan coaches who reported on limited opportunities and poor education in Serbia and Croatia). In addition, higher-income, long contract duration, and personnel responsibility in the new job were previously identified as pull factors for migrating coaches (Orlowski et al., 2016), much like the present study's findings. However, unlike Wicker et al.'s (2018) data on the migration of coaches in German sports, in the present study, high-level handball coaches also wished to migrate for career development.

#### 3.1.2. Decision-making

The cultural transition was driven by conscious decision-making, as discussed by seven of the participants. There were differences among the participants in the process and easiness of their decisions to transition to Israel. For some it was straightforward, whereas, for others, it was very difficult:

When I asked them when I need to be here, they told me August 2015, and in that moment, my child is supposed to have two months. You know, and uh, it was a very difficult decision. Of course, I spoke with my wife and, uh, she said, really, she supported me a lot of that. And she said, oh, you, it's your decision. I will support you. It doesn't matter what you do. And, uh, I was thinking, and I said, okay, maybe this is the moment when I need to leave the country to try something new and to see what, what would be the situation.

This quote emphasizes that the familial conditions during the decision-making process were imperative (Carter, 2011), also suggested by the cultural transition model (Ryba et al., 2016). Five of the participants were parents of young children at the time of this decision, and some were also expecting an additional child. Moreover, four of their wives maintained good working conditions in their home countries and did not wish to join them during their transition to Israel. Thus, having the support of the family during the decision-making was crucial. There are several decision options for coaches who consider cultural transitions, including traveling with family, traveling alone, and traveling alone first and then to be joined by the family. Each of these options presents a unique follow-up operational (e.g., traveling and accommodation, children's education, partner's work status) and emotional (e.g., loneliness, stress) challenge for coaches. The findings were in line with those of Borges et al. (2015) concerning the importance of family support in coaches' migration decision-making. Contrasting Wicker et al.'s (2018) findings, having small children or not speaking Hebrew were not perceived as migration retention factors for this study's participants. They considered the unique context of life in Israel as a country with a high-level public education as well as a highly Americanized and English-oriented culture (Galily & Sheard, 2002; Rebhun & Waxman, 2000).

#### 3.1.3. Objectives

In addition, the coaches held several objectives (i.e., goals of the transition) in their cultural transitions to Israel. These objectives were mostly related to the coaches' recruitment mechanism, as previously indicated by Borges et al. (2015). Specifically, five of them came to work in the Israel Handball Association as part of the national project to promote Israeli handball (see Context section). For example, one of the participants wished to improve the Israeli player's mentality:

If you are not a national team player, I know that on level, you have only two options. You are not talented, or you are lazy. If you are lazy, I will change that. If you are not talented, this means we can go to one level, but you can never go up that level. So, you can make a million excuses that nobody likes you, but these two are the only reasons.

In this quote, the coach described a gap between his own professional standards and the Israeli players' standards. This gap reflects what Schinke et al. (2015) have identified as dissatisfaction of migrating elite coaches with domestic athletes' training methods and standards. Another coach felt that the transition to Israel, as a country, was favorable for his family, particularly from an educational standpoint:

Education is in now in this moment is, you know, on very low level in Serbia. Very low level, it was never been like this. I know from [other coach] and from other kids that you know, physics and mathematics is very strong in Israel. You know, this is future, physics and mathematics ...

Three of the coaches arrived to work in Israeli clubs, taking several positions with youth and senior (i.e., male and female). For example, building a new youth department:

He knew I'm for that what [name of club] was searching for. You know, to build new department I was ... I'm not that's modest I can say that I was the best for that ... and you know I tried to put here a lot of ideas from Serbia you know to build similar system with some difficulties we succeed a lot.

#### 3.1.4. Planning

Planning the transition to Israel was also identified as an important aspect of the coaches' experiences. While three of them had prior knowledge of Israel, mainly through family, the other five lacked any knowledge. Israel is portrayed many times as a war zone, when in fact, it is a modern, liberal, and safe country (Henoch, 2017). Thus, the coaches were required to overcome some prejudiced thoughts they have had about Israel. Arriving for the first time to Tel-Aviv, during summertime, however, was a very positive experience for them, which diminished much of their initial concern:

I came like a tourist for 24 hours to see the city, to see Hadar Yosef [national sport center] and speak with Association and they to see me. And I love everything. I love the weather, I love the beach, I love the city, I love the Hadar Yosef hall, judo, gym, fitness, everything. I love how they look, what they eat – salads, I love everything.

Six of the coaches were originally from the Balkans, therefore had personal experience with war endeavors. Still, they mentioned how important it was to receive some reliable and reassuring information about Israel and particularly about habits of living from friends and colleagues who had already lived and worked in Israel. These findings are in line with previous research, emphasizing the importance of having preparatory information prior to commencing a cultural transition, as well as having the support of local social agents during these transitions (Borges et al., 2015; Carter, 2011; Samuel et al., 2020).

### 3.2. Professional barriers

The transition to Israel presented the coaches with various types of professional and emotional barriers. Professional barriers mainly included the Israeli player's poor sport mentality, the power of the clubs over the Israel Handball Association, gaps in professional vision between the coach and the clubs, lack of professional autonomy, and visa restrictions. While some of these barriers were previously identified (e.g., Borges et al., 2015; Schinke et al., 2015), others were unique for the study's context. For example, one of them referred to gaps in the

professional vision:

Because I expected that if they bring me here to work as professional and I feel I'm doing a lot of management, I don't need to look this, and the coaches are missing my professional part. So ... sometimes I think that I go home, I didn't make anything today. I didn't bring anything new to the world. And I need to feel this, if I don't feel that I bring something, I just came to the job ... and this is not a good feeling.

Three of the coaches discussed the issue of visa and work restrictions as a major barrier, influencing their professional progress and posing an emotional strain. According to Israeli regulations, after 63 months, a foreign worker, even an expert, cannot continue his or her employment in Israel, unless special permission is issued, with a substantial increase in the employment fees. Therefore, the Israel Handball Association as well as certain clubs do not endure the coaches' employment beyond this period. For those coaches, who lived in Israel for five years or so, and their families already started a long-term acculturation process, including Hebrew speaking and formal education, this regulation was a major barrier.

#### 3.2.1. Emotional barriers

All eight participants referred to the major emotional barrier of missing their families and friends at their home countries:

Listen, it's, it's, you know, I, I, uh, I try to don't talking about it, uh, with, uh, with anyone, anyone. But, uh, it's very difficult moment for me because, uh, you know, I'm almost five years here and, uh, my daughter is five years old and, uh, I didn't grow up with her. And you know, sometimes it's very difficult that for sure.

The coaches' ability to sustain the loneliness was at times influenced by their professional progress and success, as could be reflected in the following quote:

When are good games and good results things are easier, you are more satisfied this way, but when are bad results from performance side we are talking about, then you don't feel any satisfaction you are far from home ... home is where the family is.

Four of the interviewees migrated to Israel without their core families, mostly because of work/study obligations. The data indicated that a major dilemma of the transnational coach was whether to migrate or not with his/her family (Borges et al., 2015). It seemed that for club coaches this dilemma was much stronger, as their job security was fundamentally lower compared with the Association employed coaches. The club coaches were dependent on results and could not assure their families any stability, as postulated by this coach:

You know, what is the problem? It's not a problem to bring them here. It's problem because, uh, you know, the job of the, of the coach, it's, uh, it's not to say safely, you know, like we love to say my luggage, it's all the time ready in the moment when they kick me out, I go, uh, this is our, this is kind of the job. This is the job, what to accept from the moment when I start to be the coach.

This quote further illustrates the fluid reality in which transnational coaches operate. The desire to maintain a transnational coaching career seems to serve as "a psychological buffer" against such occupational and migratory instability.

#### 3.2.2. Perceptions of support resources in the current transitions

For positive cultural transition, it was imperative that the coach's family positively adapts (Borges et al., 2015; Carter, 2011). One of the participants referred to the emotional crisis which stemmed from his wife's poor social adjustment; she was not allowed to work in Israel and missed him while he was working long hours. Therefore, keeping their families happy and engaged was a priority for those coaches who

migrated with families. As Carter (2011) suggested, in the context of migration, families must be viewed as important social forces that encourage sport participants to pursue physical and social mobilities while maintaining loyalty to the family. Thus, when their wives could not work, due to visa limitations, it negatively affected them and caused emotional turmoil. These issues emphasize the importance of support resources throughout a cultural transition. The participants identified the wife and close family as the main resource, along with the Serbian handball community, the clubs, and Israeli friends. The Serbian coaches discussed how in Israel they felt the strength of their community:

In Serbia it's a market, everybody can speak about this or about that, when we are going out we speak against each other that the problem, and here is something different ... here is absolutely different, we are standing behind each other and near each other and in front of each other ... those that are not with family here they are coming to those who have wives here to have a hot meal, cooked meals, visit us, because we are very warm also like Israelis.

The above quote emphasizes the importance of maintaining ties to the home culture during the coaches' migration, to facilitate integration and reduce alienation (Berry, 1997). Maintaining traditions and relying on the home culture through migrating communities was previously identified in athletes (e.g., Ryba et al., 2012; Samuel et al., 2020), yet not much among migrating coaches.

### 3.2.3. Training abroad program

As part of the cultural transition to Israel, three of the coaches were involved with the TAP (Samuel et al., 2020). These coaches engaged in a unique cultural transition during which they moved back and forth between Germany, Serbia, and Israel (i.e., cyclical acculturation, Ryba et al., 2018), while their families also moved between Israel and their home country. For these coaches, mobility actually debilitated the migration process, as it interfered with their ability to integrate (Berry, 1997). Finding one's emotional balance and identity during these periods away from the family was challenging:

Heart was in Germany and you know, it's nonsense that your heart is not with your family, but also if I think that heart was only there it means that I didn't bring emotions to Germany, which was not right, so I don't know how to explain but I split it somehow.

While the TAP was highly prestigious as well as successful, it posed a heavy emotional toll for these coaches. As a result, one of them did not wish to continue following the first edition, although being highly commended for his success:

When project Germany finished, I said, "People, I don't want to do it anymore. I want to continue in Association, but in Israel. This, I don't want to do it anymore. I see it, I feel it, I live it, and now with the new kids, I don't want to do it to myself."

### 3.2.4. Transition outcome

Finally, the coaches were asked to evaluate the transition outcome within the context of their careers. As two of them were relatively in the middle of their transition, only six of them provided an evaluation. In general, the coaches were thankful and reported positively about the outcome of their transitions; however, there were remarkable differences between club coaches and coaches working in the Israel Handball Association. The club coaches described the transitions as "a really, really big experience," but noticed that it was not good for their career development that "nobody sees what I am doing here;" whilst the coaches working with youth national teams were satisfied with their contribution and knew they had an impact on the successful development of Israeli handball: "First of all, I have feeling that is good, that is good what we are doing, that is not invisible, not for my image, for the image of Israeli handball ... we send players to foreign clubs, it's not

invisible." Moreover, beyond being satisfied with the sporting results, they experienced personal development and for that reason were thankful for the opportunity they had received:

I know that Israel helped me more in the beginning that I deserve it. Because I was not the same coach as I am now. I am much better coach because of Israel give me chance in these two years, Germany [training abroad project] and European Championship and qualifications and lots of selection, lots of international games, Germany, Sweden, Denmark, Iceland, Romania, I played against all of them. And I say always, thanks for that, because they give me chance when by TV or by knowledge or by any other criteria, maybe I didn't deserve it.

## 3.3. Cultural adaptation

We further generated a main theme from the data related to cultural adaptation. This theme could be integrated within the cultural transition theme, yet we identified that it also contained independent content. This theme consisted of three lower-order themes: (a) *culturally adapting to Israel*, (b), *cultural similarities and differences*, and (c) *long-term acculturation*.

### 3.3.1. Adapting

First, the identified codes within the sub-theme of culturally adapting to Israel reflected both the mechanism of adaptation as well as facilitative/debilitative factors. The mechanism of adaptation focused on the coaches' integration into the Israeli culture and society through the task of normative belonging. The underlying psychological mechanisms of negotiation of cultural practices and the construction of meaning (Ryba et al., 2016) were central, as indicated by this quote:

So, I need to know what is your culture. I need to know what is Bagrut [matriculation exams]. I need to know what is army. I need to know what is Kidush [Friday meal] ... so in the beginning, first one or two months, I only connect with Israeli. I go to Kidush, I listen what you speak, I listen what is your problem, because this or the team, it's my problem. If I connect with Balkans, I don't see your problem, and then we are two different worlds.

In addition, the coaches were engaged in a task of fitting into the new club's culture by social repositioning (Ryba et al., 2016) as indicated by this expression:

It's very important that you feel like at home. You know in [name of Israeli club] after a couple of months really, I felt like home. I can say that I came here but it wasn't strange for me, I didn't move in Saudi Arabia you know ... in some countries that you don't know anybody so it was less difficult for me I know a lot of ... and also in Israeli handball in that time a lot of Serbian players ... with the most of them I used to play together ...

Culturally adapting to Israel was influenced by facilitative and debilitative factors. For example, the coaches' family members' personal adaptation was discussed as a key factor (Carter, 2011; Galily & Sheard, 2002). Creating a positive socio-cultural environment for family members to feel at home required the participants to be open-minded to the domestic culture and religious traditions, which Berry (1997) defined as *integration*. One of the coaches referred to the importance of his daughter feeling at home in Israel, even by accepting the Israeli-Jewish tradition:

I can tell you, one of this Friday in the kindergarten two weeks or one week before Friday, they said to daughter "next Friday you are Kochav Shabbat" [Shabbat Star] and she is Christian, we are celebrating Christmas, Easter ... and for 7 days she was so excited that she is going, she couldn't sleep because next Friday she will be Kochav Shabbat.

In this context, the participants mentioned the quality of the Israeli Mediterranean food, which included mostly chicken and vegetables. As an immigrant country, Israel offers a variety of foods and herbs which the participants enjoyed. The availability of a variety of dietary options facilitated adaptation (Fontefrancesco et al., 2019). On the other hand, the participants were required to cope with the weather changes. The summertime in Israel is extremely hot and humid, especially for Europeans, which for some of the coaches was overwhelming:

When I landed, first time, it was beginning of the August and you know, when I go out it was almost 40° [Celsius] and we go out from the hotel because first seven days I was in the hotel, we were going out from the hotel and believe me, I believe that I will die because in the monitor and I want to breathe so hard, I can't ...

These coaches also need to professionally adapt to the situation and mentality of the Israeli handball player. One of them described this process which was much about his own adaptation then about changing the players' attitudes and behaviors:

First of all, when you come from Serbia, and if you expect that kids and players will behave like Serbian players, this is the big wrong step you're going to make. Here [in Israel], I learn to work with the people in the Serbian system, but on the way that domestic players can accept it ... So, I learned how to upgrade myself on different levels. I learned how to read the people ... Here, I learned how to behave with the players who come after 7, 8 hours of work and they do everything, but focus is out, how to motivate them to bring focus back and to be able to succeed.

This quote precisely reflects the acculturation process identified by Schinke et al. (2015) concerning coaches from the ex-communist culture who migrated to Canadian sport culture. In both Schinke et al.'s study and this study, the coaches faced athletes who had out-of-sport obligations, thus were required to be flexible and develop creative ways to coach their less committed athletes.

### 3.3.2. Similarities and differences

Five of the participants identified cultural similarities and differences between their home countries and the Israeli context. While the Serbian coaches felt that the Israeli and Balkan mentalities were close, they also found Israelis to be more reliable and trustworthy in financial issues. However, the sport mentality between the two cultures was found to be much different. In fact, the Balkan coaches emphasized that the Israeli youth players did not have the same passion for success as the Serbian players, mainly because they did not look at sports as a vehicle for them to develop in life. In addition, the lack of politeness of Israelis was also noted:

I stayed the last three years in my building, and every day, I expected someone to say hello. Because by the end of the moment, some discussion to, hello, it made sense. I talk and then like, hello, why never, why some time you don't say hello? Why you don't say goodbye? What cost you? We see, we're here in the same building.

### 3.3.3. Acculturation

Finally, the issue of long-term acculturation was discussed by seven of the interviewees. They felt at home in Israel, developing positive emotions and attachment towards Israel and the Israeli mentality. They adopted some of the customs and habits of this country, as could be reflected in the following quote:

What was my feeling? To wake up in five in the morning in Saturday in Shabbat. Take my breakfast. Take the car. Go to Jerusalem. While the city starts to wake up. For me, the quiet, the city, where Jesus go with these streets ... it's something.

One of the main challenges of coaches who migrated with their

families was that with time, their children became Israeli, adopting Israeli mentality and culture while forgetting their home culture. Not being able to remain in Israel, due to visa constraints, was, therefore, highly threatening:

I cannot imagine how they [my kids] will adapt in Serbia school system, you know, because they know Serbian language, older one reads, write, everything ... young one needs to practice. But you know, when I see them happy here it's for me it's very difficult just to think about coming two years what will be with us.

### 3.4. Coaches' personal insights about mobility and migration

The participants provided insights concerning the migration and mobility experience of transnational coaches, with a message to other coaches. This message focused on personal or professional issues. The personal messages were: Go for challenges, not after money; always believe in yourself and in your instinct; everything in life is giving and getting; be open to the experience; if it's in your blood go for it; try to have prior knowledge of the designated country. A quote which best reflected these coaches' perception was as follows:

I think that if you feel that it's in your blood go for it. Because nothing is the same like your house, your home, and you need to know more people, the world is not the same everywhere.

The professional messages mainly focused on the relationship between a foreign coach and domestic players: listen to the players; respect and adapt to each player, it's important for foreign coaches to improvise; adjust to the players. One of the coaches also provided important advice for coaches who wish to work within the Israeli context:

It's all about business. If they have common interests, they will cooperate with you. If they don't see any interest, they will not cooperate with you. Results are in the second priority. First priority inside budget they work O.K., some benefits some profit and that's it. and you know it's all about money.

## 4. Conclusions

Migration of coaches for career development is an ongoing phenomenon, driven by the globalization process as well as athletic, financial, and cultural mechanisms. The present study emphasizes the importance of capturing the coaches' migration process within specific contexts; specifically, general cultural and sport-specific contexts. To attain a positive cultural transition experience and a successful transition outcome (i.e., the coach feels valued, that s/he makes an impact, that constructive social relationships were formed), there must be a match between coaches' motives, their unique circumstances (e.g., culture, familial status), and the support they receive. Still, much is dependent on the coach's personal ability to make a conscious decision to adapt and make relevant modifications in practices and attitudes.

Considering their cultural transitions to Israel, the coaches' motivations varied, including professional development, financial issues, and cultural-religious growth. Analogous to what has happened in basketball in Israel since the 1970s (Galily & Bar-Eli, 2005; Galily & Sheard, 2002), the complexity of the migration experience was triggered by facilitative (e.g., family support and adaptation, community) and debilitating (e.g., visa restrictions, loneliness) factors, the coach's employment status (i.e., club vs. Association), and professional success and satisfaction. The cultural adaptation was a critical factor, highly influenced by the coach's mentality and support resources. As Vladimir Ivić, former Maccabi Tel-Aviv Football Club senior team's coach said after his first year in Israel: "The first thing you need to do is to fit yourself to the Israeli mentality, understand football here and obviously to work hard ... the first year is never easy for a foreigner and was not easy for me



either. We've built a cohesive staff' (Artzi, 2019). This quote resembles much of what the handball coaches described in regard to their acculturation process and in their personal insights and messages to other coaches. It suggests that in many cases, the coach's own cultural and professional adaptation is a key factor underpinning clubs' and national teams' success. This emphasizes the need to investigate coaches' migration to facilitate positive adaptation.

While our findings echo previous studies in regard to motives for cultural transitions, decisions involved, and support resources (e.g., Borges et al., 2015; Carter, 2011; Schinke et al., 2015), they also present some unique content. Specifically, our findings suggest that factors such as having small children or not knowing the local language, previously identified as a limiting factor, can actually be considered by transnational coaches as pull factors. These coaches viewed their transnational engagement as a mechanism for self- and familial-development not only in financial or professional aspects but also in educational, cultural and spiritual aspects. Thus, considering the context in which coaches initiate cultural transitions is vital to realize their perspectives. In the present case, Israel was perceived as a desired location in terms of culture, education, and language (i.e., English-oriented). Unlike the frustration of coaches reported by Schinke et al. (2015), our interviewees aspired to contribute to Israeli handball players by improving their sport mentality. In addition, our findings suggest that research should not focus only on long-term migration, but also consider the challenges involved in short-term mobility, especially when migrating coaches are operating within national teams and travel often. This might debilitate acculturation and thus deserves special attention.

In this study, the coaches' experiences were culturally and sport sub-culturally contextualized (see Ryba et al., 2018), as they present unique data regarding European coaches' migration to Israel within the handball context. While contextualized data might lessen our ability to generalize study findings, and could be seen as a study limitation, we do believe that representational generalization was achieved as we compared our findings to the existing literature on coaches' migration. Nevertheless, we must acknowledge that much of the studies in this area are qualitative in nature and additional quantitative designed studies are in need to account for the range of psycho-social factors involved in such transitions (e.g., Wicker et al., 2018). In addition, we believe that analytical generalization (Smith, 2018) was achieved as we presented the data using a clear conceptual lens (i.e., Berry, 1997; Ryba et al., 2016; Samuel et al., 2020). Still, conceptual frameworks tailored to the coach's special context are in need. Coaches have unique characteristics, such as family ties, older age, and lower income, which tend to influence their mobility and migration.

Practitioners wishing to support coaches who undergo migration must pay attention to the specific context of the cultural transition and to the existing support resources. The motives coaches present for their migration might influence their decisions and adaption; thus, must be evaluated. For example, having only a financial motive for migration might not be sufficient to maintain mental toughness considering the transition demands and barriers. Also, providing coaches with prior knowledge on domestic customs and habits of life, as well as designating local social agents and occupancy for promoting family adaptation is essential. In many cases, the practitioner can serve as a liaison between the migrant coach and the club or Association, translating his/her migratory needs into practical actions. Finally, like the coaches in Borges et al.'s (2015) study, most of the coaches in the present study reported a positive migration experience and recommended other coaches to become transnational and be open to the idea of developing an international career.

#### Author contribution

Roy David Samuel: Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Formal analysis Analysis, Writing – original draft. Omer Eldadi: Methodology, Software, Formal analysis Analysis. Yair Galily: Supervision,

Project administration, Writing – review & editing: Gershon Tenenbaum: Supervision, Conceptualization, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

#### Declaration of competing interest

None.

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